

# Australia's "Asian Century": Time, Space and Public Culture

## オーストラリアの「アジアの世紀」 時間、空間、パブリックカルチャー

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### Introduction

In late September 2013, Australian news media reported on two very different events related to journeys across the ocean straits that separate Australia from Indonesia. On the evening of September 26<sup>th</sup>, an Indonesian fishing boat carrying eighty refugees from northern Lebanon who intended to seek asylum in Australia foundered off a West Java beach. The boat sank the following day. Thirty-one people who had been onboard drowned. Some of those who survived claimed that when the boat's engine failed, passengers had contacted Australian authorities, but according to official reports, the Border Protection Command aircraft that was dispatched could not locate the vessel.<sup>1</sup> Australian Immigration Minister Scott Morrison subsequently issued a statement emphasizing that the vessel sank in Indonesian waters, implicitly absolving Australia of responsibility for its rescue.<sup>2</sup> Three days later, on September 30<sup>th</sup>, the freshly elected conservative Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott flew to Jakarta. He was accompanied by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, Trade and Investment Minister Andrew Robb, and a delegation of twenty senior Australian business leaders. Abbott had promised to be an "Asia-first prime minister," and on this visit used more than one opportunity to assert that Australia's relationship with Indonesia is the nation's most important.<sup>3</sup> The two top issues for Abbott in his discussions with Indonesia's then-President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, were first, Australia's problem with asylum seekers;

and second, bilateral trade and investment.<sup>4</sup>

The actions and statements by Australian government representatives across these two events identify two familiar ways in which relationships between Australia and its northern "Asian" neighbours are represented in Australian public culture today. On the one hand: the centrality to the conservative imagination of "stopping the boats" of asylum seekers; the determination to force Indonesia to deal with those asylum seekers who travel to Australia via Indonesia; and the ensuing diplomatic row between Prime Minister Abbott and President Yudhoyono, which was later intensified by media revelations of Australian spying on senior Indonesian politicians, all point to old and deep Australian anxieties about territorial integrity in the face of perceived threats from the near north. In our view, this is the latest iteration of what Ghassan Hage characterized a decade ago (under John Howard's prime ministership) as paranoid nationalism.<sup>5</sup> Australia is now perceived to be in the midst of a "border protection crisis";<sup>6</sup> "here"--the vulnerable Australian homeland--is represented as radically, categorically and emotionally distinct from "there": an "Asia" teeming with refugees, their criminal couriers and indifferent hosts.

On the other hand, Abbott's visit to Indonesia bespeaks a different and apparently opposite logic in which Australia as a self-interested state admonishes itself that it must engage with Asian regional economies; calling for a

turn towards economic neighbours; celebrating the potential if only "we" reach out to potential markets to the north. This newer logic we call free market (inter)nationalism in order to evoke the rhetoric of unconstrained transnational markets as virtuous in-and-of themselves, even to the extent of being imagined as transcending anachronistic notions like national territory. With its continuing use of such rhetoric, despite having formally abandoned the policy framework of the outgoing Labor government's Australia in the Asian Century white paper, the Abbott administration appears to be carrying on much of its spirit, with a change of inflection: a little less culture and a little more business, a "new Colombo Plan" to facilitate greater numbers of Australian tertiary students studying for a period in certain Asian nations, and a deep commitment to maintaining an unceasing flow of fee-paying International students into Australia.<sup>7</sup>

This essay is one product of an informal, trans-institutional research network, Cultural Typhoon Melbourne, which we initiated in 2013 as a sort of rogue offshoot of Japan's Cultural Typhoon project on contemporary cultural studies.<sup>8</sup> Our starting point was a desire to collectively make sense of what we had experienced as a radical disjuncture between, on the one hand, the general public-cultural and policy imaginary of Australia's relationships with "Asia" and, on the other hand, our own various experiences of such relationships. Here, we consider some of the consequences of this dissonance by framing the present as a conjunctural moment, in Stuart Hall's sense of conjuncture as a historical phase given a distinctive shape by the convergence of particular social, cultural, political and ideological contradictions.<sup>9</sup> We are well aware that both paranoid nationalism and free-market (inter)nationalism are in no sense new; that both have deep roots in Australian culture and history, channeling as they do the twinned cultural anxieties and economic enthusiasms that arise from being a self-

perceived "western" nation geographically located in (or very close to) Asia. In this article, we do not claim to identify substantively new trends in Australia's discursive construction of its relations with Asia. Rather, we observe the stubborn persistence of certain well-established patterns even as former and current Australian governments claim to be reinventing this relationship. The fact that the two deeply contradictory imaginaries identified above should continue to constitute the dominant available rubrics in contemporary Australian public discourse for configuring "Australia" and "Asia" in relation to each seems to us to result in a distinctive and a profoundly impoverished understanding of current conditions. We find ourselves in a dead-end situation, because neither rubric, nor the combination of them, is capable of producing a sustainable cultural imaginary for our present and future.

