Our Asian centuries: provenance and proximity

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Professorial Lecture Series 2
Lecture 2 July 2013
Professorial Lecture Series

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Tuesday 30 July 2013
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The Professorial Lecture presents the opportunity for the university’s senior academics to discuss their specific interests with the university and wider community. In this lecture, I explore a topic of interest to the community from a particular personal and professional point of view. In this case, I make only passing reference to my own research in the social sciences, which has traversed a wide terrain, from post-colonial Sri Lanka to the changing circumstances of women in the sciences and the academy. Rather, in this lecture I draw on my own experience to inform and interrogate the perspectives I present.

Over a professional lifetime, many influences have shaped my research, but the most profound and enduring has been the two years of anthropological fieldwork I undertook in a village in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s. This field experience has never left me, and was the foundation for ‘incorporation’ into Sri Lankan society – incorporation that is a profound privilege but also, as a foreign researcher, a source of anxiety and uncertainty. This experience shaped, and continues to shape, my Asian Century.

As a post-war child, I was born into a conservative southern Australian culture that looked to the United Kingdom and Europe for identity and direction. Our historical connections with Europe were a source of pride and, I would later realise, attachment to perceived British cultural supremacy. In primary school in Sydney, we recited the stops on the Qantas Kangaroo Route to Europe – Darwin, Singapore, Calcutta, Karachi, Cairo, Tripoli, London – four nights and 55 hours in the air. On wall maps, our small fingers traced the route of the P&O shipping line to the same destination. The place-name mantras we recited both emphasised our geographical isolation and affirmed
our rightful place in the European world. The Asian stops elicited curiosity, but were not part of our formal curriculum.4

As an undergraduate student, however, I became a product of another Asian Century – a time when Australia’s engagement with Asia was most clearly marked by post-war legacies and prejudices and, for my generation, through the radicalising movements of protest against Australia’s participation in the Vietnam War. This was not an abstract experience. The ‘Yellow Peril’ and the spectre of our northern Asian neighbours falling to the perceived Communist threat expounded in the ‘Domino Theory’ were widely promoted and hotly debated.

The Vietnam conflict bit at the roots of the academy, and university campuses were the focal point of protest, particularly against military conscription.5 The Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, where I studied, was bitterly divided by the politics of alleged complicity of Thai experts with counterinsurgency programs among the hill tribes of northern Thailand. The head of department at the time, Professor Bill Geddes, was a key adviser to the Tribal Research Centre in Chiang Mai. Activists and some fellow anthropologists, including the man who would become the Sydney editor of Nation Review, George Munster, accused Geddes and two of his postgraduate students of complicity in counterinsurgency.6 A public and transnational furore erupted,7 and deep and enduring divisions characterised the department for years to come.8

The influence of Asia at this time was both tangible and ideological. Reaching out for alternatives to the ‘capitalist war machine’, some students were card-carrying members of the Communist Party; and many who were not carried copies of Chairman Mao’s Little Red Book (a compulsory reference for university radicals in the days of flagon wine and protest marches).

The changing Australian political environment reinforced our interest in the political economy of Asia, and the nature and validity of Asian engagement. In a historic moment in June 1971, Gough Whitlam as Leader of the Opposition led an ALP delegation to China. This visit paved the way for Australia’s recognition of China in 1972 by the newly elected Whitlam government. Within days of coming to office, Whitlam also abolished military conscription.
In what would now be termed a ‘gap year’, my generation’s overland migration to Europe was part enduring cultural cringe and part opportunity fuelled by newly emerged opportunities for cheap travel for young Australians who were happy to live as close as practicable to the people in the countries we visited. On ‘a dollar a day’, we followed the ‘Hippie Trail’ – Jakarta, Yogyakarta, Bali, Singapore, Bangkok, Kathmandu, Delhi, Varanasi, Lahore, Peshawar, Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Tehran, Istanbul, the Greek Isles, London. The trip took months, and by the time we reached Europe, Europe seemed expensive, unwelcoming and somewhat dreary after our intrepid overland adventures. The languid days of learning Bahasa and the intricacies of batik making pulled us back to what was becoming a part of the world with which we enjoyed increasing affinity.

