

Introduction

This paper began as a conversation over the throwaway remark made by a student: “I don’t care about Asia”. For the second-year Anglo-Australian student who made the above comment, Asia is irrelevant. Compelled by the structure of their chosen degree to undertake a core unit in Asian media, the student was resentful and defiant. This was, admittedly, an extreme and frank response but not unusual from many of the undergraduates and postgraduates we have encountered at tertiary level across five institutions, two states, many countries, face-to-face and online. Our intention here is to reflect on our experiences teaching about Asia in Australia and to fill a gap in the way this is usually discussed from our stance as teachers of media studies.

Stance is used here after the manner of Cochran-Smith and Lytle as “the positions teachers ... take towards knowledge and its relationships to practice. ... the metaphor of stance ... suggest[s] both orientational and positional ideas, ... [it] is intended to capture the ways we stand, the ways we see, and the lenses we see through”.¹ Our stance has many similarities with those who teach in areas such as Asian Studies or Asian languages. In fact, like Liddicoat and Kohler, who write mostly from the perspective of teachers of Asian languages, we also seek “to decenter the student and to develop an intercultural identity as a result of an engagement with [other cultures]”.² However, unlike Liddicoat and Kohler, most of the student cohorts we write about here do not choose but are instead *required* to take up the units we teach; so, while they often have some unavoidable awareness of Asia, these domestic and international students are not especially predisposed to learning about matters Asian. This makes a substantial difference to students’ attitudes. For example, the telling remark “I don’t care about Asia” mentioned earlier would be unlikely, and embarrassingly self-contradictory for any student who elects to take up Asian Studies or an Asian language.

Our stance can be explained through four key points. Firstly, we take the perspective that learning about Asia is not limited to units within Asian Studies. The unit we have both taught into and from which the conversation that precipitated this paper started is “Asian Media in Transition”, but our reflections here come from our practice as teachers of units in internet studies and media studies. On the surface, these other media units do not lend themselves readily to teaching Asia literacy particularly since media studies remains largely a discipline of Western origins.³ Yet our stance and our own “cultural maps”⁴ as first-generation adult migrant teachers from Singapore who have lived, breathed and researched Asia mean that when we design units, deliver lectures, and conduct seminars and tutorials in Australia, we also invariably draw on topics, issues, knowledge and technologies from Asia to decenter students and develop their abilities to engage with and understand other cultures.

Secondly, while we recognise that much of what we bring to the curricula comes from our personal combination of experiences, skills and inclination, we do not see the teaching of Asia literacy as being race or culture-specific—rather that the teaching of Asia literacy should be based on the ability and willingness to “frequently, purposefully and seamlessly integrate Asia into the curriculum”.⁵ Our third point follows on from this: while the study of Asian languages has been touted as crucial to Australia’s engagement with Asia in the 2012 *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, we maintain that Asia literacy can be taught and learnt without mastering an Asian language.

¹ Cochran-Smith and Lytle, cited in Anthony J. Liddicoat and Angela Scarino, *Intercultural Language Teaching and Learning* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 6.

² Anthony J. Liddicoat and Michelle Kohler, “Teaching Asian Languages from an Intercultural Perspective: Building Bridges for and with Students of Indonesia,” in *Bridging Transcultural Divides: Asian Languages and Cultures in Global Higher Education*, ed. Xianlin Song and Kate Cadman (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2013), 79.

³ James Curran and Myung-Jin Park, “Introduction,” in *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, ed. James Curran and Myung-Jin Park (London: Taylor and Francis, 2005), 3.

⁴ Peta Salter, “Teachers’ Cultural Maps: Asia as a ‘Tricky Sort of Subject Matter’ in Curriculum Inquiry,” *Curriculum Inquiry* 44, no. 2 (2014): 5.

⁵ The other five features include expert knowledge of content, assessment and pedagogy; familiarity with Asia-related teaching resources; active at building intercultural understanding; uses ICT to connect their students with others in Asia and; leads Asia-related learning within and beyond the school.

Much as fluency in a language can enhance one's cultural understanding, it provides no guarantee that such linguistic literacy leads to the sensibility towards Asia that we think of as Asia literacy. At a minimum, we prefer students to acquire a certain interlingualism where, to cite Ang et al., "rather than being equally proficient" in more than one language, the speaker "utilises necessary constructions in an appropriate language to suit a specific situation".⁶ In other words, cross-cultural exchange is not a function of linguistic ability but a result of the realisation that other ways of speaking, seeing and being are equally valid and worthy of striving to be understood. Intrinsic to this recognition is the dismantling of a hierarchy of cultures with Anglo-Eurocentrism at its apex.