Paranoid nationalism is, by definition, incapable of apprehending the realities of the present; while the naïve euphoria of free-market internationalism must sooner or later be punctured perhaps by market downturn, perhaps by the consequences of climate change, or perhaps by the intensifying social inequalities attendant on capitalism's transnational expansion. Our proposition is that an account of some significant and very differently configured cultural relationships between "Asia" and Australia might provide some resources for those interested in thinking beyond the hyperbole of economic opportunism and the paralysis of paranoid nationalism. We begin by briefly considering two ostensibly progressive innovations in governmental and public-cultural framings of this relationship since the late twentieth century-- "Asia as market" and "Asia literacy"--before turning to some stories that offer other much richer explanatory resources.

### **"Asia as market" and "Asia literacy"**

The most recent detailed government framing

of the Australia-Asia relationship is found in the White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century, commissioned by Julia Gillard's former Labor government. While the White Paper acknowledges the long history of Australian interactions with the Asian region, in this report the excitement of the Asian century derives from what is to come: one hundred years of expanding markets.<sup>10</sup> The report proposes that by 2024, Asia will account for half of global economic output, and that its ballooning middle classes will have both more discretionary income and more leisure time. This market will require better housing and food, new consumer goods, and, as people become more mobile, increased access to multiple services ranging from education to entertainment and tourism. Australia's abundant natural resources, its highly skilled and creative population, and its deepening connections with the region mean that it is well positioned to meet these needs.<sup>11</sup> Asia is reduced to an undifferentiated singularity--one vast market for the export of Australian resources and services, including primary resources, education, and tourism. No political or cultural change will moderate the spectacular rates of growth that are "all upside" for Australia.<sup>12</sup> The report's recurring, triumphal message is that Australia can therefore capitalise on being "in the right place at the right time" - that is, being "in the Asian region in the Asian century".<sup>13</sup>

This is not a new story. Writing in the mid-1990s, Ien Ang and Jon Stratton made a multi-sided critique of the economism of then-Prime Minister Paul Keating's "push into Asia" rhetoric.<sup>14</sup> There are both continuities and discontinuities between Australian public-cultural rhetorics on Australia vis-à-vis "Asia" then and now, but similarities can easily be identified in the current aptness of Ang and Stratton's observation that the

"Asianization" of Australia, in its very insistence on the need to bridge the gap between (corporate) Australia and (corporate) Asia, only ends up affirming the very discursive binary oppositioning of "Australia" and "Asia" which it strives to overcome in the first place.<sup>15</sup>

Similar points can be made about current discussions, too. The reduction of culture to a function of markets, and the assumption of the radical separateness of "Australia" from "Asia", constitute the two major problems that we see in the current public-cultural framing of the "Asian century." In our discussion below, we identify some alternatives to the "oppositioning" of Asia and Australia that we continue to see in government rhetoric of Asia-as-market and Asia literacy.

In Australia in the Asian Century, "Asia literacy"--the deepening of "knowledge and understanding of Asia" and the "acquisition of Asia-relevant capabilities"--represents the main way in which the concept of culture figures in the discussion.<sup>16</sup> Again, this is not the first time we have heard these ideas. This iteration of the Asia literacy concept marks the end of a trajectory that Henderson has identified as commencing with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG)-commissioned Asian Languages and Australia's Economic Future report (aka Rudd Report) on Asian language education in schools, released in 1994. In that articulation, Japanese, Mandarin, Indonesian, and Korean were identified as the Asian languages to be prioritized. The choice of these languages was based on a ranking of nation-states according to their importance for Australian economic interests. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki observed over a decade ago, the metaphor of "Asia literacy" has always tended to represent "Asia" (again, defined as "other" to Australia) as:

dominant rhetoric on the

a sort of hieroglyphic document which would become legible if only we could crack the code. The "Western" scholar is still assumed to stand within a legible, transparent space which is the source of theories with which to interpret the enigmatic areas outside. From this perspective, Australia can all too readily come to be presented as an outpost of Western universalism fortunately located close to the perplexing realms of Asia, and so offering a convenient salient from which to "interpret" Asia to the (English-speaking) world.<sup>17</sup>

The overwhelming focus of the Rudd Report was on increasing the number of learners of key Asian languages in secondary schools. In subsequent policies there has been a shift towards combining language learning with teaching and learning about culture in the greater Asian region. Thus, as it invoked today, literacy refers less to the ability to read and understand texts than to broader forms of cultural understanding. This can be seen, for example, in the 2013 Australian Curriculum: English (ACARA) where "Australia's links to Asia" forms part of the stated rationale.<sup>18</sup> Here, Asia literacy expands into all aspects of schooling, with the aim of fostering broader intercultural awareness and understanding.<sup>19</sup> It signifies the desirability of "all young Australians hav[ing] foundational and deep knowledge, skills and understanding of the histories, geographies, arts and literature of the diverse countries of Asia".<sup>20</sup>

But how does this renewed desirability of "Asia literacy" relate to actually existing, lived relationships between Asia and Australia's migrant histories and multicultural communities? A clue has been identified by Wenche Ommundsen, who notes that, in the

White Paper, Asian Australians are themselves "named as resources" that will facilitate economic, social and cultural interaction between Australia and their Asian "homelands".<sup>21</sup> It seems plausible, then, to conclude that "Asia literacy" refers principally to knowledge that can be put to use as Australian citizens (implicitly, non-Asian Australians) attempt to assist their nation in brokering its increasing economic interactions with Asia. Such a conclusion has recently been suggested by Brett Mason, the Parliamentary Secretary with responsibility for the New Colombo Plan, who reports that proficiency in an Asian language will not be a pre-requisite for New Colombo Plan applicants because English is the global language of business.<sup>22</sup> This most recent watering-down of "Asia literacy" to effectively exclude literacy altogether illustrates how in the current government's vision, if "culture" features at all, then it is as a set of skills and competencies in the service of the nation's economic advancement.