In the mid-seventies, when I chose to undertake postgraduate fieldwork, I took the advice of learned colleagues and shied away from the increasingly politically fraught territory of Australian Aboriginal communities. I was unable to gain a visa within a reasonable, or even predictable, timeframe to work in my second territory of choice, Indonesia. Ironically, I subsequently spent much of my time among academic and bureaucratic colleagues in Sri Lanka (the site of my supervisor’s first fieldwork, but a place I had never visited), justifying my presence in the then feisty, isolationist, socialist state. There, too, foreign researchers, especially anthropologists and linguists, were suspected of having CIA connections.

It is the context of this ‘personal provenance’ that I bring to my reading of the Australian Government White Paper Australia in the Asian Century, released in October 2012. The paper is a detailed response to Asia’s ascent as ‘the defining feature of the 21st century’. The ‘Asian Century’ is seen as an Australian and regional opportunity, as ‘the tyranny of distance is being replaced by the prospects of proximity.’ But for me the resonance of the paper is fractured by the fact that I have already ‘lived’ another Asian century and others, including Indigenous and North Australians, have experienced at least three additional Asian centuries, which I explore further.

In this lecture, I interrogate the concept of ‘proximity’ and the play of geography over history. I also examine aspects of the provenance of the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper. I suggest that Australia’s engagement with Asia has been, and continues to be, characterised
by both inclusion and exclusion; where hostility and fear as well as generosity and compassion, have powerfully defined Australia’s place in the region – where, over time, complex flows of people, knowledge and culture have been both embraced and disrupted; and where the perspective from Northern Australia has often looked very different to that from the South, in short where ‘spatial politics’ have defined our ‘proximity’ and the terrain for Australia’s Asian engagement.

I do not pretend to have the policy expertise to offer a comprehensive analysis of Australia’s history in the Asian policy space. Instead, in keeping with the concept of personal provenance as a ‘framework for constant dialogue’, I focus on critical, defining contributions that have shaped my own intellectual understanding of our Asian engagement, specifically Alison Broinowski’s *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia* (1992) and Henry Reynolds’s *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia’s North* (2003).

While Broinowski and Reynolds present very different perspectives, they both in some respect present views from outside the trajectory of mainstream intellectual traditions – Broinowski from impressions of Australian artists, and Reynolds from ‘the North’. Both are acutely aware that the experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal Australia cannot be subsumed under that of settler Australians and both strive to make space for the ‘voices’ of their subjects.

**The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Asia**

Dr Alison Broinowski, Australian diplomat and writer, addresses the question, ‘Why have Australians remained so tenaciously Eurocentric and oblivious to the challenges and opportunities presented to us by our proximity to so many Asian countries?’ Her survey study and analysis of Australian art and artists’ impressions of Asia cover a broad canvas, from the late 1700s through to the 1990s. Broinowski approached this task with a sense of optimism:

> At the outset I had expected to reach a more optimistic conclusion than I do. I had expected to find – I had wanted to find – that Australians, uniquely placed to take advantage of the stimulation of the ancient cultures, innovative modernity, and growing economies of their region, and to become a
centre of expertise about their neighbours, in the 1990s are well on the way to doing so, and in large numbers. While that conclusion is true of some scholars, business people, and Australians working in the arts, it would be premature as a generalisation about all Australians. (Broinowski 1992: x)

Broinowski notes that ‘the idea of Australian–Asian intercourse had been put forward as early as 1783 by James Marion Matra in his proposal for the colonisation of New South Wales. Matra saw Australia as a vantage point for the development of trade with China, Japan and Korea. A century later in 1877, Marcus Clarke, author of For the Term of his Natural Life, envisaged ‘Australasia’:

… a vast archipelago stretching from Malacca and Singapore to New Zealand, in which the best of tropical and Mediterranean civilizations would flourish side by side. A healthy national ‘type’ would develop with the benefits of good food, education and climate.

