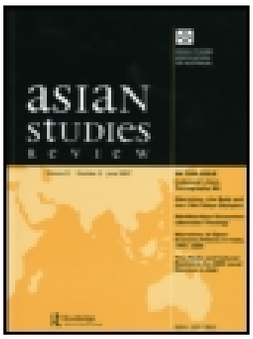

ISSN: 1035-7823 (Print) 1467-8403 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/casr20

Engaging "Asia"

Martin Stuart–Fox

To cite this article: Martin Stuart–Fox (1993) Engaging "Asia", , 16:3, 95-99, DOI: 10.1080/03147539308712881

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03147539308712881

Communications

Engaging "Asia"

Martin Stuart-Fox
University of Queensland

Of all the issues raised in the pages of the *Asian Studies Review* in the excellent series of commentaries over the past few years, the question of Australia's future role in Asia most demands continuing debate. Indeed, it is a topic that should receive discussion at all levels in the national media, from the tabloid Sunday press to specialist journals, and should cover every aspect of Australian-Asian relations from business investment to artistic interchange.

As Jamie Mackie notes in the last issue of the *Review,* there is a great deal of loose thinking in discussion of Australia's future role in Asia.[1] To ask whether Australia is "part of Asia" is really a rather absurd question. It is misleading in that it points the debate in a direction that encourages both confusion and fear—confusion as to our own "identity", and fear (that old historic fear that has dogged Australians) of being overwhelmed by Asia. I would like to say something about both these concerns, but let me first take note of the question itself.

What is meant by asking whether Australia is a part of Asia? Is the question about geography? Though we ride different tectonic plates, our geographical propinquity is significant. In relation to Southeast Asia at least, Australia suffers far less from the tyranny of distance than it does in relation to Europe or North America. Or are we part of Asia in a broadly economic sense? Certainly the proportion of our trade to and from Asia has steadily increased, though our respective economies are not yet deeply and inextricably integrated. Australian investment is not yet concentrated in Asia; nor does Asian investment in Australia yet overshadow European and North American sources. Nevertheless our economic future does, rather obviously, lie with the Asian region. In a tripartite world of powerful economic regions—Europe, North America, Asia—Australia's economic ties must undoubtedly be with Asia. The suggestion that Australia should join the North American Free Trade Association makes no more economic sense than joining the EC—if either would have us. Indeed, the

1 J.A.C. Mackie, "Guest editor's introduction" [to feature on "Australia's Future in the Asia-Pacific Region], *Asian Studies Review,* 16, 2 (1993), 79.

suggestion says more about the psychological state of mind of those making it than it does about Australia's future—a yearning for protection from great and powerful friends and the simpler certainties of an earlier age.

So are we part of Asia in terms of population or culture? These are more emotive questions. The proportion of immigrants originating from Asian countries is increasing, but in percentage terms is still minute. Almost certainly this percentage will grow, but at current rates of migration it will take decades if not centuries to become substantial. Asian migration is beneficial to Australia, not just because Asian migrants work hard, like other migrants, but because they strengthen our contacts and our relations with Asian countries in everything from culture to trade. It is particularly important for Australia to follow Canada's example in encouraging Chinese migration in order to form part of the extensive and dynamic trading community linking ethnic Chinese throughout the Asian region.

To ask whether Australia is culturally part of Asia is on the face of it ridiculous. Of course it is not. Australian culture, in every sense of the word, rests firmly on its European foundations. Our European heritage is far more substantial than any influence we have received from Asia. But is it strong enough to withstand the future impact of more extensive contact with Asia? Will not our uniquely Australian cultural identity disappear? Here lies the core of the fear and confusion that characterises too much of the debate over Australia's relations with Asia. In order to reduce both, we need to do two things: deconstruct the monolithic concept of "Asia", and de-reify the notion of "identity".