The fourth point relates to being in Australia. With over a century of troubled engagement with Asia,⁷ our stance as situated in Australia has its own legacies of burden and potential. In the 1980s, Paul Keating (former treasurer and prime minister) featured prominently in the political debate about Australia's place in Asia. In *Engagement: Australia Faces the Asia Pacific*, Keating discusses "how the people of Australia, this vast continent on the edge of the Asian landmass, are slowly coming to terms with the implications of their place in the world."⁸ A decade after the publication of his book, and over two decades since the politicised push to engage with Asia in the 1980s, throwaway declarations about not caring about Asia illustrate the complexities of "coming to terms" with Australia's relationship to Asia. When the 2012 *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper* was released with the "Asian century is an Australian opportunity" focus, it signalled another push towards Asia.⁹ Throughout and despite the long engagement of Australian institutions with Asia, official institutional rationale for Asia literacy remains stubbornly and narrowly economic because its "embrace of Asia is transactional"¹⁰ rather than political, cultural or social.

Notwithstanding that, the white paper¹¹ recommends educational policy shifts to enable Asia literacy across all levels of education. This, again, is not new territory as the education system has frequently sought to translate successive governments' envisioning of Asia literacy for all Australians into curriculum priorities.¹² Setting aside the specialist area of Asian Studies, at the higher education level the discussion on Asia literacy has centred more on its meaning, limits and its inherently orientalist roots¹³ than on how Asia literacy is to be imparted to university students beyond the study of an Asian language or an in-Asia stint. Most of the research into the pedagogy of Asia literacy has been produced at the primary and high school level¹⁴—far less has been written at the higher education level.¹⁵ This paper seeks to add to the latter store of knowledge about what Asia literacy—sandwiched between the demands to produce job-ready graduates and internationalise the curriculum—means when one is teaching at Australian universities.

Our view is that Asian literacy consists of much more than the ability to better engage with Asia economically. Woods sees Asia literacy as going beyond the "us" and "them"; to have the skills to critique ideological norms that define the ways in which Asia is

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⁶ Ien Ang, Chennupati Jagadish, Kent Anderson, John Fitzgerald, John, Fazal Rizvi, Krishna Sen, and Mark Wainwright, *Smart Engagement with Asia: Leveraging Language, Research and Culture*, Final Report, Australian Council of Learned Academics (2015), 61. <http://www.acola.org.au/PDF/SAF03/SAF03 SMART ENGAGEMENT WITH ASIA - FINAL lo res.pdf>.

⁷ Fazal Rizvi, "Beyond the East-West Divide: Education and the Dynamics of Australia-Asia Relations," *Australian Educational Researcher* 24 (1997): 14; David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska, "Introduction: Australia's Asia," in *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*, ed. David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska (Crawley: UWA Publishing, 2012), 1–11.

⁸ Paul Keating, *Engagement: Australia Faces the Asia-Pacific* (Sydney: McMillan, 2000), 1.

⁹ Australian Government, *Australia in the Asian Century White Paper*, October 2012, 1. http://www.defence.gov.au/whitepaper/2013/docs/australia_in_the_asian_century_white_paper.pdf.

¹⁰ Ramesh Thakur, "Australia's Engagement with Asia: Strategic or Transactional?," *India Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2013): 335–50.

¹¹ See, especially, Chapter 6: Building Capabilities, pp. 159–85.

¹² Deborah Henderson, "Meeting the National Interest through Asia Literacy—An Overview of the Major Stages and Debates," *Asian Studies Review* 27, no. 1 (2003): 23–53; Deborah Henderson, "Politics and Policy-making for Asia Literacy: The Rudd Report and a National Strategy in Australian Education," *Asia Studies Review* 32, no.2 (2008): 171–95.

¹³ Graham Maguire, "Asia literacy: Going Beyond the Marketplace," *Asian Studies Review* 14, no.2 (1991): 11–15; Rizvi "Beyond the East-West Divide"; M. Garbutcheon Singh, "Edward Said's Critique of Orientalism and Australia's 'Asia literacy' Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 27, no. 6 (1995): 599–620.

¹⁴ J. Buchannan, "Towards a Future for the Study of Asia in Australia: Asia on a Shoestring?," *Social Educator* 23, no. 3 (2005): 39–48; Allan Goedecke, "Asia Literacy: Not just an Optional Extra," *Principal Matters* 85, (Summer 2010): 2, 4–6; Steve O'Bree, "Developing Asia Literacy and Intercultural Understanding in a Meaningful Way in VCE Sociology," *Ethos* 22, no. 3 (2014): 29–30; Philip O'Brien, "Integrating Asia: A Sample Assessment Task for a Depth Study of Feudal Japan," *Agora* 48, no. 3 (2013): 70–71.

