

# Asia and Asians in Australian Politics and Society

For *News from Australia and the Pacific*, we ask contributors to reflect on their own research and the broader academic field in Australia and the Pacific of which it is a part. We focus on current, recent, or upcoming projects, books, articles, conferences, and courses, while identifying related interests and activities of fellow academics in the field. Our contributions aim to give a select overview of Asia-related studies in Australia and beyond, and to highlight exciting intellectual debates on and with Asia. The style of our essays is subjective and informal. Rather than offering fully-fledged research reports, our contributions give insight into the motivations behind and directions of various types of conversations between Asia and our region.

In the current edition, we focus on the theme of “Asia and Asians in Australian Politics and Society” – an especially timely topic as Australia held a national election on May 21.

Each author, broadly speaking, examines the extent to which Australia is embracing its place in Asia and its Asian-Australian communities. Professor Jia Gao examines the continuing lack of representation of Asian Australians in parliament. Associate Professors

Claire Maree and Jay Song show that this lack of representation remains in other aspects of contemporary life in Australia and that anti-Asian racism has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Professor Andrew Rosser looks at the continued difficulties Australian business has engaging with Asia due to a lack of networks, capabilities, and partnerships. Cathy Harper makes an argument that more than ever, Australia needs to embrace the Asian communities existing within it and throughout the region.

Edwin Jurriëns,  
Convenor, Indonesian Studies,  
The University of Melbourne.  
Email: [edwin.jurriens@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:edwin.jurriens@unimelb.edu.au)

Cathy Harper,  
Editor of *Melbourne Asia Review*  
at the Asia Institute, the University  
of Melbourne. E-mail:  
[catherine.harper1@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:catherine.harper1@unimelb.edu.au)

## Representation of Asia in Contemporary Australian Politics, Media and Everyday Life

Claire Maree and Jay Song

According to the latest figures from the Bureau of Statistics in 2016, the Asian-born population in Australia accounted for 10.4 percent of the total population.<sup>1</sup> This raises a range of issues in regard to the representation of Asian Australians in politics, the media, and other key areas of everyday life. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has seen a resurgence of racist remarks by right-wing politicians and growing anti-Asian sentiments and violence in public space. As Australia shut its borders to and from international travel in an attempt to stop the virus entering Australia, many Chinese – or Chinese-looking – migrants and international students, who were misconstrued as a source of the virus, became the target of racially-motivated violence. Due to the ongoing national border closures, many international students were forced to continue their studies offshore and online for two consecutive years.

In 2020, a group of researchers affiliated with the Gender, Environment and Migration (GEM) Cluster at the Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne in Australia examined various aspects of the representation of Asian Australians in the context of contemporary Australia. The collaborative work was published as a Special Issue of *Melbourne Asia Review* in March 2021,<sup>2</sup> and it includes an examination of issues relating to political under-representation and media portrayals of Asian Australians as well as the state of Asian-Australian studies.

Many would wonder about the definition of “Asian Australians.” Unlike Asian Americans, a widely-used term which also has an established field of study in sociology, media, literature, and cultural/racial studies, the history of Asian Australians is relatively short compared to analogous groups in the Americas or Europe. We use the term “Asian Australians” in reference to a diverse population comprising individuals who have migrated from the Asian region. The term is widely accepted

and used in Australian social, political, and cultural discourses. Many Asian Australians we included in our studies are first-generation immigrants or international students who just arrived in Australia. Furthermore, many Asian Australians elected to the Australian parliaments are of mixed heritage that includes both Asian and European ancestries. As the demographic composition of the Asian-born population in Australia changes, our definition may change over time going forward.

One key issue is the ongoing, well-documented lack of representation at all levels of public life. A lack of diversity on the small screen is paralleled in the political domain, where Asian Australians are under-represented in federal and state parliaments. Only 3 candidates with Asian ancestry were elected in the 2019 federal election. Difficulties in the pre-selection process can be an obstacle to greater engagement of candidates from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.<sup>4</sup> Based on interviews



Fig. 1: Melbourne's Chinatown at night (Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy of Russell Charters on Flickr).



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE

### The Asia Institute

The Asia Institute is The University of Melbourne's key centre for studies in Asian languages, cultures and societies. Asia Institute academic staff have an array of research interests and specialisations, and strive to provide leadership in the study of the intellectual, legal, politico-economic, cultural and religious traditions and transformations of Asia and the Islamic world. The Institute is committed to community engagement and offers a dynamic program of academic and community-focused events and cultural exchanges that aim to promote dialogue and debate.



