10. Australia's Other Asia in the Asian Century

Jacqueline Lo

The recently deposed (Labor-led) Australian Government released its *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper in October 2012.¹ The document has been the subject of public and academic scrutiny both within Australia and in the region. There was praise for the document's emphasis on education to develop Australia's 'Asia-relevant capabilities', even while the issue of how the Asia-turn is to be implemented and funded remained unaddressed. The *Jakarta Post* gave an insight into the region's response to the white paper:

[B]efore a nation can become a competitive force, it must have an accepted place in the region. On this key strategy, the white paper does little more than make a 'rally call' to Australians to come out and make it happen. ... Though Australia has some deeply historical links with many parts of the region due to some heroic actions of troops during World War II, tragically these opportunities to further develop relationships were not capitalized upon ... It's not about learning Asian languages but about understanding different points of view, approaches, and 'mindsets'. Austro-centrism must take a back seat in relationships around the region for Australia to be seriously considered a member of the region.²

At the point of writing, the new Coalition government headed by Prime Minister Tony Abbott has just been formalised. While the fate of this white paper remains uncertain, there are already signs that the new government is similarly keen to capitalise on 'Rising Asia' as the source of Australia's continuing prosperity. The *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper, for now at least, is indexical of the policy-imaginary of contemporary Australia.³

It should be noted that the white paper is a domestic economic policy and, as such, does not develop a nuanced approach to foreign relations, specifically through

1 The paper can be accessed at <http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/190062879>.

2 Murray Hunter, 'White Paper: "Australia in the Asian Century" or Lost in Asia?' *Jakarta Post*, 30 October 2012, accessed 25 September 2013, <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2012/10/30/white-paper-australia-asian-century-or-lost-asia.html>.

3 The *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper is, of course, not the first of its kind. The 'Asian-turn' in Australia's policy framework occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is most often associated with the government of former prime minister Paul Keating, who advocated the privileging of Australia's geographic location in the region over our historical connections with Europe. The Keating years have become the yardstick for the promotion of 'Asia-literacy' and of changes introduced not only to foreign policy but also in the domestic education and cultural sectors.

the articulation of modes of relating to Asia beyond a trade and productivity-centred model founded on the notion of 'opportunity'. Nevertheless, even within this paradigm, it fails to account for the ways in which Australia is already 'Asianised'. For all the attention on Asia and Asians, there is a remarkable absence of discussion about the role of Asian Australians in the document. As Tim Soutphommasane asserts:

Some of us seem to believe that Asia is something out there, wholly apart from us. In fact, there is already a lot of Asia in Australia. ... That is because so much of our Asian-ness ... is currently invisible. With one or two notable exceptions, Asian-Australians aren't in the room when it matters. Where are they represented in our ministerial cabinets, our corporate boardrooms and our editorial offices? Will they be represented in such settings soon?⁴

The economic rise of Asia has resulted in unprecedented changes to the geopolitical and economic landscape, which have necessitated a 'national blueprint for a time of national change' to rethink Australia's role and engagement with Asia. According to the then Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, at the launch of the commissioning of the white paper, 'Australia has not been here before'.⁵ This assertion invoked a sense of déjà vu for many scholars of Australian history. The 'Asian century' has been both anticipated and dreaded from as early as the 1880s, and unease regarding such an eventuality contributed to the development of the so-called White Australia policy that continues to haunt Australia's profile in the region. The discourses of 'engagement' with a rising Asia and its corollary, the fear of Asian invasion, have played a critical role in the nation's political imaginary. As Carol Johnson, Pal Ahluwalia and Greg McCarthy, among others, have argued, the idea of 'Asia' has operated

as a sign and symbol in Australian domestic politics, helping to define 'who we are' as well as the related question of what is Australia's place in the world. As such, 'Asia' has always been an ambivalent sign—one that can be both troubling and exemplify hope.⁶

A historicised approach to Australia's relations with Asia reveals that discourses about Asia–Australia relations are based on a bipolar East–West conceptual framework that continues to resonate in the present, despite the awareness of the impact of globalisation. More specifically, as Jan Jindy Pettman observed

4 Tim Soutphommasane, 'Australia's Asian-ness is barely visible', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 November 2012, accessed 25 September 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-opinion/australias-asianness-is-barely-visible-20121104-28ryq.html>.

5 Julia Gillard, speech, Asialink and Asia Society, Melbourne, 28 September 2011, accessed 5 January 2012, <http://www.pm.gov.au/press-office/speech-asialink-and-asia-society-lunch-melbourne>.