Unless Australians recruited fresh stock from other nations, Clarke warned, the ‘breed’ would become extinct.

But only a minority promoted such formative ‘Australasian’ ideals:

To say that most settler Australians did not welcome Asians as neighbours is an understatement. Their European education gave them little preparation for dealing with the region. They were hostile to anyone who shared their territorial ambitions. They feared Asia’s teeming millions might take the empty land from them as easily as they had taken it from the Aborigines. They were protective of their gold, of their jobs and working conditions, and ‘their’ women, and again it was Asians who were assumed to want them. (Broinowski 1992: 3)

It was this fear and insecurity that led to exclusion measures against Asians, as a singular, undifferentiated source of threat in the earliest Acts of the newly federated nation in 1901 – a defining and, in Northern Australia, disruptive moment in the spatial politics of the emergent nation. Insightfully, Broinowski contrasts this with that of northern Aboriginal populations who had enjoyed centuries of Asian contact, as a result of the visits of Macassan and Malayan traders.
Broinowski observes that:

From the first, only those among settler Australians who were specially imaginative, disaffected or eccentric thought the chance of East-West fusion worth investigating. Imperialist aspirations, material ambition, or religious zeal inspired some to hope that the new and old worlds, East and West, would meet and join hands to benefit their causes. But West was ‘us’ and East was ‘them’, and few saw the encounter from the Other side. Politics in Australia sided with history and against geography, even to the detriment of economics. Australians’ images of themselves and their neighbours were simplistically typecast, and the process of East-West fusion set back by decades. (Broinowski 1992: 198)

It was not until the post-war period that settler Australians began to recognise that:

… several neighbouring countries were no longer colonies of the West, but independent Asian states, and that exclusion of their people, their products and their culture from Australia was no longer feasible, and intervention in their affairs no longer productive. (Broinowski 1992: 116)

But in the post–Vietnam War period, there was also a new political threat emerging that turned out to be enduring and symbolic of our ambivalent relationship with Asia. The 1970s saw the first wave of boats carrying asylum seekers and the term ‘boat people’ entered the lexicon. During the Vietnam War, more than half the Vietnamese population was displaced, with most fleeing to nearby Asian countries. The first ‘boat people’ arrived in Darwin in 1976 – five Indochinese men. During the next five years, more than 2,000 Vietnamese ‘boat people’ arrived. At the time of this ‘first wave’ of ‘boat people’, the public response was sympathetic. Opposition quickly grew, however, and in 1977 the Darwin branch of the Waterside Workers’ Federation called for strikes to ‘protest the preferential treatment refugees were receiving’.19
During the next decade, typical of the impact of the ‘lived experience’ of northern Australians towards their neighbours, the direct interface with Asia and the North fostered reflection of a more inclusive kind:

In *Dustoff Vietnam* (1988) a four-part play put together in Darwin by veterans and local Vietnamese residents, much has changed. For the first time in Australian theatre, a veteran reflects on how the war must have been for the Vietnamese; a Vietnamese-Australian tells Australians, who have never asked, about her experiences as a boat person; an Ethnic Affairs Minister in Darwin divides his time between the Vietnamese and Portuguese communities. (Broinowski 1992: 124)

Throughout the 20th century, incremental shifts in attitudes towards Asia were limited by our ambiguous national identity and the legacy of the conflicts of the time, producing a subtext of threat, which we have not as a nation addressed well nor consistently. Our failure to embrace the languages of our region was a further impediment. European languages have remained dominant in secondary schools despite the introduction of Japanese, Indonesian and more recently Chinese. Broinowski reports that in 1990 only 0.5 per cent of tertiary students were studying an Asian language. She also notes that in 1991 there was not a single professor of art history in an Australian university who was a specialist in Asian art.20