One is, of course, preaching to the converted in emphasising to the readership of this journal the extraordinary variety of peoples and cultures subsumed under the rubric "Asia"—a variety far greater than any separating European states. To include, as we do, the Muslim states of western Asia, Hindu India, the religious and cultural mosaic of Southeast Asia, and Confucian East Asia within a single, overarching category is to suggest they have something in common. But what? Surely only their alienness, their differentness from ourselves. With Europe, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, with North and South America, we share a common cultural heritage that derives from Christianity and the classical world. Africa and Asia are the Other, lumped together as areas of the globe with which we share nothing. There is in fact no such place as Asia, no ethnic or cultural or religious identity that proclaims itself as Asian. There are Lebanese and Afghans and Vietnamese and Thai, but there are no Asians. Each of these ethnic groups has made their particular contribution to multicultural Australian society, but not as "Asians". Asia generates fear precisely because it is a monolithic concept, which must represent a monolithic threat, to our "identity" and survival. It would be preferable to banish the word from our lexicon, but failing that we should use it as little as possible, always glossed to reveal the multiplicity of peoples and cultures that is the reality of the region.

To suggest that cultural borrowing from the countries of Asia through increasing immigration and interaction will undermine and destroy our Australian cultural entity is to take for granted two things: that there is an "Asian" cultural identity potentially able to overwhelm our own; and that our own "identity" is something formed, fixed, and final that we can point to and say: "that is being Australian". But just as there is no monolithic Asia threatening cultural imperialism, so there is no reified Australian cultural identity which we should or can preserve, like some exotic insect in amber.

What is our Australian identity? Even to ask the question is to misconceive the process. As in labelling Lebanon to Japan as Asia, our language lets us down—but in another way. "Identity" reifies something in perpetual evolution. We have only to think back—those of us who can—to the 1950s, the 1960s, to recognise the extraordinary changes that have taken place in this country, and thus to appreciate the absurdity of trying to identify something as protean as an Australian identity. Were the fifties more "Australian" than the nineties—the 1890s, or the 1990s? Are we less "Australian" now than we were then? There is no such thing as "identity", frozen in reality as in language. There is a process of identification of people with a country they accept as their own. And this is a dynamic process of inclusion and innovation, of selection and assimilation, that does not suddenly stop at some point. The "Australian identity" is what we make it, as a community over time. Our borrowings will be of what fits into this process of national self-definition at each present stage of development, and which, once integrated, will constitute part of that self-definition. The process is one of enrichment, as is all cultural growth. And it is not as if Australia is alone in this process: every country is undergoing a similar process of selection and incorporation of cultural influences. China, Indonesia, India, perhaps above all Japan, have absorbed as much or more from the West as Western countries have absorbed from them—with some agonising, to be sure, about loss of cultural identity, due to the same misapprehensions as disinform our own debate.

If national identification, what it is to be Australian, is understood as an evolving process, much of the fear of some non-existent monolithic "Asia" disappears. We are what we are becoming, not what we—nominally all Australian citizens, but too often some self-appointed group or organisation—decide we have been, or are, at some particular time. Such mythical reconstructions serve sectional interests but contribute only one element in the continuing process of national identification. The process is infinitely complex—material culture is the product of behaviour directed by and expressive of ideas derived from upbringing, education, travel, personal contacts, available information. Out of this interaction, multiform and multicultural, comes an evolving sense of what it is to be Australian. In the future we may select and absorb more influences from countries comprising "Asia" than at present, but the trajectory of the evolving process of identification will remain uniquely Australian. The process is not convergent with those in countries to our north, but parallel and different. We will never become what Indonesia is becoming, or

Thailand, or Pakistan. Fears that this could happen are not only ungrounded, they are nonsensical.