### Time

Our argument is that the vision of culture offered by these recent calls for "Asia literacy" is amnesic, narrow and desiccated, and that it fails to account of the actual, everyday, lived experience of many residents of Australia. Furthermore, as a significant body of research on the long history of Australia's engagement with its northern neighbours testifies, to imagine the twenty-first century as newly "Asian" involves considerable historical forgetting.<sup>23</sup> Australia's formal political re-orientation toward the Asia-Pacific could be tracked across a century of regional engagements: these include the industrial battles over Australia's export of scrap iron to Imperial Japan that earned Menzies the "Pig-Iron Bob" tag (1938); Australia's involvements in the Pacific War (1941-45), the Indonesian National Revolution (1945-49), the Malayan Emergency (1948-60), the Korean War

(1950–53), and the Vietnam War (1956–75); and the politics of Whitlam's belated recognition of the PRC (1972). But however we might choose to identify that re-orientation in the political realm, growing up in Australian cities from the 1960s on, as most of the authors of the essay did, we knew in ordinary, everyday ways that culturally, we were in the Asia-Pacific. Childhood media consumption provides just one example.

Between the 1960s and the 1980s, much of the authors' own popular media consumption, particularly of children's programming in the after-school hours, was "Asian" from the beginning. We wanted aqua-gum because of the star of a Japanese anime series, Marine Boy, and can still sing (at least some of) the stirring theme song of *Kimba: The White Lion*.<sup>24</sup> Although a Sydney Headmaster at the time described the show as exemplifying "a cult of Japanese sadism", for many children growing up in mid-1960s eastern Australia, the martial skills of *The Samurai* were deeply fascinating.<sup>25</sup> In addition to a diet of local, British and north American television, young viewers were being thoroughly prepared for the joys of Chairman Kaga's exhortations in *Iron Chef*, three decades later. Some of us recall reading *Neuromancer* (1984), the first novel of a young American writer who'd been educated and lived for over a decade on the other side of the Pacific, in Vancouver. Gibson tossed around references to Shinjuku and Chiba as comfortably as the film *Bladerunner* (1982) cited the aesthetics of Tokyo. We were enchanted by Japanese films, from Kurosawa—who won a Palme d'Or 1980 and released *Ran* in (1985)—to Imamura who also won a Palme d'Or for the tough and beautiful *Ballad of Narayama* (1983), to Itami's "new wave" *Tampopo* (1985), and to the manga that would burst onto the cinema screen later in the decade in the anime film *Akira* (1988). In the early 1980s, we discovered the 5<sup>th</sup> generation Chinese filmmakers. Soon enough, we found ourselves working in Australian tertiary education, which was soon to reinvent

itself as an export service sector to the region. So, in terms of both geo-political and everyday media temporalities, for us as for many people who grew in Australia from the 1960s, the twentieth century was "already" Asian.

## Space

In a variety of different ways, the authors of this essay have been in motion within, between and among Japan, Australia, China, Taiwan and Indonesia over a twenty-five year period: as high-school exchange students, scholarship language students, working holiday makers, postgraduate researchers, and university professors. Such geographic and linguistic mobility has resulted in criss-crossing experiences of immediacy and distance, and a deep sense of complex, everyday cultural and experiential entanglements that fatally complicate any clean definitional break between "here" and "there". Such experiences are not simply idiosyncrasies of our own personal life histories, but are indicative of a historical moment in which where language and culture, like media, are in constant motion. Ignoring these commonplace experiences—which we argue in an important sense define cultural life in Australia today—recent public policies position engagement with "other" languages and culture as simply a means of furthering the national economic interest. Such approaches reinstate dichotomies of and native/ non-native and known/ unknown, denying the reality of everyday flows of trans-national connection facilitated through intensifying digital and material mobilities.

The kinds of everyday translocal experiences that we refer to above are commonplace not only for the relatively privileged social strata of cultural workers and scholars like ourselves, but also for all migrants, whether permanent or

temporary, and for their families. The 2011 Census revealed that 26% of Australia's population was born overseas with a further 20% having at least one overseas-born parent, and over the past decade Australia has become home to increasing numbers of temporary and permanent migrants from Asia.<sup>26</sup> India and China are now the two top source countries for Migration Program visa places,<sup>27</sup> and Mandarin is the nation's most widely spoken language after English.<sup>28</sup> As we noted above, the official rhetoric on the Asian century tends to see Australia's Asian migrant communities simply as resources to facilitate Australia's northward economic expansion.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, we propose that the everyday translocal and inter-cultural experience of Asian-heritage migrants in Australia--which constitutes Australian social life as translocal and inter-cultural--underlines the fallacy of conceiving of "Asia" and "Australia" as radically separate or separable entities.

