The decision of Great Britain in the early 1960s to join the European Economic Community provoked a sense of crisis in Australia, a realisation that it could no longer rely on its membership of the Commonwealth as a defining feature of its place in the world. If Britain was becoming part of Europe, where could Australia go? Nowhere else, so it would seem, but Asia... But what kind of proposition is this? How on earth can Australia be part of Asia? Ien Ang uses the 2008 Wertheim Lecture to shed light on this conundrum.

Asia from 'Down Under':

regionalism and global cultural change

Ien Ang

As a European settler colony Australia has historically been regarded as a far-flung outpost of Europe, 'down under' in relation to the great powers of the West. Looking at the world map, however, it is evident that in geographical terms, Australia is positioned 'down under', not to Europe or America but to Asia. From Australia's point of view, Asia is not the 'Far East' (as Europeans tend to see Asia), but the 'Near North'. The fact that the term 'Far East' is still occasionally used in Australia is testimony to the symbolic power Europe still has in the global imagination. But it is a residual power, a legacy of the colonial and imperial past. In modern Australia, governments have increasingly steered the country towards closer ties with Asia, sometimes reluctantly, at other times enthusiastically, but always with a sense of urgency.

A complex and ambivalent relationship

As the Western nation-state located in closest proximity to Asia, Australia provides an excellent site for observing processes of global change. Australia's complex and ambivalent relationship with Asia can give us fascinating insights into the contradictory tensions that are associated with the gradual decentring of the West, in ways which are still hardly recognised in Western Europe.

It is hardly contested that the balance of global power will shift as a consequence of the growing economies of Asia, especially China and India. This development has already been keenly felt in Australia. In the last two decades Australia's economy has become increasingly intertwined with that of its Asian neighbours. For example, China has recently taken over Japan as Australia's largest trading partner, and exports from Australia to China have seen exponential growth in the past decade. Indeed, Australia's long-lasting economic boom in this period is inextricably linked to China's insatiable demand for natural resources such as coal and iron ore, of which Australia has plenty. Commenting on the potential impact on the Australian economy of a recession in the US, one economist said: "Australia is fine as long as China is fine, and in 2008 China is fine". (Chris Richardson, Access Economics director, in Mike Steketee, 'Soft Landing', *The Weekend Australian*, March 29-30, 2008.)

There is something ironic about an advanced, developed nation-state such as Australia having to rely so much for its prosperity on being the supplier of raw materials to a fast-growing non-Western giant such as China. Yet the Australian experience may well be the fate of many national economies in the years to come.

'Enmesh, integrate and engage'

When I relocated from the Netherlands to Australia in 1991, I left a Europe where discussion was immersed in the prospect of an integrated European Union. Arriving in Australia, however, I noticed that a very different debate was raging. Australians did not talk about Europe at all; instead, all the talk was of Asia. Then Prime Minister Paul Keating described Australia as "a multicultural nation in Asia". Public discourse in the Keating era was replete with the need for Australia to 'enmesh', 'integrate' and 'engage' with Asia. Educational policy stressed the importance of teaching Asian languages in schools, and cultural exchanges with a wide range of East and Southeast Asian countries were stepped up in order to increase what was called "Asia literacy".

But these furious attempts at reorienting Australia towards its Asian neighbours could not hide the paradoxes of what James Rosenau calls "distant proximity" (2003): Australia's radically different racial, cultural and historical make-up had always been cause for maintaining psychological distance rather than closeness to Asia. As Rosenau puts it, "to a large extent distant proximities are subjective appraisals - what people feel or think is remote, and what they think or feel is close-at-hand" (Rosenau 2003). Australia's rapprochement to Asia, which was primarily motivated by geopolitical, economic and security reasons, demanded nothing less than radical cultural change – and, as we know, cultural change is hard to bring about and slow to eventuate.

By 1996, the tide had turned. The new, conservative government of John Howard rose to power (where it would stay until 2007) in the wake of a populist backlash. Right-wing politician Pauline Hanson managed to get into parliament with, among others, a strong anti-Asian agenda. Howard himself claimed: "We have stopped worrying about whether we are Asian, in Asia, enmeshed in Asia or part of a mythical East Asian hemisphere. We have got on with the job of being ourselves in the region." (John Howard, House of Representatives, Hansard, 21 September 1999). Howard steered Australia's foreign policy strongly towards an alliance with the US and Australia became an emphatic member of Bush's 'coalition of the willing'. Although this didn't spell an end to Australia's relations with Asia, the 11 years of Howard government meant a hugely reduced commitment, which only now, with the ascendancy of Kevin Rudd's new Labor government, is being overturned.