Fear of "Asia" used to centre on fear of actual invasion, of hoards of "Asians" (who? where from?) descending upon Australia and seizing it from us. It was a fear fed by atavistic territoriality and ignorance of the other. In fact we are remarkably well defended geographically, far better than countries sharing land frontiers. Now, fear of "Asia" centres on migration and culture. But our migrants are those under cultural threat, as they well understand, clinging desperately as they do to what elements they can of their original cultures in the face of powerful Australian cultural influences. Their children are Australian, recognising their Australianness most forcibly in the countries of origin of their parents. There must be many of us who have had the experience of being greeted with relief in some Asian city by someone we took to be Thai or Vietnamese only too eager to reveal themselves as fellow Australians: "Gooday. I'm from Brisbane". As for culture, we shall take what we want, for the initiative lies with us.

Australia's future obviously does lie with the Asia-Pacific region, more so even than Canada and the United States. They face Europe across the Atlantic; we face only "Asia". East to South America, west to Africa, are too remote. Our relations must be with the countries to our north.

How fast we can move in evolving an Australian identity more open to our Asia-Pacific region will largely depend, as Jamie Mackie rightly says, on how well we educate our children. Here surely lies the greatest challenge for members of an organisation that has available to it most of the specialist knowledge on this part of the world. Our writing and our teaching are all important, both in relating Australia to the Asian region, and Asian countries with Australia. Networking, institution building, coordinating, and whatever else will only work if we develop a sympathetic understanding. As contacts increase, understanding will grow. Regretfully as yet, many Australians see the countries of Southeast Asia, from Bali to Chiangmai, as exotic holiday destinations about which there is no need to know anything but the price of hotels and where the best bars are. Australians are generally tolerant and friendly, and this helps; but courtesy, respect for the way others do things, and humility are all too often lacking. Relating better to Asian countries requires us not to change our own values or abandon principles. Rather it requires a change of approach, from arrogant criticism and confrontation to more subtle and indirect means of making the same point—whether it be in defence of democratic values or fair trading or human rights.

On an institutional level there is much we can do, both to foster relations with particular countries or organisations, and in developing appropriate institutions of our own. The institutes and councils that have been established, the "up-date" conferences that are held, are making an admirable contribution. I would fully

endorse Elaine McKay's call for a Department of Culture, Sport and the Media. If that is considered too radical, however, my own hopes for the future direction in which Australia should move are even more unlikely to be realised in the near future. Yet they need at least to be discussed.

I disagree with Jamie Mackie on whether it would benefit Australia *in Asian countries* to become a republic. It is immaterial whether other countries in the region retain monarchies. What is incomprehensible for most "Asians" I have encountered is how we can accept *someone else's* monarch as our chief of state. The Queen of Australia is not an Australian queen, and never will be. A Governor-General is a colonial legacy we have failed to rid ourselves of, in their view. If we want to make a statement that will be unambiguously understood as emphasising our determination to link our future with that of our region we should declare a republic and sign the Bali Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. That most Australians would be reluctant to make these moves is a measure of how far we have yet to go.

China revisited: teaching in the Middle Kingdom 1992

David Daw
Australian Defence Force Academy

In November 1991, Professor Harry Heseltine (Rector of University College at the Australian Defence Force Academy) and myself were successful in obtaining a grant from the Australia-China Council for the establishment of an Australian studies program and a continuing relationship between the University College and a similar university in China.

Our partner in this project is the Foreign Languages University PLA at Luoyang, a city which is one of the ancient capitals of China and which is situated at the very centre of the Middle Kingdom. The links between the two universities have been growing for some time. They began with visits to the FLU in 1986 by Dr Nicholas Jose, then cultural counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, and in 1987 by Professor Stephen Pricket of the Australian National University. A delegation from Luoyang visited Australia in April 1988 and, as a consequence of this, the aim of establishing a link between the Foreign Languages University PLA and the University College ADFA was pursued in earnest. In May 1989, Professor Heseltine visited Luoyang, followed by me in October of the same year. During each of these visits, discussions were held about the desirability of establishing an Australian studies program at Luoyang and enhancing our own courses in Chinese affairs with reciprocal visits of staff and students of the two universities. These discussions eventually led to our successful bid for a grant from the Australia-China Council towards the end of 1991.