In this section, we address a group of young Asian temporary migrants whose presence in Australian cities is among the most obvious symptoms of the targeting of Asia-as-market: the "export" of Australian higher education. (It is worth noting that the pervasive governmental language of "education export" to describe the activity of teaching International students in Australia reinforces yet again--in this instance, directly contrary to basic geographic logic--the presumption of a fundamental separation between "Australia" and "Asia"). Our aim is to show how the everyday experiences of Chinese International students fatally complicate the "binary oppositioning" of "Australia" and "Asia".<sup>30</sup>

As a result of monetizing Australian higher education as an export commodity, by 2011, more than one in five enrolments in Australian universities were by International students, with China being by far the most significant student-sending nation.<sup>31</sup> In 2012 these developments, which fundamentally transform

the university classroom experience in ways that have yet to be fully understood, prompted one of us to undertake an exploratory, interviews-based study of 15 Chinese International students' experiences of educational mobility. Martin was spurred on in part by her own previous experience as an overseas student in China and Taiwan for several years: a life-shaping series of educational travels instigated, initially, by a post-secondary school scholarship funded by the Australia China Council under the Hawke Labor government of the 1980s. Martin's interviews with the Chinese students allow us to develop a materially grounded critique of the presumptive opposition between "Australia" and "Asia," offering rich resources for problematizing the conceptual "sedentarism" on which such an opposition is based.<sup>32</sup>

For many of the students interviewed, the journey from China to Australia was not their first experience of educational mobility but just the latest in a series of ongoing educational travels. For example, 19 year-old Xiaoxu,<sup>33</sup> whose family home was in Fujian province, had gone away to boarding school in Kunshan, Jiangsu in the first grade. She then moved to another city for junior high school; back to Kunshan for high school; to a third city for year 12; and finally to Melbourne for a prep program leading into the Australian university system. Xiaoxu plans to become an entrepreneur, internationally trading the products made by her parents' factory. This pattern of multi-stage, ongoing educational mobility was common across the stories of many of Martin's interviewees. A similar pattern also emerges in another of our co-authors' account of his own educational travels. Yi's tertiary education experiences were initiated with inter-provincial travel within China, in order to pursue a bachelor degree in Media Arts; followed by a move to Adelaide, Australia; a year on exchange in Los Angeles; and most recently, to Melbourne, to pursue his PhD. He envisages a future in academia in

Australia, in China, or in a third country where opportunity presents itself. For students like these, the journey from China to Australia is thus not so much a single, momentous step, but rather one leg in a travel route that extends across time and space--both into the students' own past travels and into their envisioned professional futures; across and between China, Australia, and other locations worldwide. In such accounts, "here" and "there" become relativized in relation to the far longer, more complex and contingent trajectories that constitute the experience of educational and professional mobility across a lifetime.

Students' media use also revealed patterns that complicate the simplistic here / there; China / Australia model. For this generation of International students as for young permanent migrants, everyday life is fundamentally shaped by the technological affordances of smartphones, internet connectivity, wifi, laptops and tablet devices, such that they inhabit an always-on communicative circuit linking the "here" of their embodied, material everyday life in Melbourne with the virtual "there" of friends and family in China and around the world. Downloading Korean and US dramas and films from "every/nowhere" via Chinese file-sharing sites; chatting with family, friends and classmates across China, Australia, the USA, the UK and New Zealand via Chinese platforms like QQ, Renren, WeChat and Weibo; tuning in to Chinese Internet radio, catching up on East Asian celebrity gossip online; knowing that their parents are never further than the phone in their pocket--these students' experience of Melbourne as a locality is fundamentally conditioned by the "telepresencing" of distant others enabled by these communicative technologies.<sup>34</sup> These students' everyday worlds are thus inherently trans-local: their experience of locality is produced in and through their connections across geographic scales, revealing their occupation of multiple and complex social

networks that exemplify the "there" within the "here," or the mutual imbrication--rather than the radical opposition--of close and distant locales.<sup>35</sup>

Yi's personal experiences of educational mobility further underscore the complex entanglements of "here" and "there" for an international student in Australia. His choice to study in Adelaide was motivated, in part, by his aspiration of avoiding Australian universities in the larger cities where there was a high concentration of incoming International students from Asia, especially from China, like himself. His initial expectation of what "Australia" would be like was thus cast through his desire to have a fuller experience of being elsewhere--culturally and geographically--than China. However, the apparently natural division between "here" and "there" started to collapse for him within weeks after his arrival in Adelaide. First, finding himself to be one of only a few Asian faces in lectures and tutorials, he became more than ever aware of his identity being racialized. The insistent question, "Where are you from?" reminded him constantly that, for the local students, he was never completely "here". Second, he felt isolated both socially and in classes. Often, he was unable to join conversations about Australian media content, and unable to comprehend many local cultural references. Despite being an avid fan of American TV dramas, he was only able to have superficial discussions about media consumption and representation, and often found it almost impossible to sustain a casual conversation with local students. This led to him spending more time either with other International students from Chinese-speaking backgrounds--elaborating a certain shared sense of "there-ness out here"--or with friends physically located in China, via internet-enabled technologies, creating the sense that we describe above, of the "there" within the "here".