Broinowski concludes her treatise with themes rediscovered in the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper:

Australia in 1990 was critically short of Asian-language teachers, even though there are now so many native speakers in the population, and even though the number of students taking Asian languages remained so far below those studying European ones. There was, as well, no sign of appointment to top jobs of Asians or Asian-literate Australians commensurate with the economic importance Asia was repeatedly said to have. (Broinowski 1992: 205)
North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia’s North

In *North of Capricorn*, historian Henry Reynolds argues that during the last quarter of the 19th century Northern Australia ‘more clearly and closely reflected its geographical milieu than has been the case at any time since’:

Tens of thousands of Melanesians came into Queensland as indentured labourers, principally in the sugar industry ... Smaller numbers of Chinese workers were engaged to construct the railway line from Darwin to the Pine Creek goldfields in 1887 and 1888 ... The development of the pearl shelling and bêche-de-mer industries on the Kimberley coast in and around Torres Strait attracted divers, seamen, tradesmen and adventurers from as far away as Japan in the north, Polynesia in the east and Ceylon in the west. (Reynolds 2003: ix–x)

This was a time when the pull of geographical proximity played out in everyday lives. Reynolds cites the example of Mrs Dominic Daly, who, living in the small community of Darwin in the 1870s, found that:

... The most effective way to supplement diminishing supplies was to send a ship to Timor rather than wait for relief from the south. Her father’s secretary was sent away ‘laden with commissions to bring back all kinds of things’. Her stock of haberdashery was replenished and the returning schooner brought fresh provisions, ‘fruits and curry stuffs’ and large numbers of coconuts. The ship also brought the family’s ‘first native servant’, an Indonesian boy called Omah. (Reynolds 2003: 105)

Reynolds considers at length the observations of Knut Dahl, a young Norwegian scientist who visited the Northern Territory and the Kimberley in the early 1890s when the Chinese outnumbered the Europeans in Darwin (as he reminds us they did for 30 years from 1878 to 1909). While Dahl was struck by the fragility of the small European settlements and the depressed nature of European settlers who ‘... deplored the fate that had left them stranded on this barren coast’, he was impressed by the importance and vitality of the Chinese community, and the Asian nature of Darwin in particular:
The few business people and officials in the service of the Government were apparently in no hurry over their duties, and adopted the cool and indolent habits peculiar to the majority of white men in tropical towns. Little or no life appeared in the streets, everybody knew everybody else, and the Resident Commissioner was generally mentioned by his Christian name. Chinatown on the other hand was a welter of life and activity. The very air smelt of business ... One had the feeling that the people one saw thronging the shops and streets, who bought and sold, and, busy as ants, carried on their trades, belonged to a race which slowly and securely was gaining opulence and power. In Palmerston Chinatown one might fancy oneself in a modest quarter of one of the towns of the Far East. (Reynolds 2003: xiii)

Reynolds reports that a study of Chinese graves from the period 1880–1900 in the Stuart Park Chinese cemetery reveals the diversity of occupations and the harshness of living conditions:

- labourers, miners, carpenters, cooks, gardeners, fencing workers, iron mongers, iron smiths, horse riders, fishermen, cart drivers, cowboys, station keepers, labour bosses, publicans, bag makers, leather makers, frame and box makers, ferrymen, storekeepers and herbalists. (Reynolds 2003: 111).

Almost all had died between the ages of 20 and 40 years of age.24

Similarly, for many coastal Aboriginal communities, the relationship with Macassan (Indonesian) fishermen was much more significant than their experience with passing Europeans:

The Macassans had been visiting the northern coasts for several hundred years, coming down on the northwest trade winds at the end of the year and returning at the beginning of the dry season in March or April with the arrival of the south-easterlies ... The fleets of praus often carried a thousand or so men who spent their time gathering, cooking and smoking bêche-de-mer for the Chinese market and supplementing the catch with turtle shell, pearls and sandalwood. (Reynolds 2003: 12–13)
This multiracial society was not, however, the society that the newly federated Australia embraced. Like Broinowski, historian Henry Reynolds casts a critical eye over the rhetoric of Federation:

... there were two Australias in 1901, not one. The much lauded unity was more aspiration than actuality. Southern, settled, overwhelmingly white Australia, which participated in the federal referenda of 1898–99 and the first national elections in 1900, was very different from and particularly hostile to, the multiracial society in the tropical north, where uncounted thousands of Aborigines occupying large tribal territories in Cape York, Arnhem Land, the Kimberleys and the Great Sandy Desert had never seen Europeans and knew nothing of Federation or their putative membership of a new nation. In the small towns of the north, from Roebourne in the west to Mackay in the east, and on mining leases, cane fields, banana farms and pearling luggers, there were many non-European residents – Pacific Islanders, Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos and Malays – who had no cause to welcome the establishment of the new parliament for which they had been unable to vote. (Reynolds 2003: vii)

The election of 1901 had made it clear that among the first business of the new government would be to enact legislation to further disenfranchise non-Europeans to address, according to John Watson, Leader of the federal Labor Party, ‘the cancer spot’ that was ‘the piebald north’.25

Federated Australia in fact saw the countries to the north as a threat to Northern Australia, and the success of the Chinese in Australia’s North stood in direct contrast to the European colonisation process:

Alfred Deakin declared in the first federal parliament that both government and opposition ‘with the people behind them’ were united in the ‘unalterable resolve’ that the new Commonwealth would mean a white Australia and that ‘from now hence forward all alien elements within it shall be diminished’. The existing, dynamic and successful multiracial society in the northern towns – home and haunt to alien elements – was to be legislatively choked to death. Its
very existence was a challenge, a threat, an affront to the new nation obsessed with ideas of blood, biology and racial purity. (Reynolds 2003: xi)

Northern Australians did not necessarily share the convictions of their Southern leaders. Reynolds notes that the editor of the Torres Strait Pilot, Alex Corran in 1902 presented a visionary perspective of a future shared with Asia:

It is in the North of Australia the effect of the two peoples coming together will be felt, and there can be nothing else for it ultimately but a change of attitude on the part of Australia towards the Asian. Human rights cannot always be denied, and however great may be our desire to preserve the entire continent of Australia for settlement by white men only, the right to come and go will have to be conceded ultimately to other classes of the human race. Perhaps with development according to Western ideals the Chinese may become less objectionable as possible citizens of Australia, but whether or not, our proximity to Asia will render our present attitude one ultimately to be abandoned. We will then have to be satisfied with the possession and government of the country. (Reynolds 2003: 102)

In the Northern Territory Times in 1905, a group of prominent Chinese were also moved by public criticism to record their positive contribution through themes that resonate today:

It is said of us that we seek to make money and get out of the Territory to spend it. That may be so, but where is the white man who has come to the Territory intending to make it a permanent home? As a matter of fact, we have resided here and made this our home equally with European residents … might we not more truly say that a much more serious menace to the Territory exists in the fact that the Territory is controlled for the most part by men like Mr Mitchell [South Australian politician], who know little about it and do not understand its problems, and who, as you so appropriately put it, are ready to throw mud at it when it suits their purposes. (Reynolds 2003: 117–20)
Yet in the 1920s and 1930s, Chinatowns were cleared and previously flourishing communities disappeared. Darwin’s Chinatown was destroyed during World War II, with much of the destruction apparently deliberate:

The Administrator of the Territory, C.L.R. Abbott, observed in 1943 that the acquisition of the area would give control ‘over all people returning and would entirely prevent the Chinese quarter forming again.’