Fig. 2: Melbourne's Chinatown (Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy of Michael Coghlan on Flickr).

with Australians of Indian origin – some of whom had been successfully elected to office and others not – Surjeet Dhanji recommends that Australian political parties should address the “representation gap,” initiate programs to close that gap, and harness the talent of those currently underrepresented.<sup>5</sup>

Although underrepresentation occurs at the level of politics, the pandemic has resulted in the continued hyper-visibility of Asian Australians, as manifested in increased anti-Asian racism. Hyper-visibility refers to the ways in which minoritized groups are over-represented in overwhelming negative ways. Qiuping Pan and Jia Gao, for instance, indicate widespread experiences of racism against Chinese immigrants.<sup>6</sup> The most common manifestation of such racism

involved racial slurs and/or name-calling. Such incidents are also heavily gendered, with women lodging 65 percent of the COVID-19 Racism Incident Reports between April 2–June 2, 2020.

The relationship between the state and society has changed over the course of the pandemic. State responses to the global pandemic at a local level have direct and indirect consequences on minorities, especially Asian migrants in Australia. In order to understand changing state-society relations during and after the pandemic, trust in both the government and different media sources is an important area to study. In this regard, Wonsun Shin and Jay Song's online survey of 432 Asian Australians illustrates how much they have relied on

traditional media (e.g., mainstream TV) and how little they relied on ethnic language programmes.<sup>7</sup> In spite of anti-Asian racism, the survey respondents showed a high level of trust in Australian governments. Others reported that Asian Australians are more likely to be anxious and worried due to COVID-19, and they have experienced “twice the drop” in work hours as other Australians.<sup>8</sup>

Asian Australians are highly diverse and constitute a fluid group that is being constructed and reconstructed by interactions among its members in an increasingly complex, mediated society. Studies on Asian Australians, therefore, require an intersectional and multi-dimensional approach to fully understand the challenges and opportunities of engaging with the fastest-growing population in Australia. One such example of an intersectional approach on Asian Australians taken by members of GEM examines sexual citizenship. This approach illustrated how gender, sexuality, and ethnicity influence Asian migrants' experiences in post-marriage equality Australia.<sup>9</sup> The authors point to the necessity of critical reflexivity for the study of migration in contemporary societies.

As stated earlier, Asian migration to the Americas and Europe has a longer history, and studies on Asian diasporas are already an established field. Even though the field is relatively new in the Australian context, the nature of contemporary transnational Asian migration to Australia – from the arrival of Europeans to a hub for cosmopolitan highly skilled Asian migrants – has greater implications for scholars not only in migration and ethnographic research, but also gender, media, and inter-cultural studies.

Claire Maree is an Associate Professor and Reader of Japanese Studies at the Asia Institute, University of Melbourne and President of the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA). Email: [cmaree@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:cmaree@unimelb.edu.au)

Jay Song is an Associate Professor of Korean Studies at the Asia Institute of the University of Melbourne and Deputy Editor for the Asian Studies Review. Email: [jay.song@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:jay.song@unimelb.edu.au)

#### Notes

- <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0-2016-Main%20Features-Cultural%20Diversity%20Article-60>
- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/edition-5/>
- <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/157b05b4-255a-47b4-bd8b-9f715555fb44/TV-Drama-Diversity.pdf>
- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-missing-indian-australians-in-politics/>
- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/the-under-representation-of-asian-australians-political-order-and-political-delay/>
- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/australia-needs-to-embrace-asianness-as-part-of-australianness-to-end-racism/>
- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/what-our-survey-found-about-effective-covid-19-communications-in-asian-australian-communities/>
- <https://csrm.cass.anu.edu.au/research/publications/experience-asian-australians-during-covid-19-pandemic-discrimination-and>
- <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13621025.2021.1981827?journalCode=ecst20>

## Better representation of Asian Australians in politics is needed more than ever

Jia Gao

With a federal election looming in Australia, the representation of ethnic minorities in the country's politics will be almost certain to come under the spotlight again. Asian Australians have long been a topic of analysis and debate because of Australia's anti-Asian past and the new politics of ethnic representation. Analysts and observers, including myself, will devote special attention Chinese-Australian candidates and how the communities will vote in the coming election, after years of being suspected of being the fifth column of Chinese communists and having their loyalty to Australia openly questioned.

In my 2020 book, *Chinese Immigration and Australian Politics*,<sup>1</sup> I examine how, on the surface, Chinese Australians have been so active that many new groups and associations have been created and party politics-related activities – both pro-Labor and pro-Liberal – have been frequently held in the community. As a result of their high levels of social activism and political participation, there has also been a recent upward trend in electoral participation by Chinese Australians. There were 21 candidates of Chinese origin in the most

recent federal election in 2019, after only six ran in 2016, seven in 2013, three in 2010, and seven in 2007.

