

Why expert Asia-related analysis is more important than ever, in Australia and the region

Cathy Harper

The eastern Melbourne suburb of Box Hill perhaps represents the future possibilities of Australia's place within Asia and its relationship with its Asian Australian communities. It's well-known for its concentration of Asian diaspora communities, particularly Chinese. It's about half an hour from central Melbourne by car or train, located near a major highway and train station, with high-rise hotels and a large shopping mall. It's also one of the State government's designated metropolitan activity centres. Official statistics show that more than 35 percent of residents report Chinese ancestry compared with a national average of 3.9 percent. Top countries of birth of Box Hill residents (other than Australia) are China, Malaysia, and India. The residents of Box Hill are generally younger and more educated than the national average.

It's one of the places where Australia's immigration and other policies are being manifested in everyday life. As Professor Jia Gao argues in his essay for this section, the merit-based migration system has "not only transformed the economic structure and the demographic composition of Australia, but importantly has also changed established patterns in the distribution of employment opportunities, wealth, and political influence in Australia."

However, in the words of Professor Vedi Hadiz, there remains a lack of appreciation for the complexities of Asia and the

nuances in Australia's connections with Asia.¹ Australia's challenge in and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic is to find a new narrative² that aligns its national imperatives with a vision for how it relates to its region.

England and New Zealand continue to be major source countries of migrants to Australia, but the proportion of those born overseas who were born in China and India has increased since 2011 from six percent to 8.3 percent, and 5.6 percent to 7.4 percent respectively. International students in Australia are part of this picture. International education is, depending on the measure used, Australia's third or fourth biggest export, behind coal, iron ore, and natural gas. Over the past two decades, China, India, Indonesia, Nepal, Malaysia, Korea, and Vietnam have been the main source nations of international students in Australia.

But serious analysis of Asia and Asia-related issues in Australian news and other media remains marginal. For example, 2022 research by respected think tank the Lowy Institute found that 53 percent of foreign news stories in Australia's mainstream media about COVID-19 were about the experience in the US and UK. Southeast Asia accounted for only five percent and South Asia 1.5 percent. Research published in 2021 by academic Wanning Sun, found that tabloid media in Australia resorted to Sino-phobic positions in reporting on China's efforts to contain COVID-19. Very recently, some media outlets owned by News Limited

appear to be supporting unsubstantiated claims by a federal government minister about Beijing's claimed preferences in relation to Australia's upcoming federal election. A 2018 study by Deakin University – which examined media coverage of issues related to multicultural Australia – found that more than a third of stories reflected a negative view of minority communities. A 2019 report by Media Diversity Australia found that 75.6 percent of television news and current affairs presenters, commentators, and reporters were Anglo-Celtic.

Australia needs to support serious research, analysis, and discussion within Australia and from Asia, with a diversity of voices and perspectives, about the major challenges it and its neighbours face. How can Australia – and other nations in the region – better manage great power competition between China and the US? How can Australia improve its relations with Southeast Asian nations?³ How can democratic decline be mitigated?⁴ What can business do to help sustain human rights?⁵ What is the state of Islam in contemporary politics?⁶ How does politics influence culture and identity through regulating language learning?⁷ These are issues that affect all of us.

Domestically, can Australia help overcome a surge of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racism related to COVID-19 by addressing the nation's continuing lack of "Asia-literacy"? How can the conspicuous lack of Asian-Australians⁸ in Australian parliaments⁹ be overcome?¹⁰ How can we better harness the cultural and economic potential of Asian diaspora communities in Australia?¹¹

Melbourne Asia Review, published by the Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, gives voice to experts across the region, including in languages other than English. It 'translates' research into context relevant to current, developing challenges. As the region and the world adjust to the cleavages wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic, we

need serious consideration of what our region could and should become.

The reality – as exemplified by the Melbourne suburb of Box Hill – is that Asia and Australia are more deeply intertwined than ever before, both between nations and within them. Australia and the region need to better articulate forward-thinking ideas based on evidence, research, and considered analysis that will deeply influence the nature and trajectory of Asia and Australia and their diverse communities.

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Notes

- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/directors-introduction/>
- https://asiaink.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0006/3958791/Finding-Australias-new-Asia-narrative-Prof.-Michael-Wesley-and-Asiaink.pdf
- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/what-does-southeast-asia-want-from-australia/>
- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/edition-6/>
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- <https://melbourneasiareview.edu.au/interview-transnational-connectivity-is-here-to-stay-how-we-understand-and-deal-with-it-is-crucial/>

Australian Business and Economic Engagement with Asia

Andrew Rosser

Australian government policy-makers have long asserted that Asia is a source of economic opportunity for Australia, especially for Australian businesses seeking to internationalise their operations.¹ Neither growing geopolitical tensions between Australia and China in recent years nor the economic dislocation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic appear to have altered their thinking in this respect.