The complication of any straightforward "here"

and "there" geography in the subjective experience of educational mobility is also notable in Yi's elaboration of his sexual identity. Although now self-identified as a queer man, for several years while he was studying and living in Adelaide and Los Angeles, his sexual identity was predominantly mediated through a "there"--China. His primary contacts with LGBT communities were via the Internet, with communities located in China. While no longer claiming the complete lack of a "here" in his sexual identity, he is informed by his exchanges with other Asian users of queer social media, through his PhD research, that they have had similar experiences of not feeling fully "here" as queer subjects. Such felt displacement results not just from the sexual racism of Australian gay male culture, but also from the spatial "entanglement and interconnectedness"<sup>36</sup> that characterizes many people's lived experiences of translocality.

### Public culture

Our concern in this article has been to pay attention to existing cultural practices that highlight the limits of both the Australia/ Asia binary and the narrow conceptualisation of Asia-as-market. In this penultimate section, we consider some Australian-Asian media collaborations and partnerships between cultural institutions in relation to these central concerns. Over the last decade, the Australian government has negotiated and signed co-production treaties with China (2006: covering feature films only) and Singapore (2007: to date covering feature films, mini series, children's animations, and documentary), and it is in the process of finalizing agreements with South Korea, India and Malaysia.<sup>37</sup> Although there is a history of film collaborations between Australia and Asia since cinema's inception,<sup>38</sup> the current period has seen a shift in policy towards official collaborations that are based on economic imperatives masked as cultural exchange. A statement of Screen Australia's aspirations can be found in its Enterprise Asia

strategy (launched in December 2012), which is described as a "facilitation strategy" aimed at connecting Australian screen businesses with growing markets in Asia. Closely echoing the rhetoric of the Asian Century report discussed above, Screen Australia asserts:

Many Asian countries are experiencing a burgeoning middle class, which is driving consumption of screen content.... Greater consumption of Australian screen content in Asia will also familiarise Asian audiences with aspects of Australian culture and society, which brings a range of tangible and intangible benefits.<sup>39</sup>

However, this Asia-as-market model is complicated by a growing number of Asian Australian co-productions across a diverse range of genres and forms. In reality, Australia is not simply a site of media production that "connects" to Asian markets positioned "out there", and nor is "monetis[ing] content" the most useful way to understand the forms of cultural exchange that co-productions can facilitate.<sup>40</sup> Take the example of the first (and so far the only) Australia-Singapore feature film co-production since the signing of the official co-production agreement between the two countries in 2007: *Bait 3D* (2012).<sup>41</sup> *Bait 3D* tells a very Australian (horror) story. The film is a disaster-thriller about a freak tsunami that floods a resort community on the Queensland coast in northern Australia. The only survivors are trapped in an underground supermarket with a crazed gunman in their midst and two hungry great white sharks circling below. Perhaps because of its setting and storyline--the film is shot on Australia's Gold Coast, with an Australian director and a mostly Australian cast--very few references have been made in the Australian press to the fact that *Bait 3D* is a Singapore-Australia co-production. The Singapore press, by contrast, were quick to



foreground the Singapore talent behind this collaboration, with 3D, visual, and postproduction effects being handled by the Singapore companies Widescreen Media and Blackmagic Design. Complicating this scenario further, a Chinese version of Bait 3D was also produced, with additional Chinese actors and subplots, resulting in the film's runaway success in China (Still 1). Bait 3D grossed \$1.96 million on its first day of release there, taking \$20 million in total, making it the most successful Australian (and indeed Singaporean) film of all time and significantly outpacing the takings of Australia-China co-productions.<sup>42</sup> Conversely, Bait 3D was a commercial and critical flop in Australia.

The transnational, transcultural experience of a co-production like Bait 3-D complicates the understandings of location, place and culture that currently dominate both government and media industry discourses on Australian screen culture in Asia. Co-productions do not easily fit the model of transporting ready-made Australian culture from here to there for economic gain. Different audience responses to international co-productions highlight the difficulties likely to attend any attempt to export national media content on a global scale. At the same time, the Singapore collaboration and Chinese involvement that were necessary to realise the Bait 3D project makes it impossible to conceive of the film as an "Australian" product in any pure or simple sense.



**Still 1: Adding a certain "China flavor" with an extra scene added for the Australian-Singaporean co-production Bait 3D's China release: a red-clad Chinese Search and Rescue Team vows to devote itself wholeheartedly to its mission** (source: [actor Ashton Chen's Youtube channel](#))

Further instances of Australia-Asia cross-border collaborative practice can be found in partnerships between cultural institutions. Institutional collaboration has attained a high profile in recent years and been championed as an innovative practice that does much more than simply convey Australian cultural products to overseas markets. One example is the Australian Research Council-funded transnational Large Screens project. In both its form (transnational institutional collaboration) and the content of its projects (investigating the possibility of a transnational public sphere), this project offers rich resources for conceptualizing actually existing public cultural forms that extend across Australia and Asia, and deeply problematize the presumptive separateness of those terms.<sup>43</sup>