¹⁵ Richard Gehrman, "Asian Studies, Asia Literacy and the University: A Case Study," *Asian Studies Review* 17, no. 3 (1994): 153–58; Sukhmani Khorana, "Transnational Teaching and Research in Australia in the 'Asian Century': A Narrative-based Case Study," *Social Alternatives* 34, no.2 (2015): 47–51.

represented and spoken about. Leong understands it as a certain competency and sensibility towards Asia, born of attitudinal change. The goal, as such, is to arm students with the skills and processes for questioning assumptions about Asia, and its relationship to Australia on face value and prepare them for new experiences and different ways of thinking and being. This teacher takes to heart the dictum that “to know the other one must other the known”.¹⁶ The aim is to perform what Salter calls “destabilization work”.¹⁷ While our stances are similar, our understandings differ because of how we arrived at them. There is no doubt that our individual training, teaching and life experiences, careers and research interests inflect how we understand, practise and teach Asia literacy. In short, while Woods thinks of Asian literacy as a broadening in how Asia is seen, represented and spoken about, and Leong thinks of Asian literacy as an attitude and process, these two aims (better understanding and attitudinal change) are interconnected.

The approach of favouring process over content speaks to the difference in the student body at higher education institutions, such as our employers past and present. Even as greater numbers of primary and high school students are of diverse cultural heritage, it is still possible at these schools to assume to some extent what the students know and do not know, how they know what they know and when they learnt it. School students are also usually no older than seventeen or eighteen, and are at school to gain a basic education. There is also far less certainty about what students know and why they enrol for the units we teach on Asian media and new media. Most often the units are mandatory, and although we teach from within the humanities, our students can and have been undergraduates and postgraduates from disciplines as varied as public health, law, journalism, communications, information technology, design, art and business studies.

The student body at university is also usually more diverse. On campuses and online we have taught individuals ranging from sixteen to seventy years of age, from places as far apart as Mongolia and Zimbabwe, and experientially as dissimilar as the far north of rural Queensland is to metropolitan Kuala Lumpur and icy Harbin. It is therefore difficult to generalise about the types of students we have worked with over the years. Nonetheless, it is clear (as table 1 illustrates) that, over the last decade, university teachers in Australia have had to adapt their teaching practice to work effectively with mixed and diverse cohorts consisting of domestic students and increasing numbers of students from overseas.¹⁸ The steep increase in numbers of overseas students over the same period is illustrated in table 2.¹⁹ The makeup of the higher education study body is even more diverse if we consider the growing multicultural backgrounds of domestic students. The 2011 Census, for example, revealed that 43.1 per cent of Australians have at least one overseas-born parent,²⁰ indicating a substantial number of families to be of mixed cultures. In 2015, it was further revealed that 28.2 per cent of Australian residents were born overseas. For the purpose of this paper, the diversity of the higher education student body in Australia is on the rise.

Table 1: Top five countries of birth for overseas higher education students in 2004, 2009 and 2015 in Australia.

Country of Birth/Year	2004	2009	2015
China	40,589	79,391	108,468
Malaysia	28,527	33,085	29,026
India	17,650	27,803	34,026

¹⁶ Muller, cited in Salter, “Teachers’ Cultural Maps,” 208.

¹⁷ Salter, “Teachers’ Cultural Maps,” 791.

¹⁸ Figures derived from a combination of data from Department of Education statistics, “2004 Overseas Students,” (2014), https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/2004_overseas_students.xls; “2009 Overseas Students,” (2014), <https://docs.education.gov.au/documents/2009-overseas-students>; “2015 Overseas Students,” (2014), https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/2015_overseas_students.xls, “2004 All Students,” (2014), https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/2004_all_students.xls; “2009 All Students,” (2014), https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/2009allstudents_0.xls; and “2015 All Students,” (2016), https://docs.education.gov.au/system/files/doc/other/2015_all_students.xls.

¹⁹ Same data references as in footnote 18.

²⁰ Figure derived from <http://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/CO-59?opendocument&navpos=620>

Hong Kong	25,450	19,411	-
Singapore	24,345	27,633	26,686
Vietnam	-	-	18,779

Table 2: Australian universities with the top three highest numbers of overseas students.