The surge in the number of preselected candidates of Chinese origin – and the activities of such candidates – have, however, been mistaken and misused by some as evidence of alleged Chinese interference in Australian politics and public life. After the 2019 election, the push to counter China's interference in Australian affairs, as well as anti-Chinese sentiments, have escalated to an unprecedented level. Many sections of the Chinese-Australian communities feel threatened when some counter-spy and -espionage measures have been widely implemented. What has made the situation worse is that Sinophobia has permeated public discourse by unethical media outlets in the country, creating even more racial stereotyping and bias than before.<sup>2</sup>

As a long-time observer of the fast-growing Chinese-Australian community, I can see that there is a great deal of misconception and mistrust, both in terms of the facts and the way they are interpreted, in the many hostile comments made by politicians, journalists, and critics. Fear has long been part of the psyche of European

settlers in Australia, and China has long been seen as a peril in the Australian imagination. This round of Sinophobia is, however, different and characterised by a mistake of believing that many activities by Chinese Australians are driven by geopolitics, or that they are guided by China's ruling communist party. Many networking activities of Chinese-Australian businesspeople, which have been promoted by Australian government bodies and businesses, are seen as signs of China's meddling in Australia's domestic affairs.

My analysis has shown that many critics are reversed in what a succession of Australian governments has been doing over recent decades in using migration schemes to sustain the country's socio-economic development. The reckless ‘othering’ of the Chinese has failed to consider Australia's post-war historical shift towards Asia and the merit-based migration system that has been developed and implemented since the 1990s. Both the strategic shift and the merit-based migration system have not only transformed the economic structure and the demographic composition of Australia, but importantly have also changed established patterns in the distribution of employment opportunities, wealth, and political influence in Australia.

Australia's immigration selection criteria have been progressively developed to emphasise the importance of qualifications, skills, business experiences, and financial capacity. As a result, more Chinese migrants are from mainland China as it has become a key producer of most tradable goods. The immigration regime has also resulted in the Chinese-Australian community being a few years younger than the median age of the total Australian population. They have become better educated and qualified in comparison with portions of the Australian population, and many of them are also financially better off than previous generations, making it possible to set up and run more businesses. Australia's high dependence on trade with China, as well as tourism and international education, have placed many Australians of Chinese origin in a position to capitalise economically. It is fair to say that these changes had been welcomed since the mid-1990s – before the recent Sinophobia – as Chinese Australians

not only meet Australia's need for more skilled labours, but also bring other benefits to the country.

All of the above changes have added a new and unfamiliar dimension to Australian politics, aggravating the long-brewing resentment of many Australians towards those of Chinese origin.

This negative sentiment has been exacerbated by other related issues, such as the activities of some ethnic Chinese buyers in Australia's housing market and their strangely enthusiastic interest in community and network-building activities. The latter is beyond the comprehension of many non-Chinese Australians, as they are unable to imagine the need of Chinese Australians for networks. Many also question the donations by Chinese Australians to political parties, but almost no one challenges the parties that accept these donations.

After several years of particularly xenophobic sentiment in Australia, questions have been raised in regard to the future of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity in Australia. Specifically, many Asian Australians are now wondering whether they could buy a house without upsetting others, and to what extent their children can academically perform well without facing discrimination. Ordinary Asian Australians want to know when Australian society can once again become as tolerant as before and when it will accept the reality of its ethnic diversity.

Jia Gao is Professor at the Asia Institute, the University of Melbourne. He has authored the following books on new Chinese migrants in Australia: *Chinese Activism of a Different Kind* (2013, Brill); *Chinese Migrant Entrepreneurship in Australia from the Early 1990s* (2015, Elsevier); and *Chinese Immigration and Australian Politics* (2020, Palgrave Macmillan). Email: [jia@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:jia@unimelb.edu.au)

#### Notes

- [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341314269\\_Chinese\\_Immigration\\_and\\_Australian\\_Politics\\_A\\_Critical\\_Analysis\\_on\\_a\\_Merit-Based\\_Immigration\\_System](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341314269_Chinese_Immigration_and_Australian_Politics_A_Critical_Analysis_on_a_Merit-Based_Immigration_System)
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-01/coronavirus-has-sparked-racist-attacks-on-asian-australians/11918962>



Fig. 1: Senator Penny Wong speaking at the Australian National University (ANU) in 2017 (Image reproduced under a Creative Commons licence courtesy of a Wikimedia Commons user).