6 Carol Johnson, Pal Ahluwalia & Greg McCarthy, 'Australia's Ambivalent Re-imagining of Asia', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 1 (2010): 60.

some years ago, notions of engagement and regional integration are 'ideally about Australia in Asia, and not about Asia in Australia'.⁷ Notwithstanding the significant progress that has been made towards a more culturally inclusive concept of the nation in the area of public education, and the growing conviction that Australia's future lies with the economic ascendancy of its Asian neighbours, there remains a significant proportion of the Australian population that is uncomfortable with the changes in cultural orientation and population demographics. The populist support for Pauline Hanson's One Nation party in the mid-to-late 1990s, the Cronulla riots in 2005 and the current growing unease about Chinese investment in Australia are indicators of anxieties about the presence of Asia and Asians in Australia, and the assumed incommensurate differences between 'Asianness' and 'Australianness'.

The emergence of Asian Australianness as fields of political action, cultural production and academic research emerged in the late 1990s in response to heightened racism against Asian and Aboriginal Australians. Asian Australianness as a category of identity was deployed in the face of exclusionary racist politics. Drawing on concepts of hybridity and diaspora, the term was used to claim a space of critique and agency for Australians of Asian descent as both Asian *and* Australian. Asian Australianness as a platform for anti-racist political solidarity was developed to unsettle dominant expectations of an unproblematic homology between cultural, racial and national identity.⁸

More than a decade later, and with new landscapes of racism emerging, the role of Asian Australians within the national imaginary remains ambivalent. While the spectre of Asian (and especially Chinese) economic dominance invokes older fears of the yellow peril, Asian Australians are also held up as bridge-builders and cultural translators who can facilitate the country's engagement with Asia. In visual art and design, the status of Asian Australian artists has arguably risen in both esteem and currency, propelled by the growing international interest in contemporary Asian art. Interest in so-called World Literature (that is, literature that crosses the traditional cultural and national domain to reach a global audience) and diasporic literature (literature written from and about the Asian diasporas in the West) are also increasingly popular.

And yet, despite the international appeal of Australian cultural production, Asian Australian artists continue to be interpreted within a nationalist and specifically multicultural framework. This leads to a tendency to emphasise the biographical and cultural/ethnic identification of the artists as the primary means of elucidating the artworks. While some Asian Australian art is based on

7 Jan Jindy Pettman, 'A Feminist Perspective on "Australia in Asia"', in *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*, eds John Docker & Gerhard Fischer (Sydney: University of New South Wales, 2000), 147.

8 For details see Jacqueline Lo, 'Disciplining Asian Australian Studies: Projections and Introjections', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 27, nos 1 & 2 (2006): 11–27.

the concepts of hybridity, migrancy and diaspora, there are other works that have little to do with such matters. The danger with privileging sociological frameworks is that it risks reiterating hegemonic paradigms of racialisation. The institutionalisation of such practices within academia, as well as in the curatorial and arts marketing sectors has the unfortunate consequence of delimiting Asian Australian artworks as ethnographic testimonials of racial and ethnic difference and, thus, reinforces the location of the works at the fringes of mainstream culture.

If mainstream Australia is being encouraged to find new narratives for engaging with Asia, what roles and narratives might there be for Australians of Asian descent in this not-so-new century?

Aboriginal–Asian Intimacies

Multicultural Australia did not begin, as is generally held, in the 1970s with the official demise of the so-called White Australia policy. Northern Australia was a multicultural place where Asians and Aboriginal communities traded, coexisted and procreated prior to the British presence on the continent. Yet, within the larger context of settler Australian history, there is still the perception that Asians and Aboriginals do not have much in common. The Australian story is largely constructed in terms of black/white race relations. According to Regina Ganter, the non-British histories of Australia have ‘never been unknown, but they have also never been privileged into the master narrative of domestic histories’. The histories have been conveniently forgotten because they do not extend British history and are, thus, ‘not remembered very hard’.⁹ The separate, but parallel, management of Asians and Aboriginals became more entrenched in the first half of the twentieth century: the former were controlled by immigration laws (most notably the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901*) that kept them outside the borders of the nation, while the latter were confined to reserves and fringe settlements. The White Australia policy and its breadth of legislative instruments prevented not only non-Europeans from entering the country, but also Asians, who were already in the country, from associating with Aboriginals.

Nonetheless, there is a long history of intimacy between Asians and Aboriginals. Peta Stephenson argues that the management of parallel communities meant that Asian men and Aboriginal women were forced to maintain

their relationships in clandestine ways and their children remained illegitimate. Indigenous–Asian relationships were shrouded in secrecy, with many fathers reluctant to acknowledge their mixed-race children

9 Regina Ganter, *Mixed Relations: Asian–Aboriginal Contact in North Australia* (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2006), 28.

for fear of reprisal. The threat of fines, imprisonment and deportation also kept many men from publicising their relationships with their Aboriginal partners.¹⁰

There is no recognition of this 'Asia from within' in policy instruments, such as the *Australia in the Asian Century* document.¹¹ Such specific iterations of vernacular cosmopolitanism remain aporetic to the narrative of Australia's Asia-turn.

