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Engaging the Asian Century

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Over the course of 2012, much has been said in Australia about its future in the Asian century. The Australian Prime Minister has established a high-level Task Force, chaired by the former Treasury Head, Ken Henry, to produce a White Paper that has been given the task of mapping the scale and pace of Asia's transformation and its implications for Australia. The Government is convinced that just as the United States dominated the twentieth century, the twenty-first century will be an Asian century; and that Australia will have to negotiate this reality to take advantage of the likely economic and strategic changes in the region. To be released in late 2012, the White Paper has been asked to examine Australia's links with the diverse nations of Asia, in an attempt to define the government's policy settings and strategies across most of the policy domains, including education and the arts. It will thus consider 'the potential contribution of business, non- government organisations and individual citizens and provide a blueprint to navigate the Asian Century—a period of transformative economic, political, strategic and social change' (Henry, 2012: 1). Fundamental to the demand for this blueprint is a conviction that Australia's integration into Asia is essential for its national prosperity, its social and economic vibrancy and its security.

The idea of the "Asian Century" emerged in the late 1980s to describe the fast growing economies of the region. It is based on a prediction that the region could account for over half of global output by the middle of this century. The idea of Asian Century is however not only descriptive of the rates of economic growth in Asia but also expresses a postcolonial confidence in its growing geopolitical significance, particularly with the rise of China and to a lesser extent India. This confidence is based on a particular understanding of international relations, of how regions relate to each other within a framework of uneven and asymmetrical distribution of power. The rise of Asia is thus assumed to imply an inevitable decline in the power of Europe and the United States. Within the context of such political shifts, Australia faces a range of strategic choices relating to the ways in which its geographical location within the Asian region might dictate its economic and political affiliations. During a recent visit of the US President Barack Obama, many Australian analysts seemed troubled, for example, by the question of how the nation might reconcile the facts of its geographical and economic realities with its historical links with Europe and its political loyalties to the United States.

There is of course nothing new about this existential anxiety. From the very beginning of the British colonisation, Australia has struggled to establish a coherent and consistent position with respect to Asia. Accordingly, the suggestion that Australia might have an Asian future has always aroused a range of conflicting responses, from deep fears that Australia could be overrun by the "yellow hordes" to a more progressive notion that a closer involvement with Asia is not only inevitable but should also be welcomed for the opportunities it provides. In the late nineteenth century, it was the anti-Asian sentiment that was strong. So much so, that one of the first legislative acts that the newly forged Commonwealth of Australia passed in 1901 was the infamous *Immigration Restriction Act*, often referred to as the White Australia policy. The founders of the

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Australian federation viewed "whiteness" as a sign of moral and intellectual superiority, and regarded Asians as dangerous economic competitors. That is not to say that the White Australia policy was universally supported. Indeed there has always been a pro- Asian lobby within Australian politics, which regards Australia's economic destiny to be inextricably tied to Asia (Walker & Ingleson, 1989). Indeed, it is this sentiment that eventually led Australia to abandon discriminatory immigration policies in the late 1960s; and has now become the driving force behind the Government's attempts to reframe Australia-Asia relations.

The Henry Review has generated a great deal of interest within the Australian community, with almost 300 submissions from a broad spectrum of individuals, associations and government and non-government organizations. Most of these submissions are highly supportive of the importance that the Australian Government attaches to Asia-Australia relations. Most insist on the need to enhance the ability of Australians to engage with people living and working in Asia. Highlighted too in these submissions is the importance attached to learning an Asian language, and to the development of a broader program in Asia-related cultural literacy. It is noted moreover that Asia-literacy is much more than language fluency, and that it must therefore include attempts that "encourage effective engagement with Asia, deepen interpersonal relationships, augment Australia's security strategy and capitalise on the economic potential of the Asian Century" (Henry Review Submissions, 2012: 11). In their submissions, business groups in particular speak of the importance of "Asia capabilities" appropriate for expanding trade links and working in Asia. This, they argue, requires people-to-people links and a better cultural understanding of Asian cultures. This business perspective is grounded in the belief that the growing middle-class in Asia has created enormous commercial opportunities for Australia. For Australia to take advantage of these opportunities, it needs to develop appropriate economic policy settings, with respect not only to trade and taxation but also education, skills formation and migration.