The Large Screens project's industry partners include the Australia Council (Australia's federal arts funding body), Federation Square (a Melbourne-based private company that oversees an iconic large screen in downtown Melbourne), and Art Centre Nabi (a private art gallery in Seoul, South Korea). The research team consists of scholars with expertise on large screen theories and cultures of production and reception, as well as digital media artists, programmers and curators. The project's collaborative partnership structure can thus be conceived of as a transnational cultural cluster, defined as an "[i]nteraction between enterprises with institutional co-operation that crosses national boundaries."<sup>44</sup> The aims of the project are to create and curate interactive digital art works, program them simultaneously across large public screens in

Melbourne and Seoul, and assess levels of cross-cultural audience engagement. Instead of innovation strategies targeted directly at increasing export income, this project aims to test the conceptual and technical possibility of a transnational public sphere. This is defined as a shared public-cultural imaginary based on connections across geographic and political borders, facilitated by media and data flows that, like those discussed above in the section on International students' experience, exceed the territorial confines of nations.<sup>45</sup>

To date, the Large Screens project has curated and staged three telematic events across Melbourne and Seoul. The first, entitled SMS-Origins by Leon Cmielewski, Josephine Starrs, and Adam Hinshaw, was held on 7 August 2009. It used the public display of SMS texts to connect the audiences across the two cities, instructing audiences to "sms [their] family origins". Participants sent text messages of their own and their parents' places of birth, and links were added to a map on a public screen that updated in real-time as it received texts. Ultimately, multiple curved vectors linked Korea and Australia to all parts of the world, including China, Italy, Greece, Singapore, the USA and UK, providing an arresting graphic illustration of the extent of the actually existing transnational connections linking the lives of Australian residents with places, peoples, and histories beyond the nation (Figure 2). The second event, entitled The Hello Project by Rebecca Hilton and Soonho Park, was held on 7 October 2011. It involved a constantly changing dance routine where a set of dance movements were taught, learned and passed from a participant in Seoul to a participant in Melbourne, and so on, much like the children's game of "Chinese whispers". During this event the large screens were split into two, one half showing the real-time one-to-one transmission process of the dance, the other half showing a time-lapsed and longer edited clip of all the completed dance sequences. Surrounding the screens in the public parks and squares were

crowds, watching the dance acts on the screen, dancing around the square, or queuing up to wait their turn to join in the game.

The third event, entitled Australia Vs Korea: Dance Battle 2012, was held on 14 October 2012, with live link ups across Perth, Melbourne and Seoul. The event consisted of "battles" (competitions) between dancers in the three cities, and also featured public hip hop workshops, special performances, and an open stage section where the public could take to the stage. More than 10,000 people across these cities watched and participated in these events. In the face of a project that has directly visualized the reality of people's lived cross-border connections, and staged interactions between publics across national borders, it's hard to hang onto, let alone defend the utility of the inherent separateness of "Australian" from "Asian" cultures, or the notion of cultural engagement consisting simply of the export of "Australian culture" to Asian markets.



Figure 2: from SMS-Origins, Leon Cmielewski, Josephine Starrs, Adam Hinshaw 2009: A regionally interconnected Australia.

### Conclusion: Revaluing culture

The still-dominant conception of Australia's

relationship with Asia can be explained in terms of "in but not of" in a double sense. On the one hand, Australia is considered to be geographically located in the Asia-Pacific region. As we have seen, the current conjuncture of paranoid nationalism with free-market (inter)nationalism frames this location as bringing Australia economic benefits, as well as risks connected with immigration flows from the north. However, persistent attachments to the social and cultural legacy of British colonization and Australia's historically constituted identification with the West have hindered the development of a sense of belonging to our region. In this sense, Australia is represented in dominant public discourse as "in but not of Asia". On the other hand, no less significant is the idea of Asia being "in but not of Australia". Asian cultural influences and the presence of migrants from the region constitute basic historical conditions of Australian life and culture. Yet such an Asian presence is not commonly recognized as constitutive of contemporary Australian society. As we have seen throughout our discussion, "Asia" is routinely represented in the dominant rhetorics as a large, undifferentiated abstraction "over there," characterized by a fundamental cultural otherness. This lack of attention to cultural complexity both within the wide geographic region we call "Asia" and within the territory of Australia itself acts as a further block to the imaginability of Australia as part of Asia.

In our critique of the currently dominant conceptual frameworks available in Australian public culture for understanding the relation between Australia and Asia, we have illustrated the pervasive influence of two specific discourses. These are, first, the discourse of Australia and Asia as categorically distinct entities; and second, the discourse of Asia as market. We have tried to show how the rhetoric of Asia literacy is implicated in both of these constructions. To urge Australians to skill up on Asia literacy is to presume in advance the definitional separateness of Australian and

Asian cultures--as Morris-Suzuki has argued, it is to imagine "Australia" as taking up the role of a privileged interpreter standing outside and apart from the mysterious text of "Asia."<sup>46</sup> We have also demonstrated how the official rhetoric around Asia literacy persistently tends to assume that the ultimate goal of cultural knowledge is to advance national economic interests. We've argued that "Asia" has in fact long been a constitutive element in everyday life in Australia through people's border-crossing experiences-physically, imaginatively, professionally and through media. In the new millennium, such mutual engagement and contamination has been deepening in ways that seriously trouble the conceptual separation of Australia from Asia. The examples we have discussed all testify to the imperative to acknowledge, understand, and work with Australia's already existing, constitutive connections with "Asia", rather than desperately seeking ways of improving a narrowly conceived "Asia literacy". A dominant discourse exercises its symbolic power by suppressing the complexity of reality. The time is ripe for us to bring the covert reality out from under the shadow of the dominant, economics-driven mythology of the Asia-Australia relation as one of separateness and opposition.