Year	2004		2009		2015	
	Overseas students	Domestic students	Overseas students	Domestic students	Overseas students	Domestic students
Monash University	17,077	38,649	21,114	38,811	26,201	48,870
RMIT University	15,132	23,684	24,710	24,523	26,933	33,153
University of Melbourne	-	-	-	-	18,384	40,499
Curtin University	14,319	23,684	18,143	25,270	15,497	35,151

One consequence of the increasing number of students from Asia at universities here is reluctance among Australian students of Anglo-European and, sometimes, Asian descent, to participate in group work with overseas Asian students. When asked, the reasons given for this reluctance are varied but one that recurs consistently is the assumption that overseas students are less fluent in reading and writing in English. Hence, aside from assuming that there would be issues communicating with these students, the perception is that the inclusion of Asian students may also negatively affect the performance of group assessments.²¹ Part of our task, then, in teaching Asia literacy is to help students see the value in and provide them with the tools to encourage interactions and collaboration in diversity. How do we go about portraying Asia literacy as relevant, interesting and hence, desirable? Writing in 1997, Rizvi notes that “as educators, we face an enormous challenge—of promoting a better understanding of Asia-Australia relations, of the nature and extent of Asian immigration to Australia, and of the new globalised cultural economies which are the source of much anxiety within many sections of the Australian community.”²²

In discussing the “enormous challenge” of promoting a better understanding of Asia-Australia relations through higher education, ask the following: what are our roles and obligations as Western-trained scholars of Asian origin teaching in the Western world? As Morris-Suzuki observes, “the ‘Western’ scholar still occupies a privileged, legible and transparent space from which theories on how to interpret the enigmatic outside”²³, but our positions as Western-trained, first-generation migrant scholars of Asian origins are doubly, if not triply complicated.

Asia Literacy

Broadly speaking, Asia’s economic relevance to Australia is not disputed. However, wider Australia society remains ambivalent about the desirability of stronger cultural and political ties to Asia.²⁴ It is no exaggeration to say, therefore, that economic rationale is what drives the current vogue for inculcating Asia literacy in students at the tertiary level. Exactly what such literacy entails is unclear but its economic *raison d’être* is so blatant that Singh suggests that “Asia literacy is a branch of Australia’s economic policies”.²⁵

From the pedagogical point of view, Asia literacy can be described as “a curriculum focus that will drive the re-positioning of Australia–Asia relations”.²⁶ Asia literacy can also be defined as the “possess[ion] of knowledge, skills and understandings of the histories,

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²¹ Sophie Arkoudis, Kim Watty, Chi Baik, Xin Yu, Helen Borland, Shanton Chang, Ian Lang, Josephine Lang, and Amanda Pearce, “Finding Common Ground: Enhancing Interaction Between Domestic and International Students in Higher Education,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 18, no. 3 (2013): 224.

²² Rizvi, “Beyond the East-West Divide,” 14.

²³ Cited in Fran Martin, Chris Healy, Koichi Iwabuchi, Olivia Khoo, Claire Maree, Keren Yi, and Audrey Yue, “Australia’s Asian Century: Time, Space and Public Culture,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 13, no. 6/1 (2015): n.p.

²⁴ Shaun Wilson, Gabrielle Meagher, Rachel Gibson, David Denemark, and Mark Western, eds., *Australian Social Attitudes: The First Report* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), 249; Farida Fozdar, “Asian Invisibility/Asian Threat: Australians Talking About Asia,” *Journal of Sociology* (2015): 14.

²⁵ Singh, “Edward Said’s Critique,” 601.

²⁶ Salter, “Teachers’ Cultural Maps,” 204.

geographies, arts, cultures and languages of the diverse Asian region”.²⁷ Other scholars have used terms such as “cross-cultural/intercultural competence”,²⁸ “cultural intelligence”,²⁹ “crosscultural capability”, “intercultural sensitivity” and “cultural fluency”³⁰ to encapsulate the ability to relate across cultures. In summary, we might say that Asia literacy is “an Australian construct ... defined from an Australian, western perspective in accordance with the type of knowledge desirable for Australian students”.³¹ Ultimately, as befitting an initiative based largely on the economic rationale, the overall focus is on the accumulation of human capital.