But first, let's look from the other side of the picture. Australia may want to belong to Asia, but does Asia want Australia? Former Singaporean PM Lee Kuan Yew seems to agree with John Howard: Australians are not Asians. In an interview on Australian television he said:

> *"Getting close to Asia doesn't mean that you become Asians, or you bring Asians into Australia, it just means understanding Asians, being able to get on and do business with Asians, making them feel comfortable with you and being comfortable with them"*
>
> **(Lee Kuan Yew interviewed by Kerry O'Brien, ABC 7:30 Report, 20 November 2000).**

But doesn't Lee essentialise Asianness too much here? In their book *The Myth of Continents,* Martin Lewis and Karen Wigen (1997) observe that "of all the so-called continents, Asia is not only the largest but also the most fantastically diversified, a vast region whose only commonalities - whether human or physical - are so general as to be trivial". In short, the boundaries of Asia are not fixed, and there are so many different peoples and cultures within what we call 'Asia' that it would be hard to talk about distinctly 'Asian ways', 'Asian values' or indeed 'Asians'.

Dampier iron ore mine in Western Australia. In 2007 Western Australia exported some A$8.5 billion-worth (€5.03 billon) of iron ore to China.

Despite the immense internal diversity of the region, however, Asia does operate as a powerful, if contested category of collective identification. A look at some of the competing designs for transnational region-building reveals the tensions involved. Australia was the key initiator of the establishment of the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) in 1989 to promote more effective economic cooperation across Asia and the Pacific Rim. APEC currently has 21 members, comprising most countries with a coastline on the Pacific Ocean. It thus includes not just the ten Southeast Asian nation-states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), China, Japan and South Korea, but also, importantly, the US as well as Canada, New Zealand and Australia itself (with other countries including Mexico, Chile, Russia and Papua New Guinea joining along the way). In cultural terms, APEC successfully managed to institutionalise a very broad idea of 'Asia', here branded as 'Asia Pacific', and suppressing any references to more particularist, non-white and non-Western notions of Asianness. The well-known group photos of APEC leaders in the national costume of the host nation of the regular summits, are a visual display of this.

But it is good to remember that the initial proposal for APEC was opposed by the countries of ASEAN, in particular by former Malaysian Prime Minister Mathathir, who instead proposed an East Asia Economic Caucus, which would only be open for 'real' Asian nations and would exclude countries considered non-Asian. The plan was strongly opposed and criticised as a "caucus without Caucasians" by the US, who wished to downplay any fault line between Asia and the West in the construction of the region. (Mohan Malik, 'The East Asia Summit: More discord than Accord', YaleGlobal Online, 20 December 2005)

Although Mathathir's Asians-only design for the region lost out against the Western-led APEC in the early 1990s, since the Asian economic crisis of 1997, which affected many national economies across the region, the idea of a more specific East Asian regionalism has gained momentum, most prominently institutionalised in the so-called ASEAN+3 forum (which brings together the 10 ASEAN states and China, Japan and South Korea).

Interestingly, this increased emphasis on 'East Asia' as the common signifier for cooperative region-building was motivated by a desire to reduce Asian dependence on Western-dominated financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and on the perceived ineffectiveness of APEC. Indeed, several authors have observed that an important motive for this new drive towards East Asian regionalism was a shared sense of humiliation and resentment against the West's slow response to the 1997 economic crisis (Capie 2004). By contrast, China extended generous financial support to Thailand and Indonesia during the crisis, enhancing its stature as a model of economic stability and responsible leadership (Hugh de Santis, 'The Dragon and the Tigers: China and Asian Regionalism', *World Policy Journal*, Summer 2005). As Indonesian economist and trade minister Mari Pangestu observes: "The growth of China led to a growing realization that the region could form a large and dynamic economic bloc ... and seek a more effective voice in the global arena hitherto dominated by Western interests." (Williams, Louise, 2004. 'We need to be part of Asia's makeover', *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 28)

East Asia is now a powerful label for active regional identity making, based at least in part on the reproduction of the master-division of 'Asia' and 'the West'. In this dichotomy, Australia is placed firmly within the second camp. When Australia requested participation in the 2005 East Asian Summit, Mahathir, who had retired as PM of Malaysia in 2003, repeated his ascerbic anti-Australian views, arguing that Australia is "some sort of transplant from another region" (quoted in Robinson, Jeffrey, 2003. 'Australia's Asian ambitions', *Asian Times Online*, 23 October) In the end, diplomacy won and Australia does now participate in the Summit meetings. However, Mahathir's rantings resonate with the lingering distrust and hostility of Western hegemony throughout the non-Western world. Complaints about white supremacy and Western arrogance, and in the Australian case, echoes of the White Australia Policy, are never far below the surface. They feed feelings of 'us' (Asians) versus 'them' (Westerners) which can be mobilised whenever particular global events invite a local response.