At the root of our discontent with the currently dominant frameworks for thinking about Australia in relation to Asia is our recognition that these frameworks entail a serious impoverishment of the concept of culture. In our discussion of the richness and complexity of people's everyday lives in a cultural field constituted by the interpenetration of "Australia" with "Asia", we have tried to underline the importance of recognizing the inherent value of everyday (inter)cultural experience. The social life of our cities and towns is now fundamentally shaped by the presence of Asian International student and migrant communities; our media diet has long been deeply flavoured by Asian content and

genres; and many people's life stories are defined by lines of movement between various locations across our region. In these and many other profound transformations we see rich possibilities for reconceptualizing the definition and meanings of cultural life in and beyond Australia today. To realize those possibilities, the conceptualization of (Asian) "culture" as simply a bundle of linguistic skills and specialist knowledges and capacities to be mastered in the service of economic gain is clearly inadequate. The conception of culture underscored in our examples above is not of some static entity that exists "out there" to be pinned down in textbooks and mastered by the specialist, as one might learn algebra or coal sampling. Rather, our stories highlight both the organic, mutable character of culture, and the need to take everyday life here, in Australia, as an object of analysis--and thereby, in the case of our Asia / Australia example, to recognize the mutual imbrication of these terms in our actual lived experience today. The value of taking culture seriously, on this model, lies in human benefits that far exceed the functional goal of economic gain. Not least of these is the recognition that the translocal, inter-cultural experience that we argue is a defining feature of contemporary Australian life must profoundly (re)shape our understanding of both the nation, and our selves.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> ABC News online, "[Timeline: Sinking of asylum seeker boat off Java](#)", Sept 20 2013. Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>2</sup> George Roberts, "[Asylum seeker boat sank 50 metres off Indonesian shore, survivors say](#)", ABC news online, Sept 29 2013. Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Hartcher, "[I would be an Asia first prime minister, says Abbott](#)," Sydney Morning Herald, Sept 3 2013, accessed Oct 10 2013; see also Prime Minister of Australia, The Hon. Tony Abbott M.P., "[Remarks at Sydney Airport](#)", Sept 30 2013. Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Samantha Hawley, "[Tony Abbott heads to Jakarta for talks with Indonesian president in first international trip since election](#)," ABC news Online, accessed Jan 22 2015; Michael Bachelard, "[Abbott government ends asylum seeker stand-off with Indonesia](#)", Sydney Morning Herald November 9, 2013, accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for hope in a shrinking society*, Pluto Press Australia, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> [Operation Sovereign Borders](#) is the name of the Abbott' government's anti-asylum-seeker policy. Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Australian Government, [Australia in the Asian Century](#), October 2012, accessed Jan 22 2015. The original Colombo plan, initiated in 1949, focused on education and human resources development for the benefit of developing nations in East and Southeast Asia, and saw several generations of students from the region receiving scholarships to study in Australia. On

the New Colombo Plan, see [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#), accessed Jan 22 2015. See also Sarah Bice and Helen Sullivan, "[Abbott government may have new rhetoric, but it's still the 'Asian century'](#)," *The Conversation*, November 8 2013. Accessed Jan 22 2015

<sup>8</sup> On [Cultural Typhoon Japan](#). Accessed Jan 22 2015

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hall and Doreen Massey, "Interpreting the Crisis," *Soundings* 44 (2010): 57-71.

<sup>10</sup> The first four chapters of the White Paper outline this vision for Australia's future, forming a section titled 'The rise of Asia provides great opportunities for Australia'.

<sup>11</sup> Australian Government, *Australia in the Asian Century*, p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Wesley, '[Michael Wesley analyses the Asian Century white paper](#)', ANU College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Government, *Australia in the Asian Century*, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ien Ang and Jon Stratton, "Asianizing Australia: Notes towards a Critical Transnationalism in Cultural Studies," *Cultural Studies* 10 (1996).

<sup>15</sup> Ang and Stratton, "Asianizing Australia," p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Australian Government, *Australia in the Asian Century*, p. 167.

<sup>17</sup> Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Anti-area Studies," *Communal/ Plural* 8.1 (2000): 9-23, pp. 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> ACARA, [The Australian Curriculum](#). Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Eeqbal Hassim, 'Intercultural Understanding

through Asia Perspectives in English.' Literacy Learning: The Middle Years 21 3 (2013): 7-16.