When Woods put the question of Asia literacy to the most recent classes of 2015–16, it seemed that many students had internalised the rhetoric surrounding Asia’s economic relevance to Australia as the reason for acquiring Asia literacy; their broad definition of Asian literacy was given as the possessing of cultural knowledge to engage with Asia and its nuances. The centrality of the economic rationale is difficult to shift given it does accomplish the job of pushing some students beyond complete apathy to initial interest in Asia. Yet, it is important to do so because as Salter puts it, the “subtext” to such an approach is “that Asia literate knowledge is all that is needed to invert reliance on Asia and assert Australia’s economic dominance. This resonates with neocolonialism, opening the door for positioning Asia as the Oriental Other ... a fecund economy that is now sophisticated, and requires a more strategic approach to penetrate and pillage.”³²

In the 2013–14 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes,³³ for example, when asked how close they feel in relation to their local area, state, nation and region respondents indicated that Asia was the region they felt least close to. In the face of such attitudes, persuading students of the value of Asia literacy without resorting to explanations about the enormous markets and employments prospects is an uphill task. To unsettle the commonly held beliefs, we both draw from a vast array of resources to counter the clichés such as the association of Indonesia (especially in Perth) with the Bali bombing and Muslim terrorism and, the assumption of China’s internet space as being heavily censored and filled with propaganda. In the next section, we describe some of the teaching techniques we use and the processes that students undergo as part of their learning.

Asia Aware and Asia Literate

One of the first exercises we carry out in the Asian media classes is to have students answer the question “what is Asia?” While one of us likes to conduct it with the aid of a map of the world and group discussions, the other prefers to mind map in class. Open-ended questions, such as whether Turkey is part of Asia or Europe, are usually good openers and illustrate complexities about the way Asia is “constructed” and “imagined”. Such questions also allow us, throughout the semester, to build on the understanding that culture is “always evolving, dynamic and hybrid” and “cannot be understood as static, eternally given, essentialist”.³⁴

The students’ responses in the mind maps (see figures 1 and 2) depict what we describe as “Asia awareness”. Perhaps tutored by the popular press, some students see Asia as the origin of cheap imports, human trafficking, unregulated labour, pollution, media censorship, illegal migrants and rampant property speculation. These perceptions position the students to see Asia and Asians as the

²⁷ Asia Education Foundation, Submission to the Australian Government White Paper on Australia in the Asian Century (March 2012), n.p. http://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/589117/AEF_Submission_to_White_Paper_Mar_2012_file-1.pdf.

²⁸ Brigid Freeman and Fazal Rizvi, “Australians Living and Working in Asia: Report for the Securing Australia’s Future Asia Literacy: Language and Beyond Project” (2014), 13. http://acola.org.au/PDF/SAF03/4_living_and_working.pdf.

²⁹ Freeman “Australians Living and Working,” 13.

³⁰ Freeman “Australians Living and Working,” 13.

³¹ Hughes, cited in Peta Salter, “A Reconceptualisation of ‘Knowing Asian’ in Australian Education,” in *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 6 (2015): 790.

³² Peta Salter, “The Problem in Policy: Representations of Asia Literacy in Australian Education for the Asian Century,” *Asian Studies Review* 37, no. 1 (2013): 9.

³³ Cited in Fozdar, “Asian Invisibility/Asian Threat,” 5.

³⁴ Sandercock, cited in Ted Cattle, *Interculturalism: The New Era of Cohesion and Diversity* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 156.

other and a threat on the doorstep of the Australian continent, reflecting a view naturalised over the years in Australia.³⁵ Still others, informed by popular media, refer to Psy's *Gangnam style*, manga and anime, ninjas, *Ip man*, Jet Li and Jackie Chan as access points for their understandings of Asia. This and a sense of Asia as a culturally rich and diverse region still position Asia as the *other*, but a cool and hip, if bizarre *other*. Strangely enough, for the students, this view seems to sit comfortably side by side with that of Asia as consisting of hierarchical societies.

(Insert Figure 1 here).

(Insert Figure 2 here).

Said's concept of "Orientalism" and Hall's discussion of the construction of the "West and the rest" provide useful frameworks for understanding the distinction we make between Asia awareness and Asia literacy. Generally, at the start of semester, students display an awareness of Asia as "different" from us (i.e. "they" are more spiritual, "they" have festivals). The attitude of the students towards engagement with Asia is reflective of the discourse of Orientalism that draws on the Orient as "recurring images of the Other"³⁶ and defined by its difference to the Occident.³⁷

We also draw on Said's concepts of *latent* and *manifest Orientalism* to distinguish between being Asia aware and Asia literate. In *Orientalism*, Said uses the terms *latent* and *manifest* to further distinguish between two types of Orientalism. Said argues that whereas *latent Orientalism* is "an almost unconscious (and certainly an untouchable) positivity", *manifest Orientalism* consists of "the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth".³⁸ Many students' awareness of Asia can, thus, be regarded as a form of *manifest Orientalism* in that they draw on the dominant distinctions of culture and religion that inform our perceptions of the Orient. To be Asia literate would be to perceive the underlying role of the *latent* aspect, that is, that the attitudes influencing our perceptions of the Orient are shaped by the way the Orient itself is studied and talked about. These distinctions inform how we teach our students about Asia.