We can see this taking place when perusing newspaper coverage of the recent clashes between pro-Tibet and pro-China protesters during the Olympic torch relay around the world. Newspapers such as *The Straits Times* (Singapore), *The Bangkok Post* (Thailand) and *The Times of India* (India) all provided commentary with careful consideration of the different sides, but there was criticism of what was widely perceived as Western media bias against China. These countries positioned themselves firmly as Asian nations within the Asian region, often emphasising the need to maintain good relations with their Asian neighbours and questioning the West's moral authority to lecture the rest of the world, China included, about human rights. In this coverage, a clear line between Asia and the West was drawn.

By contrast, Australian media tended to co mmunicate unhesitatingly from a Western standpoint, and were preoccupied with Chinese human rights abuses in Tibet and the alleged involvement of the Chinese government in whipping up pro-Chinese patriotism among overseas Chinese to defend the torch relay. In this instance, the Chinese were positioned as the 'baddies', representatives of an 'Asia' that was definitely not 'us'.

But with China now so essential for it's economy, Australia must be careful not to antagonise China too much. Between human rights and economic prosperity, where does Australia stand? It is here where the role of the new Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, is so interesting.

Lu Kewen

The most intriguing aspect about Rudd

Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd is the first and only Western leader to speak fluent Chinese. In China he is known as *Lu Kewen*.

is that he is the first and only Western leader who speaks fluent Chinese. He has a degree in Chinese history and was a diplomat in Beijing before becoming a politician. Even before he was elected as Prime Minister in November 2007 he upstaged his predecessor, John Howard, by speaking in flawless Putonghua with the President of the People's Republic of China, Hu Jintao, during the APEC meeting in Sydney, drawing admiration from the Chinese delegation. In China itself, he is known by his Chinese name *Lu Kewen*.

Rudd's first world tour as Australia's new leader, in early April 2008, coincided with the uprising in Tibet. As the issue of human rights and the possibility of a boycott of the Beijing Olympics was talked about among Western leaders, many wondered whether Rudd would put Tibet on the agenda during his visit to China.

Rudd had to walk a diplomatic tightrope, and by all accounts, he succeeded. His biggest public triumph was a speech, delivered in Mandarin, to students at Beijing's elite Beida University, where he said: "Some have called for a boycott of the Beijing Olympics Games ... I do not agree. But we also believe it is necessary to recognize that there are significant human rights problems in Tibet. As a long-standing friend of China, I intend to have a straightforward discussion with China's leaders on this." Drawing on his intimate knowledge of Chinese language and history, Rudd used the powerful and meaning-laden Chinese word *zhengyou* to describe himself: a *zhengyou* is a true friend who dares to disagree, 'a partner who sees beyond immediate benefit to the broader and firm basis for continuing, profound and sincere friendship'. (Barme Geremie, 2008. 'Rudd rewrites the roles of engagement', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 12-13). Responses in Australia and around the world were admiring. Some commentators even suggested that with Rudd, Australia is well-placed 'to assert a genuine middleman role, given the respect in which it is held in Beijing and Washington' ('Australia finds new role as Sino-US matchmaker', *South China Morning Post*, 26 February 2008.)

However, we should not overestimate Australia's capacity to influence world affairs. For example, while Rudd's criticism of China's human rights record hit the headlines globally, within China responses were muted. More importantly, Rudd's China performance played out differently across Asia. The Japanese were concerned that China had moved to the forefront of Australia's foreign policy focus at the expense of Japan, and one Indian analyst concluded, reflecting on Australia's relative neglect of the other up-and-coming economic giant, India: "China, China, China, China and more China was the recurring theme of his speeches." (Raman 2008). Political commentator Greg Sheridan puts it best: "Rudd... is generally well-regarded throughout the region. But the Australian debate often does not understand that China is not Asia and Asia is not just China. Speaking Mandarin is sweet in Beijing but cuts you absolutely no ice in New Delhi, Tokyo, Jakarta or Bangkok." (Greg Sheridan, 'Make amends for Asia blunder', *The Australian*, May 10, 2008.) The sensitive relationships with Japan and Indonesia, especially, needed careful diplomatic attention with Rudd forced to visit these two countries soon to avoid perceptions of China bias.