Reynolds presents the sobering conclusion that:

... In deliberately weakening and diminishing the Asian communities, in seeking their extinction, Australia lost much of the entrepreneurial drive and flair and the sheer hard work of Chinese, Japanese and Filipino immigrants which had been so important in the 19th century. Many skills relating to horticulture, irrigation for agriculture, water diversion for mining projects, food preparation and preservation were lost. What were perhaps even more important were the myriad social connections of kin and business association that had developed between North Australia and neighbouring Asian and Pacific societies, which withered away during the first part of the 20th century and could never be replaced. (Reynolds 2004: 187)

It might be argued that in the post-war reconstruction period Australia, as a member of the Commonwealth, endeavoured to rebuild such ties. Under the Colombo Plan, bilateral aid flowed to developing countries in South Asia and South-East Asia, and the Colombo Plan enabled thousands of Asian students to study in Australia. The Long-Term Scholarship Programme was a hallmark of the Colombo Plan until 1989. The Plan was grounded in assumptions that improved education and living standards would generate political stability and counter communism in the region. But from Asian perspectives, the Plan was seen by critics as an extension of British imperialism and as participation in the scholarship program required participants to be nominated and endorsed by member countries, the opportunities were framed in a political space far removed from that of the Asian labourers who had been such important contributors to the
development of Northern Australia. The Plan has served to develop a very different set of connections with Asia, primarily with those who would come to constitute the post-war political elites.

The New Australian Asian Century

The *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper (of October 2012) is unashamedly focused on the economic opportunities and imperatives afforded by Asia’s rise, which is seen to be the defining feature of the 21st century:

Within only a few years, Asia will not only be the world’s largest producer of goods and services, it will also be the world’s largest consumer of them. It is already the most populous region in the world. In the future it will also be home to the majority of the world’s middle class. (Australian Government 2012: 1)

The theme of economic opportunity is reiterated throughout the paper:

The share of world output within 10,000 kilometres of Australia has more than doubled over the past 50 years to more than a third of global output today, and this share will rise to around half of global output in 2025. (Australian Government 2012: 118)

With rising incomes in Asian economies, there will be a structural change in global consumption to higher value food products and services. Strong demand is expected to continue for the foreseeable future, especially for higher quality produce and protein-rich foods such as meat and dairy products. (Australian Government 2012: 124)

With minimal attention devoted to history and a glossing over of conflict, the White Paper focuses on the strengths of Australia’s relationship with Asia, including a long history of engagement, strong and robust relationships with the countries in our geographical region, a multicultural and highly skilled workforce and established financial, political and cultural links.30
Future success is seen as dependent on continued investment in the five pillars that underpin our productivity (skills and education, innovation, infrastructure, tax reform and regulatory reform), cultural capability, new business models and mindsets that connect with Asian markets, regional stability based on trust and cooperation as well as strengthening and deepening political, social and cultural links.31

The overwhelming majority of the 300-plus page report is devoted to detailed economic analysis, in which demography is seen as a critical ‘dividend’ with large numbers of young people of working age boosting the productive capacity of Asian economies. This productivity dividend is seen to be tied to infrastructure investment but also to education, especially secondary and higher education.32

Urbanisation is similarly seen as a benign process that has boosted demand for mineral and energy resources. When I read that urbanisation in Asia involves around 44 million people leaving rural areas and ‘being added to the population of cities every year in search of opportunities’ I could not help but evoke images of poverty, despair and dislocation. Growth in inequality is acknowledged as a consequence of uneven patterns of development but these ‘wide disparities’, especially between coastal and inland provinces and states, warrant less than a page of attention.34

In fact so much of that which is nuanced and insightful in this report is limited to no more than a passing comment: the fact that it is explicitly recognised that ‘Asia’ is ‘a region of great diversity’ not an undifferentiated entity; recognition that caste, ethnic and gender inequality add complexity to differential regional development; the impact of climate change threatening coastal areas and river systems, together with desertification predicted to impact on large expanses of land; recognition that Australian interactions with Asia date back to Macassan–Indigenous Australian trading before European colonisation; and the positive impact of Asian migration, including educational migration that has proved so important to building enduring relationships in the region, despite the dramatic fall in interest in Asian languages.35 There is even room made, at least once, to draw on a significant local idiom: Chen Yun’s description of Chinese reform as ‘crossing the river by feeling stones’.36
At the risk of appearing parochial, it is also important to note that Darwin is singled out for its potential to benefit from structural changes in the economy and the new opportunities emerging in the ‘Asian Century’:

Darwin is unique among Australian cities in its capacity to transform itself in coming decades because of its proximity to Asia, natural attributes, potential sites for new ports and expanded liquefied natural gas processing industry. Closer to Jakarta than it is to Sydney, Darwin has great opportunities to become a world leading centre for engineering, financial, medical and education services. It is on the cusp of evolving in the same way as Singapore, which has used its location to become a modern thriving city with high-quality housing, services and quality of life … Decisions made today will shape the direction of the city for decades to come. (Australian Government 2012: 184)

It is envisaged that three forces will shape the economic and social landscape over the coming decade. First is the ‘staggering scale and pace of the continued transformation of Asia, ‘which by 2025 will account for almost 50 per cent of global economic output’. The second is the ageing of Australia’s population, which will impact on labour force participation, and third is the issue of environmental sustainability and ‘management’ (in contrast to conservation, of environmental resources).37

But perhaps the most telling and unresolved statement in the White Paper is that ‘Asia has become an important part of our Australian identity’38. This is a statement that demands interrogation, as it suggests that we do not intend, perhaps cannot deny, history, culture and societal norms that the dominant history places Australia, despite our geographical positioning, in the ‘Anglosphere’.39 On the one hand it suggests that we expect to be able to incorporate Asia into our domain, to engage in the ‘complex and circular flows of people in the region’, yet it leaves open the question of how we define our future identity and on whose terms. Australia stands ready to look North but is Asia ready to embrace our born-again enthusiasm for engagement? Is Asia ready to look South?
Conclusion

I began this lecture with reference to the profound and enduring impact of my anthropological fieldwork experience in Sri Lanka in the late 1970s. My own Asian engagement was an obvious and critical component of the ‘personal provenance’ I brought to my reading and response to the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper. During the reflective process of interrogating my response, I became increasingly aware that it was not just my own field experiences that accounted for the sense of dissonance mixed with optimism that the paper generated for me. Initially, I assumed it was the instrumental focus on Australian economic competitiveness\(^{40}\) of the paper that generated discomfort. Surely we have more of value to export than natural resources and agricultural products? Yet, in reality, each of Australia’s Asian Centuries – apart from engagement based on hostility – was largely driven by economic activity and opportunity, even the earliest engagement of northern Aboriginal communities with Macassan traders and the pre-Federation dependence of Australia’s North on Chinese, Japanese, Islander and Ceylonese labour.

The reflective process afforded by this lecture reveals another more subtle reason for my questioning of the framing of the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper. Just as my Sri Lankan fieldwork experience and enduring engagement with Sri Lanka have shaped my identity, so too did the concurrent transformation of the discipline of Anthropology itself.

When I was studying anthropology at the University of Sydney in the 1970s, the discipline was undergoing profound change. This period witnessed a move away from the positivist roots of structural functionalism, the methodological tenets of which were a commitment to scientific objectivity that enabled anthropologists to stand outside the societies they were studying and engage in research in a manner that did not demand their subjects’ consent, and assumed that the research was not contrary to their subjects’ interests.\(^{41}\) The emergent paradigm of the 1970s and 1980s interrogated the unequal power relations between anthropologists and the societies they studied; and the influence of the social justice, post-colonial studies and feminist movements demanded that our subjects’ voices were heard directly, rather than solely through the mediating interpretation of the anthropologist.\(^{42}\)
The sense of dissonance for me of the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper is that, as a government policy paper, it is written from a single perspective – it is Australia looking to Asia yet talking to Australia, and by default talking at Asia\textsuperscript{43} – a perspective that arguably distances us from Asia at a time of ‘proximity’. The most ‘proximate voices’, from Asia and from Northern Australia are, perhaps predictably, absent. Despite the exemplar case studies dotted through the paper, Asian perspectives of Australia, including the powerful narratives from ‘the Other side’, are also absent. Hopefully, the consultation around the implementation process will add such voices to the policy space.