If we refer back to the mind maps of students' understandings of Asia (see figures 1 and 2), we can see how they are more Asia aware than Asia literate. For example, at the *manifest* level we can see how their views of Asian values, food or "boat people" draw on "the boundary notion of East and West ... a willed imaginative and geographic division made between East and West".³⁹ Still, students remain incognisant that their attitudes are framed by this binary or what the implications of these perceptions are (the *latent* aspects). While representations of Asia in the media may have changed over the years to include more diversity, and students' understandings of Asia are no longer entirely defined by the media (they also list friends and travel as sources of knowledge of the region), the same frameworks remain.

We also find the mapping exercise useful for gauging the level of knowledge students have about Asia at the start of the semester. It sets up the range and tenor for much of the work done during the semester, and, at the end of thirteen weeks or so, we repeat the exercise. On such occasions, students themselves often express surprise—*did we really say that?*—if not embarrassment at their earlier

³⁵ David Walker, *Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia 1850–1939* (St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1999), 7.

³⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1.

³⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

³⁸ Said, *Orientalism*, 206.

³⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 201.

views about Asia. Such revisiting of earlier ideas encourages reflexivity in learning and begins what we would like to think of as the gradual process of attitudinal change.

Among the most revealing responses we have come across at the start of a semester are responses where Asia is identified as distinct (read, different) from Australia because it is a region of diverse cultures, traditions, languages and religions. Putting aside the assumed monoculturality of Australia for the moment, this brings us neatly to another of our favourite discussion points in classes: the exploration of how students imagine Asia in relation to Australia. “From this perspective, Australia can all too readily be presented as an outpost of Western universalism fortunately located close to the perplexing realms of Asia, and so offering a convenient salient point from which to “interpret” Asia to the (English-speaking) world”.⁴⁰ There continues to be a disjuncture between the political rhetoric and the views around the educational relevance of Asia that is repeated in the report *Asia Literacy and the Australian Workforce*, where Halse et al. identify an entrenched “disparity between public policy and teachers’/principals’ views on the reasons for and benefits of Asia literacy”.⁴¹ For school teachers and principals, there are two key benefits of Asia literacy. The first is “to build appreciation of and connection with culturally diverse peoples” to create a “more tolerant and successful Australia”; the second is the “building of students’ competence as ‘globally smart citizens’ with the capacities to function effectively and successively in a global world”.⁴²

In the Asian media unit, one week is devoted to examining the representation of Asians in Australian films such as *Blood Oath* (1990)⁴³, *Japanese Story* (2003)⁴⁴ and *Tomorrow When the War Began* (2010).⁴⁵ The point we make with these films, which are set over a period of more than two decades, is that the Asian characters are still represented as the *other* and that the underlying attitudes still influence the ways in which the people of the Orient are represented. Using these films as a departure point, discussions in class can begin with critiques of representation as *manifest Orientalism* and lead on to reflections and, hopefully, recognition of the *latent Orientalism* that underlies the same representations. By highlighting this dichotomy in the study of the “rest” (including Asia), our intention is to point to its limits and destructiveness as “it draws crude and simplistic distinctions and constructs an over-simplified conception of ‘difference’”.⁴⁶ Said warns against using the distinction between East and West “as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind’, destiny, and so on”.⁴⁷ Similarly, in approaching the study of the Australia-Asia relationship, it is important to shift students away from starting points such as “the media in Australia is free but the media in Asian countries are heavily controlled”. To support this exercise, we also often refer to Erni and Chua’s use of “more historically informed notion of ‘contexts’”⁴⁸ to shed light on the *latent* aspects of Orientalism inherent in these and other works.

For example, students investigating Malaysian media regulations are quick to describe them as draconian. Yet, they are often slow to realise that these same regulations—the Internal Security Act and the Sedition Act—were established by colonial administrations to counter perceived communist threats. The concept of nation-building provides another context for understanding media in Asia. The process of “constructing” a unified nation with shared goals and values through nation-building has been used to describe the role of the

⁴⁰ Martin, “Australia’s Asian Century,” n.p.

⁴¹ Christine Halse, Anne Cloonan, Julie Dyer, Alex Kostogriz, Dianne Toe, and Michiko Weinmann, “Asia Literacy and the Australian Teaching Workforce,” A Commissioned Report Prepared by the Centre for Research in Education Futures and Innovation (August 2013), 117. http://www.aitsl.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/asia_literacy_the_australian_teaching_workforce.

⁴² Halse, “Asia Literacy and the Australian Teaching Workforce,” n.p.