This highlights the enormous complexities involved in the process of transnational region-building, and Australia's complicated role within it. Will Australia reinforce the emergence of an increasingly China-dominated, Sinocentric Asia, or can it play a role in promoting a more equal, genuinely multicultural 'Asia'?

Flows of popular culture

But region-building is not just a matter of networking between government leaders in their carefully orchestrated meetings. Just as significant are more informal, on-the-ground and unpredictable processes of transnational flow that actualise social and cultural interconnections across the region. Whether or not Australia is part of Asia, and how, is not a question of government decree; rather, it depends on the complex web of actual, intersecting and overlapping connections between Australia and other parts of the region through the myriad human interactions which make societies work: from trade to education, from tourism to news-gathering, from marketing to political activism, and so on. One example which illustrates the patchy and very partial nature of Australia's (un)belonging to Asia is Asian pop culture. Since the early 1990s young people across East Asia have embraced Japanese pop culture (manga, anime, fashion, TV series) with a passion. More recently, East Asia has been swept by a so-called Korean Wave *(hallyu)* of enthusiasm for Korean pop culture; so much so that the Korean government and the Korea National Tourism Organization now exploit Hallyu to promote Korea as 'the hub of Asian culture and tourism'. Hallyu fever began when Korean soap operas were introduced to the region and achieved fantastic ratings successes across East Asia. Indeed, even Japan, which has been an exporter of popular culture into Asia throughout the 1990s, is now becoming a lucrative market for Asian popular culture from elsewhere. Young Japanese audiences have been switching from Western (i.e. American) to Asian TV programmes. Asian pop stars and soap opera actors now routinely travel across the region to be greeted by thousands of enthusiastic fans.

These developments suggest that a process of regionalisation is going on at the level of popular culture, underpinned by an intensification of the transnational flows of media and consumer culture, creating a shared, mostly East Asian cultural intimacy one can encounter whether one is in Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Bangkok or Taipei, even parts of Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. While this doesn't mean that local and national cultural differences are being erased, nor that what is being created is an even, integrated popular cultural field, what it does intensify is a shared sense of popular, urban and decidedly modern 'Asianness'. I would suggest that what is articulated in this wildly dynamic, vibrant and energetic popular culture is a hybrid experience of urban modernity that that is both like and unlike Western cultural modernity, blending local and global cultural elements in innovative mixtures (Iwabuchi, Muecke & Thomas [2004); Shim [2006])

On the whole, though, this Asian popular culture does not cross over to Australian mediascapes. Korean soap operas are not on Australian TV screens, nor does Asian pop music ever reach mainstream popularity. Instead, Asian pop culture is a sub cultural niche market, adopted either by Australian fans for whom Japanese manga, say, is just a form of postmodern exotica, or used as a batch of diasporic cultural identity by the thousands of young Asian migrants living in Sydney or Melbourne. As far as popular culture is concerned, then, there is a major disconnect between mainstream Australia and Asia.

On the other hand, Asian migration into Australia tells a somewhat different story. When Asian leaders such as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir can so confidently say that Australians are not Asians, they undoubtedly have the dominant image of the white Anglo-Australian in mind. But in the past few decades, due to its active immigration policies, Australia's population has become enormously diverse. Chinese languages are now the second most frequently spoken at home, followed by Italian, Greek, Arabic and Vietnamese. (ABS 2006 Census). Australians of Asian backgrounds are becoming increasingly visible in public culture, exemplified by Minister for Climate Change, Penny Wong, who is of Malaysian Chinese descent. Moreover, Asian Australians maintain multifarious diasporic linkages throughout the region, weaving Australia ever more intricately into the social fabric of Asia. Such, what Arjun Appadurai calls, disjunctive flows (Appadurai 1996) articulate that 'Asia' is a fluid spatiality (Urry 2003) with very changeable and ambiguous boundaries, criss-crossed by many layers of cross-border flows and shaped as much by lateral and unpredictable interconnections as by formal institutions and diplomacy. Sometimes Australia is part of it, sometimes not. Sometimes cultural, historical and racial differences matter, and made to matter deeply, and sometimes such differences are easily overcome – making visible what Wim Wertheim called the 'finer shades' and 'more graded scale of possibilities' in-between the dichotomy of 'Asia' and 'the West' (Wertheim 1964). In short, Australia both is and is not part of Asia.

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This is an abridged version of the Wertheim Lecture delivered in Amsterdam on 5 June 2008. Listen to the full lecture online at: http://www.iias.nl/index.php?q=wertheim-lecture-2008-asia-down-under-ien-ang

Korean *Hallyu* star, Giordano.