Consideration of two seminal works, namely Broinowski’s *The Yellow Lady: Australian Impressions of Australia* and Reynolds’s *North of Capricorn: The Untold Story of Australia’s North* provide particular narratives that generate insights into the intellectual and political provenance of the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper. I chose these works for their power to generate a framework for a dialogue that I hoped would be compatible with Northern Australian perspectives.

Alison Broinowski, just over a decade ago, commented:

... West was ‘us’ and East was ‘them’, and few saw the encounter from the Other side. Politics in Australia sided with history and against geography, even to the detriment of economics. (Broinowski 1992: 198)

The *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper outlines the imperative for tectonic shifts in Australia’s alignment with our near neighbours – politics siding with geography and against history, to the advantage of economics.

Some have questioned how this shift might happen when our history, our religion, laws, customs, and culture are intimately tied to our European ancestry even though we are a community with growing minorities of ethnic and religious groups who do not directly share that European heritage.\textsuperscript{44} The answer lies in whether we can resolve our ‘Anglosphere’ heritage and identity to embrace the White Paper’s demand for Australia to change and genuinely redefine our ‘proximity’ through reciprocity of relationship, culture and language as well as through shared economic interests. In this, Northern Australia,
drawing on its own provenance, has a leading role to play. After all this is our fourth Australian Asian Century and in the previous three, pre-colonisation, pre-Federation and post-war, there is evidence that we have negotiated the spatial politics more inclusively than our Southern leaders and policy makers.

Endnotes

3 Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company.
4 Evidence that my curiosity was sparked sits on my bookcase in the form of Eleanor Frances Lattimore’s children’s novel Bells for a Chinese Donkey, which was drawn from her own memories of growing up in Shanghai, where she was home-schooled by her father, an American professor. I had selected the book as an end-of-year school prize, which tells me that at age 10 an imagined China was already an established part of my world. A few years later, I chose the much weightier Seven Years in Tibet by Heinrich Harrer, a one-time SS officer and later tutor to the Dalai Lama. (See Sharon Bell (2012) ‘Re-imagining China’, Campus Review, 30 January.)
5 Military conscription was introduced under the National Service Act 1964, and from 1965 this could include overseas service, including in Vietnam.


Dr Broinowski was a diplomat for 28 years, with much of that time in Japan, Burma, the Philippines and South Korea. She is now a visiting fellow at ANU and UNSW.


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22 Reynolds notes that the first Chinese contract labourers arrived in 1874 and with over 1,000 men arriving in 1877 and 1878 with recruitment for the construction of the Darwin–Pine Creek railway line, they represented over 60 per cent of the non-Aboriginal population by 1881 and over 70 per cent 10 years later. The main attraction of the Northern Territory was the gold mines south of Darwin. From the turn of the century the proportion of Chinese declined sharply (2003: 107–110).


Conservative American businessman James C. Bennett argues that the English speaking world has exerted a civilising influence through cultural and legal Western traditions resulting in the characteristics we identify with ‘developed societies’. He does not see this influence waning if steps are taken to strengthen ties between the ‘Anglosphere’ nations. (See J.C. Bennett (2007) *The Third Anglosphere Century*, The Heritage Foundation, Washington.

A team of experts led by the former Secretary of the Treasury Ken Henry authored the paper.

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) which explored the archetypes of Eastern and Western societies, was a groundbreaking and influential work at the time as was James Clifford, and George Marcus’s (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, which challenged existing disciplinary assumptions.

Contemporary media ensures that the substance of the paper is accessible to many audiences outside Australia. Translations of the Foreword are available in Chinese, Hindi, Indonesian, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese.


**References**


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Professorial Lecture Series 2
Lecture 2 July 2013