⁴³ Denis Whitburn and Brian A. Williams, *Blood Oath (Prisoners of the Sun)*, directed by Stephen Wallace (Village Roadshow, 1990).

⁴⁴ Alison Tilson, *Japanese Story*, directed by Sue Brooks (Palace Films, 2003).

⁴⁵ Stuart Beattie, *Tomorrow When the War Began*, directed by Stuart Beattie (Paramount Pictures, 2010).

⁴⁶ Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power,” in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 189.

⁴⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, 2.

⁴⁸ John Nguyet Erni and Siew Keng Chua, “Introduction,” in *Asian Media Studies: Politics of Subjectivities*, ed. John Nguyet Erni and Siew Keng Chua (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 8.

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media in countries such as Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia and China. Introducing readings that explain how concepts such as *nation* and *Asia* are products of construction and “imagination” form the basis from which the question “In what other ways could the nation and Asia be constructed?” can be posed. Inviting students to (re)consider how Asia has been imagined or constructed can often change their attitudes not only towards the region but also in the ways in which the region can be studied.

In this respect, the multiplicity and easy online access of media has been a great boon to our portfolio of teaching materials over the years. Whereas teaching in the 1990s revolved around resources available in libraries and personally held stashes of cultural objects and texts, it is both more acceptable and easier to import and embed a rich store of Asian texts into classrooms. One example has been the capacity to introduce the cadences of Asian languages and styles of humour to class through digital radio, online video and archived material from the past for comparison, elucidation and reflection. Examples such as the Los Angeles-based band Dengue Fever,⁴⁹ which combines Cambodian pop music with indie rock, both confound these East/West binaries and demonstrate that Asian culture is neither moribund nor conservative. Other examples include the introduction of *e-gao* (digital parody) from China’s cyberspace to demonstrate the rich and politically subversive culture of satire from within, and challenge students’ perceptions of China as communist and monolithically authoritarian.

The task is no different in units not specifically Asian themed, such as those on new media that Leong has taught at four different institutions of higher learning. Resources, examples and content from all over the world including Asia are introduced to such classes as par for the course. These include the Ghanaian mPedigree system for verifying medication to secure products against counterfeiting⁵⁰ and the usage of QR codes to place virtual Tesco stores on the doors of train stations for the convenience of busy commuters in crowded Korea.⁵¹ Again, the aim is to disrupt the Anglo/Eurocentric universe of students’ cultural horizons by introducing a plurality of global sociocultural and political references. The point we drive home with these exercises is that difference, whether in contexts, resources, language or customs coupled with the need to address gaps can be productive and innovative. At other times, if the topic of a week’s lecture is new media and health, Thailand’s Health Promotion Foundation’s advertisements on dealing with health issues⁵² are as relevant as the health monitoring apps and smart watches of Google, Apple and Motorola. The overall aim is to move the view of Asia as *other* to Asia as another, Asia as already in Australia—from being Asia aware to being Asia literate.

Such a view is in line with Pan’s argument that the main problem confronting Australia in its mission to acquire Asia literacy is what it must “unlearn”—the three ingrained modes of imagining Asia: “absence, threat and opportunity”.⁵³ According to Pan, these “preunderstandings” both limit what and how much Australians can learn about Asia. By disrupting the East that students imagine, we also hope to disrupt the West that they hold on to. For those Australian students who are themselves of Asian descent, there is the double task of dispossessing them of any auto-Orientalism they labour under.

There are those who insist that “Australia [already] speaks the languages of Asia” because “there are 2.2 million or so speakers of Asian languages in Australia”. As such, “Asian cultural literacy acquisition by osmosis: with extensive interaction between diverse groups, Asian cultural literacy is being naturally spread throughout Australian society” negating the need for “new large-scale Asia literacy

⁴⁹ Examples of Dengue Fever’s music can be found on their website, <http://denguefevermusic.com/>.

⁵⁰ More information about mPedigree can be found on their website, <http://mpedigree.net/>.

⁵¹ Jennifer Bergen, “Korea’s Tesco Reinvents Grocery Shopping with QR-codes ‘stores’,” *Geek.com*, 28 June 2011. <http://www.geek.com/mobile/koreas-tesco-reinvents-grocery-shopping-with-qr-code-stores-1396025/>

⁵² See, for example, the Thai Health Promotion Foundation video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3nkTSYZgw0>.