The Henry Review has welcomed the level of support that appears to exist in Australia for stronger links with Asia. Its recommendations are therefore likely to build on the hundreds of suggestions that have been proposed for promoting a better understanding of Asian cultures, and for learning Asian languages. The Government too is likely to accept the symbolic policy discourse surrounding the idea of Asia literacy, and will clearly fund some of the programmes and projects the White Paper will recommend. However, I fear that the Paper will not include a more critical appraisal of the conceptual framework within which the idea of Asia literacy is located. In what follows, I want to argue that such as an appraisal is needed if Australia is a engage the Asian Century in terms, which go beyond the instrumentalism that appears embedded within the popular discourses of Asia-Australia relations that circulate not only in the popular media but also within academic, business and policy circles. This discourse is based on a dualism between Australians and their Asian others. Despite almost three decades of scholarship in postcolonial studies, which has problematised such constructions, this dualism implies an instrumentalism that not only separates *us* and *them*, but also encourages Asia to be viewed instrumentally—as means to our ends.

This instrumentalism necessarily invokes conceptions of the Asian others whose cultures must be understood, whose languages must be learnt, and with whom close relationships must be developed—in order for us to realise our economic and strategic purposes. A crude social distance is thus assumed between Australian *us* and Asian *them*, a distinction that is often exploited by right-wing ideologues uncomfortable with recent demographic and policy shifts in Australia. This instrumentalism, which operates on a particular politics of difference, of course, has a long history. In its popular form, it is built on a binary between the East and the West. Though its current expressions are a great deal more complex and sophisticated, this is essentially the same binary that Edward Said (1987) had shown to be implicit in the discourses of orientalism. Inspired in part by Said, postcolonial theorists, such as Homi Bhabha (1994) have shown such discourses to be characterised by a deep ambivalence, which trades on an indeterminacy that views the orient as both an object of desire as well as derision. Following the same line of thinking, Asia is often recognised as inextricably tied to our economic and political interests, but is also viewed in terms of

various stereotypes—as a homogeneous mass whose differences from us must be understood and managed.

Perhaps the most articulate and influential characterisation of this logic is to be found in the "class of civilisations" thesis put forward some years ago by the Harvard political theorist, Samuel Huntington (1996). According to Huntington, world politics is entering a new phase in which the basic source of conflict will be cultural rather than economic. He argues that:

> … the differences between civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition, and, most importantly, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views on the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty, authority, equality and hierarchy. (Huntington, 1996: 6)

Far from being on the verge of a global cultural convergence, defined in terms of the modern, liberal, western, democratic, individualistic, capitalist way of life, as some globalisation theorists, such as Francis Fukuyama (1991) suggest, Huntington predicts that international relations in the post-Cold War era would no longer be between social classes but between identities and interests shaped by cultural heritage. Huntington suggests that such civilisational differences will need to be carefully managed, if the West is to retain its hegemonic position in the world.

Since its publication, the "clash of civilisations" thesis has generated a great deal of debate. On the one hand, realist thinkers in international relations have found it perfectly plausible, since it describes new forms of political conflict, often in response to modernisation and globalisation. Even if some his claims are a little overstated, Huntington is admired for pointing to the importance of culture in international formations. In contrast, many theorists have shown Huntington's argument to be fundamentally flawed. Chiozza (2002) has shown, for example, how Huntington's thesis cannot be supported by empirical evidence; and that interactions across civilisational divide are no more conflict prone now than in the past. Political theorists such as Noam Chomsky (2001) have found the clash of civilisations thesis to be highly objectionable on both theoretical and political grounds. They have argued that the thesis is mistaken in casting the differences between the West and the East as absolute, conceptualising them in terms of a range of metaphysical postulates rather than in terms of the political conflicts that produce them, through a range of specific historical processes. To articulate differences between civilisations in such absolutist terms is to represent the world as essentially polarised—in terms of a binary that runs the ideological risk of increasing levels of misunderstanding and conflict. In his book, *Fear of Small Numbers*, Appadurai, (2006: 115) has noted that Huntington's thesis is based on a "… primordialism with a macro-geographical base. [It overlooks] the vast amount of global interaction between civilizational areas, it erases dialogue and debate within geographical areas, and it deletes overlaps and hybridities. In a word, it evacuates history from culture, leaving only geography".