<sup>20</sup> Asia Education Foundation, 'Asia Literacy: The Facts'. Melbourne, 2013. . Accessed November 10 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Wenche Ommundsen, 'Transnational Imaginaries: Reading Asian Australian Writing', *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 12: 2 (2012), 6; emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Trounson, "Lack of Asian 'no bar to Colombo plan'", *The Australian Higher Education supplement*, April 2 2014: 28.

<sup>23</sup> See for example David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850 - 1939*. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1999; Alexander Turnbull Yarwood, *Asian migration to Australia: The background to exclusion 1896-1923*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964; David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska eds., *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*. Perth: UWA Publishing, 2012; Daniel Oakman, *Facing Asia: A History of the Colombo Plan*. Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010; Carol Johnson, Pal Ahluwalia & Greg McCarthy, "Australia's Ambivalent Re-imagining of Asia," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 45.1: 2010: 59-74.

<sup>24</sup> *Undersea Boy Marine* (海底少年マリン Kaitei Shōnen Marin) by Minoru Adachi.

<sup>25</sup> The original Japanese title was Onmitsu Kenshi (隠密剣士, "Spy Swordsman"). The series by [Senkocha Productions](#) featured 128 episodes between 1962 and 1965. On Shintaro in Australia, see the excellent documentary, *Shintaro: The Samurai Sensation that Swept a Nation*, SBS and Screen Australia, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#). Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Department of Immigration and Citizenship,

Australian Government, [Australia: Migration Trends 2011-2012](#). Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, "[2011 Census shows Asian languages on the rise in Australian households](#)". Accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Ommundsen, "Transnational Imaginaries."

<sup>30</sup> Ang and Stratton, "Asianizing Australia".

<sup>31</sup> Australian Education International. "[Research Snapshot: Onshore higher education International students as a proportion of all onshore students by university, 2011](#)." 2012, accessed March 13, 2013; OECD. OECD Stat Extracts, "[Foreign/ International students enrolled](#)," 2012, accessed March 13 2012; Australian Education International. "[International Student Numbers 2012](#)," 2013, accessed March 13, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Mimi Sheller and John Urry, "The New Mobilities Paradigm," pp 208-209. *Environment and Planning A* 2006, volume 38, pages 207 - 226

<sup>33</sup> All interviewees are referred to by pseudonym.

<sup>34</sup> John Tomlinson. 2007. *The Culture of Speed: The Coming of Immediacy*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi and Singapore: Sage.

<sup>35</sup> David Conradson and Deirdre McKay. 2007. 'Translocal Subjectivities: Mobility, Connection, Emotion.' *Mobilities* 2.2: 167-174; see esp. 169; see also Fran Martin and Fazal Rizvi. "Making Melbourne: Digital Connectivity and International Students' Experience of Locality," *Media, Culture and Society* 36.7 (Oct. 2014): 1016-1031.; and Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen (2010) eds. "'Translocality': An Approach to Connection and Transfer in Area Studies". In *Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective*. Leiden: Brill.

<sup>36</sup> Freitag and von Oppen, "Translocality," p.1

<sup>37</sup> Screen Australia policy documents outlining its Asia focus include a 'Response to Australia in the Asian Century Issues Paper' (April 2012), 'Friends with Benefits: A report on Australia's International Co-Production Program' (August 2012)), 'Doing Business with Australia: Producer Offset and Co-productions' (July 2013) (also available in Chinese), and most recently 'Common Ground: Opportunities for Australian Screen Partnerships in Asia' (November 2013).

<sup>38</sup> See Olivia Khoo, Belinda Smaill and Audrey Yue, 2013. *Transnational Australian Cinema: Ethics in the Asian Diasporas*. Lanham MD: Lexington Books.

<sup>39</sup> Screen Australia, '[Response to Australia in the Asian Century Issues Paper](#)', April 2012, p. 5, accessed Jan 22 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Screen Australia notes that co-productions 'expand opportunities for audiences to consume and therefore monetise the content created, which has the added and important by-product of generating cultural exchange' (Screen Australia, "Response," p. 5).

<sup>41</sup> The Australia-Singapore Co-Production

Agreement was signed on 7 September 2007 and entered into force on 16 October 2008. So far four co-productions with Australia have been produced under the agreement, two children's animation series, *Zigby and Guess How Much I Love You - the Adventures of Little Nutbrown Hare*; one documentary series, *Gallery of Everyday Things*; and one a feature film, *Bait 3D*.

<sup>42</sup> *The Australian*, 17 October 2012, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> 'Large Screens and the Transnational Public Sphere', Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project (LP0989302, 2009-2013), with Nikos Papastergiadis, Scott McQuire, Ross Gobson, Sean Cubitt and Audrey Yue.

<sup>44</sup> Graeme Evans and Jo Foord. *Strategies for Creative Spaces - Phase 1 Report: Report Commissioned London Development Agency - Creative London, City of Toronto, Ontario Ministry of Economic Development & Trade and Ministry of Culture, 2005, 30.*

<sup>45</sup> Nikos Papastergiadis, Audrey Yue, Amelia Barikin, Scott McQuire, Ross Gibson, Cecelia Cmielewski (In Press, 2014), "Translating Gesture in a Transnational Public Sphere," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*.

<sup>46</sup> Morris-Suzuki, "Anti-Area Studies."