⁵³ Chengxin Pan, “Australia’s Self-Identity and Three Modes of Imagining Asia: A Critical Perspective on ‘Asia’ Literacy,” in *Asia Literate Schooling in the Asian Century*, ed. Christine Halse (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 198.

programs”.⁵⁴ That these claims rest on two comfortable assumptions—one, that linguistic competency leads to cultural literacy, and, two, that extensive interaction does occur across the board—does not seem to have occurred to its proponents. To use a simple example, it is not uncommon to see students from Australia sitting apart from overseas students or failing to converse with one another in our classrooms. In a survey of international students conducted in 2010, many claim to have little opportunity to interact with domestic students.⁵⁵ The reasons are varied and can also include international students’ own preference for staying with familiar cultural and language groups, and obstacles arising from language differences.⁵⁶ Hence, interactions between overseas and domestic students often have to be encouraged through class activities. That Australia is already Asia literate is a claim that rests on exchanges that are not par for the course and, in practice, need active encouragement, even in classrooms.

While Keating long ago expressed the view that Australia is geographically located “on the edge of the Asian landmass”,⁵⁷ there are those who still find it difficult to come to terms with that view. A case in point being another Anglo-Australian student who expressed surprise that news about Australia featured under the Asia section of the CNN news site, insisting instead that it would be more appropriate for Australia to be listed under Europe. For such students, John Howard’s description of Australia as “an essentially European derived nation, but located in the Asian Pacific region, [which] means of course that we share the culture and the inheritance of western civilization”⁵⁸ is an infinitely preferable cultural stance.

The question remains: how do we make Asia literacy relevant to students? The acclaimed author, teacher, poet and academic bell hooks writes of the times when “critical work that ... [has] direct consequences for how we live in the world” is often negatively received. When an individual is asked to change their thought and behaviour, resistance is common.⁵⁹ Although interrogating the origins, productiveness and contexts of differences seems several levels below the kind of critical work hooks describes, at its core the turn towards critical thinking is similar. Finally, if a student is “not yet ready to receive a teaching”,⁶⁰ only time can bring home the lesson delivered in class. While we may not see the immediate results of how a semester of teaching can set in motion attitudinal change, it is heartening at the end of semester review to sometimes have students refer to Asia as being “very postmodern” and acknowledge that Asia is not a monolithic but diverse region with complex flows between cultures. Perhaps most significantly, even where their attitudes to Asia may not have changed, horizons of references are often broadened. Like Cante, we see interculturalism—“the creation of a culture of openness which effectively challenges the identity politics and entrenchment of separate communities, based upon any notion of ‘otherness’”—as an essential objective of teaching about Asia in Australia.⁶¹

Author

Comment [4]: Consider inserting her actual name, Gloria Jean Watkins, after the pen name.

Conclusion

In closing, writing and thinking about our teaching practice has no doubt triggered a lot of self-reflection on our own roles and how being first-generation migrant teachers from Asia positions us in relation to Australians from elsewhere as well as second-generation migrant teachers of Asian origins. It would be fair to say that when we first started teaching, neither of us focused very much on Asia

⁵⁴ Benjamin Herscovitch and Centre for Independent Studies, “Australia’s Asia Literacy Non-Problem,” *Issue Analysis*, no. 133 (5 September 2012): 1.

⁵⁵ *International Student Survey 2010*, prepared by Australian Education International (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2010).

⁵⁶ Arkoudis, “Finding Common Ground,” 224.

⁵⁷ Keating, *Engagement*, 1.

⁵⁸ Howard, cited in Wilson, *Australian Social Attitudes*, 248.

⁵⁹ bell hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 137–38.

⁶⁰ hooks, *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 138.

⁶¹ Cante, *Interculturalism*, 142–43.

literacy. Yet, as Australian-trained faculty members of Asian origins, a confluence of institutional expectations, employment opportunities, research interests, pedagogical and self-reflection has led us to incorporate Asia literacy into our teaching practice over the years. Are we uniquely well equipped to teach in such areas because of the immediacy of lived experience we have reference to? Does that translate into an obligation? Neither of us subscribes to the belief that, to paraphrase Said, “only [an Asian] can write about Asians, a Muslim about Muslims, and so forth”.⁶² Indeed, Anderson and Hughes warn against “an over reliance on diaspora as a single solution to smarter Asia literacy in Australia”. Instead, “inclusion of Asian diasporas in Asia literacy initiatives should complement and not substitute broader people-to-people links between Australians and citizens living within the Indo Pacific”.⁶³ We do not believe anyone is especially obliged or enabled to teach about Asia but, in these times of precarious employment, we are glad to report that it remains one part of our jobs.

⁶² Cited in Singh, “Edward Said’s Critique,” 614.

⁶³ Kent Anderson and Kirrilee Hughes, “Smarter Engagement with Asia,” *Australian*, 5 June 2015.