These criticisms of the clash of civilisations thesis do not seem however have undercut its appeal in explaining the emerging architecture of global politics. Indeed, as Seyla Benhabib (2002) has observed, many in America seem to have accepted the events of September 11 as offering a belated confirmation of Huntington's thesis concerning an unbridgeable East-West cultural divide. Even in many parts of Asia itself, the distinction between the East and the West continues to be regarded as self-evident. Indeed, a number of political leaders in Asia, such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, have sought to promote a set of values that they regard as distinctively Asian, and which supposedly do not bear much resemblance to Western moral precepts. These so-called Asian values include an emphasis on social stability and continuity, a belief in discipline and hard work, and acceptance of social order and authority, a commitment to the traditional values, and a priortitisation of obligations ahead of rights. Collectivist modes of social organisation are portrayed as Asian compared to the liberal individualism that is believed to be a distinctively Western tradition. And it is suggested that while Asian cultures are also committed to democracy and human rights, their conception of these values differ markedly from those found in the West.

It would clearly be foolish to deny significant cultural differences across the world, but must they be defined in such generalised categories as the East and the West? As Ien Ang and Jon Stratton (1995: 180) argued some years ago, if there is a master narrative of East and West then it must be a contrast between an *imagined* East and an *imagined* West. They insist that both East and West are imaginary categories, “constructed through a mutual symbolic mirroring, in a battle of overlapping, interested Self/Other representations”. More recently, Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010: 216) has suggested that the imaginary West has performed different functions in various discourses at different times …”; it has been an opposing entity, a system of reference, an object from which to learn, a point of measurement, a goal to catch up with, an intimate enemy, and sometimes an alibi for serious discussion and action”. It is a framework used to categorie different societies and their characteristics. However, such a construction of the West leads Asia to be named as a homogenous and monolithic structure that elides specific cultural, historical and economic considerations. To assume a fundamentally static notion of Asia is to overlook furthermore the vast differences that exist within Asia across region, religion, gender, and political divides, and also to ignore the level of intercultural contact that has taken place for centuries.

The talk of core Eastern and Western traditions masks the irrefutable fact that all cultures are dynamic, changing through their engagement with other cultures, not only through the development of new cultural forms but also through the struggle to maintain traditions that retain relevance. Indeed, in my view, in the idiom “East Meets West”, the concept of “Meet” deserves greater attention because it is through the politics of meeting of cultures that the ideas of East and West are imagined in the first place. Indeed, the differences between cultures only become significant in the contexts of cultural interconnectivities: otherwise there is no need to note them. Moreover, cultural differences are not facts to be taken into in cross-cultural exchange but matters that are constitutive of intercultural relations. It is important to finally abandon the view that cultures can be defined in terms of a set of closed cultural boundaries expressed in language, arts and cultural traditions, bracketed as homogenised entities frozen outside history and contemporary interactive cultural relations not only within particular national spaces but increasingly beyond them as well. Cultures cannot be assumed to exist prior to the global dynamics of historical and political interactions.

If this is so then engagement with Asia must necessarily be historical and politicalā historical because cultural interconnections are a product of various historically contingent factors and political because they require naming and negotiating constantly evolving differences. A historically informed account of engagement with Asia must thus acknowledge that all social practices and institutions in Asia are at least in part affected by the colonial experience. It is true that most Asian leaders have not always admitted the importance of colonial legacy in the constitution of their contemporary social institutions, such as education. However, this postcolonial sensibility appears now to have been largely abandoned in favor a pragmatism that demands building on existing legacies, both indigenous and colonial. In an emerging confident Asia, the need to consider “new” or “emergent” forms of cultural practices, linked to contemporary social relations interpreted in terms both of valued traditions as well as the prevailing relations of power, is now widely recognised. In this way, traditions are treated as necessary resources with which to engage in new cultural circumstances and practices, and understand and relate to others. In a sense, then, cultural practices are always ‘new’ representations—involving narratives that are constituted by a history of the traditions that are recognised and sometimes creatively invented to interpret and negotiate changing circumstances.