Despite this situation, however, few Australian businesses have so far established a significant presence in the region. In recent decades, Australian mining and agricultural companies have exported vast amounts of primary commodities to the region, including iron ore, coal, gold, petroleum, wheat, and beef, contributing to Australia's wealth and prosperity. But Australian businesses have made little direct investment in the region, preferring instead to put their capital into countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

In a series of recent reports on Australia's economic relationship with Asia, the business advisory firm PwC has observed that Australian businesses "are looking offshore for growth but are largely ignoring the world's fastest growing region."² Few are planning to expand into the region.³

To address this issue, PwC, the Business Council of Australia (a leading business representative organisation), the Asia Society (a prominent think tank), and the University of Sydney's Business School collaborated between 2019 and 2021 on a program of research and consultation aimed at examining "how Australian companies can increase their presence and position in Asia to ensure [Australia's] continued prosperity and deliver progress for future generations."⁴

Their key findings were published in April 2021 in a report entitled *A Second Chance: How Team Australia Can Succeed in Asia*. Although not an official government report, *A Second Chance* was launched by Dan Tehan – Australia's Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment – indicating some degree of government support for the project.

The new agenda outlined in *A Second Chance* has five main elements. The first, "Adopt a 'Team Australia' approach", calls for greater collaboration between Australian business, government, and academia in the pursuit of greater economic engagement and business success in Asia. The second, "Playing to our strengths", advises that Australian policy-makers and corporate executives need to know Australian business' "capabilities and comparative advantages well and identify markets and sectors where [Australian business is] most likely to get ahead." The third, "Learn to navigate a more complex China", asserts that Australia needs to maintain the best possible economic relationship with China in the context of emerging tensions in the bilateral relationship due to geopolitical factors and fundamental differences over human rights and democracy. The fourth, "Reboot Asia literacy," posits that Australia needs a deeper understanding of Asian cultures, politics, societies, and economies, not just in general but particularly in corporate boardrooms where Asian expertise and experience is limited. New appointments to corporate boards are thus needed. The final element, "Champion our rich Asia talent" calls on Australian business to harness the market knowledge, networks, and language skills of Asian Australian communities and the Australian diaspora to gain better access to lucrative Asian markets.

This agenda thus represents an attempt to grapple not just with the difficulties for Australian business created by Australia's deteriorating relationship with China, but also with two other stark realities as well.

The first, which is acknowledged only implicitly in the report, is that Asian markets are in many cases characterised by government-business relations that are personalistic and political in nature and dominated by predatory and authoritarian elites.⁵ These characteristics make it difficult for Australian businesses to compete given legal obligations to avoid bribery and corruption and the fact that many Australian businesses find it difficult to develop the local relationships crucial to success. In earlier reports, PwC has argued that many Australian businesses have little idea how to do business in the region.⁶ The solution proposed in *A Second Chance* is to harness the networks and market knowledge of new corporate board members who have Asia expertise and experience as well as members of the Asian-Australian and Australian diaspora communities who are connected to the region through family, social, and business linkages.

The second reality is that foreign investors operating in Asia – particularly ones from other Asian countries – often work in close collaboration with, and have extensive support from, their home country governments. As *A Second Chance* points out, such a partnership-based approach "has served countries like Singapore and Japan well in securing major investment and other commercial opportunities in Asia."⁷ Operating without strong government support, Australian business has been at a competitive disadvantage. For Australian business to compete more effectively in Asia, *A Second Chance* contends, Australia needs to replicate this collaborative model.

The agenda outlined in *A Second Chance* is innovative in these important respects. This does not mean it will succeed, however. Its realisation depends on other key parties getting on board: the Australian government, corporate shareholders, academia, Asian-Australian communities, and the Australian

diaspora. In launching *A Second Chance*, Minister Tehan said that he looks forward to working with PwC and its collaborators on implementing the report's recommendations.⁸ But it remains to be seen whether the Australian government and other parties will ultimately play their part. Even if they do, the resulting assemblage may be insufficient to make up for decades of conservatism, disinterest, and laziness within the Australian business community and to address the stark realities of Asian markets noted above. It may be that the Asian economic opportunity will, as PwC has put it, simply pass Australian business by.⁹

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- <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=ld%3A%22media%2Fpressrel%2FHPR02000695%22;src1=sm1>
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