This dynamic view of culture suggests the need to recognise intercultural relations historically and politically, expressive both of traditions and of new cultural possibilities, within spaces that are sometimes tied to the nation-state, and to our communities, but which are increasingly embedded in wider transnational spaces. In the era of globalisation, the production and circulation of cultural practices is now to found in a huge variety of places, across spaces and scales that are often distant and remote. This is as true of Asia as it is of Australia. Our cultural condition is now necessarily a

complex and "hybrid" one—and cannot be neatly packaged as a collection of ethnicities, for the purposes either of administrative convenience or of hegemonic control. Our national histories and cosmopolitan aspirations present us with a new cultural space in which we can simultaneously engage with both the local and the global. This space has opened up new ways of thinking about intercultural exchange, and by implication, Asia literacy.

Asia literacy is thus not simply about learning externalised cultures and languages but interpreting and negotiating the possibilities of intercultural relations. Such relations should now best be explored as a complex and inherently unstable product of a range of historical narratives and the contemporary experiences of the cultural economies of globalisation. It should be noted that these cultural economies are increasingly restructuring our established ways of looking and working across cultures, even if some policy makers and institutions appear reluctant to recognise this. And such is the pace of cultural change that the politics of looking and working across cultural differences involves inherent fluidity, indeterminacy and open-endedness. Many educators have of course long understood this, as they work with the complexities of cultural difference that defy the packaging of people into neat and convenient stereotypes, especially now in the age of globalisation.

Globalisation has been defined as an "intensification of world wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens, 1990). While this intensification was initially caused by migration of people and long-distance trade connections, its acceleration during this century has been caused by the spread of technologies, finance and people, as well as of images, ideas and ideologies. Thus new spaces have emerged in which cultural practices are no longer tied unambiguously to territories. There is a loss of the "natural" relation of culture to geographical and social territories. Recent theorists of globalisation of culture have used the notion of 'deterritorialisation' (Tomlinson, 2000) to show how communities have become embedded within broader global relations. Global mobility has become a deterritorialising force that has the effect of re-shaping both the material conditions of people's existence and their perspectives on the world, leading to "… the gradual and constant alterations in the cognitive maps of people, in their loyalties and in their frames of social and cultural reference" (Tomlinson, 2000: 34). It has enabled people to think of cultural exchange as dynamic and creative, even as it has led to the homogenisation of some cultural practices and has contributed to some people becoming dislodged from their communities, removed from their social links and obligations. Either way, deterritorialisation has become a powerful transformative force in an era in which borders and boundaries are reconfigured.

An agenda for engaging the Asian century clearly needs to take account of these changing conditions. But here we confront a number of dilemmas. While we might support initiatives that recognise shifting and hybrid cultural practices, we cannot afford to simply valorise difference and hybridity, allowing such practices to be shaped by transnational cultural markets, media and capital. In recent years, neoliberal states have indeed celebrated the emergence of global markets in the production, consumption and distribution of cultural diversity, consistent with the imperatives of what has been referred to as the "globalisation from above". However, it is impossible also to overlook the realities of other practices of globalisation: "globalisation from below" which involve the criss-crossing transnational circuits of communication, the contested practices of place-making, the resistance of power differentials and the making of new identities with their corresponding fields of difference. The Australian encounter with the Asian century needs to engage with both the globalisation from above, expressed in practices promoted by large corporations and powerful states and globalisation from below, embedded in the cultural practices of Australians living and working in Asia and those diasporic Asians who now call Australia their home, but retain synchronous links with their countries of origin.

In my view, educational institutions have a major responsibility for creating spaces in which a critical examination of such developments can take place; where students are encouraged to

explore the contours of global interconnectivity and interdependence, and their implications for questions of identity and culture; and where they can develop skills that enable them to link locally grounded practices of cultural exchange to the broader processes of globalisation. If our future is to be tied to Asia then we need to develop forms of self-reflexivity about how our identities are historically constituted but are socially dynamic; how our practices of the representations of the other reflect particular relations of power; and how this understanding is necessary to develop cultural relations that transcend instrumentalism and are informed instead by a moral discourse that views Asian cultures in their own terms and not simply as a means to our economic and strategic ends.

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