There are, however, increasing numbers of Aboriginal Asian artists, such as Jason Wing, Sandra Hill and Vernon Ah Kee, who challenge this silence and embrace their mixed-race heritage. Wing began as a street artist and has since expanded his practice to incorporate photo media, installation and painting. Despite branching into new media, his work maintains its street-art sensibility, as well as drawing on his bi-cultural heritage. Known for addressing contentious issues, Wing explores complex notions of race, the environment and politics through a graphic aesthetic.

In 2011 Wing was commissioned by the Sydney City Council to create a 200-metre-long public artwork for Kimber Lane, a service lane in Sydney's Chinatown. One of the terms of the commission was to reactivate urban spaces and to divert human traffic from congested Chinatown thoroughfares by making some of the alleyways more pedestrian-friendly. Earlier public artworks in the precinct tended to conform to traditionally recognisable and iconic representations of Han culture, such as red lanterns and pagodas. This was not just for tourism, but an important marker of identity and belonging for the local Chinese community in the area and beyond.

While sensitive to the need to respect this history of the Chinese presence in the area, the artist also wanted to make visible the hitherto absent markers of Aboriginal presence, which is part of the history of the district and Wing's biography. Wing's grandfather, born in Hong Kong, came to Australia and worked in the restaurant industry in Chinatown where he met and married Wing's grandmother, who was of Scottish descent and worked as a waitress in the same restaurant. Wing's father met his mother, who is an Aboriginal woman from the Biripi people in the Upper Hunter region of New South Wales, at school in western Sydney. When Wing's parents separated, he 'travelled between two worlds—the city and the bush—and this had a profound influence on [his] attitude to life and his artwork.'

10 Peta Stephenson, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), 75–76.

11 There is only one brief mention of early Asian–Aboriginal contact that predated European settlement: in the document 'White Australia, industry protection, ... state paternalism and imperial benevolence ... had the effect of stunting the relationship with Asia', Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Australia in the Asian Century*, white paper (Canberra, 2012), 78, accessed 1 January 2013, <http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/white-paper>.

Jason Wing, *In Between Two Worlds* (entry to Kimber Lane), Sydney 2012; 200 m long x 7 m high, exterior house paint, Dibond, Perspex, LEDs.

Jason Wing, *In Between Two Worlds (lane view)*, Kimber Lane, Sydney 2012.

Photograph: Paul Patterson. Special mention: Architectural Graphics. Image courtesy of the artist

I combine both traditional Chinese paper cutting and Aboriginal stencil techniques in my work. I also look for similarities in both cultures in terms of spiritual customs, teachings and detailed understanding of the human body and nature.¹²

The artwork invokes the four elements of water, wind, fire and earth, and references Indigenous Australian and Chinese cultures. Both cultures believe that these elements have their own spirits. In *In Between Two Worlds*, this spirituality is embodied in the 30 androgynous cherubic figures that represent both past and future. The spirit figures float along the alleyway (a creative interpretation of safety lighting for a public space) and entice passersby to explore the laneway. On the chest of each spirit figure is a circle, signifying that the laneway is the symbolic heartland of Chinatown. The circle also invokes the Indigenous Australian cultural symbol for a campfire, a waterhole and a place of gathering. In embodying the two cultures together in the spirit figure, Wing makes visible and material the convergence of histories that are usually represented as incommensurate.

When he was developing his plans for Kimber Lane, Wing had just returned from an arts residency in the Shanxi province in northern China. The work is partly inspired by his experience of walking through the clouds in the Taihang Mountains:

I wanted to replicate the overwhelming oneness I felt with nature by replicating cloud murals on the walls, roads and pavement and suspending spirit figures in midair. I can only hope that this work located in the heart of an urban Chinese-Australian metropolis, evoked the same spiritual experience I had whilst walking through those misty mountains.¹³

The image of the cloud is often used in traditional Chinese imagery. In Wing's work the cloud mural invokes the four elements of wind (through the appearance of movement), water (the colour blue), earth (the cloud shape resembles mountains), and fire (the tail of the clouds look like flames). The cloud pattern is also incorporated in the granite paving of the lane, some of which is inlaid with paint to create visual continuity with the walls. Clouds represent the heavens and the Chinese word for cloud is also homophonic for 'luck' or 'fortune'. Thus, when encountering some resistance to his liberal use of the colour blue in the work (as opposed to the more conventional red), Wing was able to persuade the Chinese community elders that the laneway was presenting the community with 200 metres of good fortune.¹⁴

12 Jason Wing, 'Postcards from China', *Artlink* 32, no. 2 (2012): 91.

13 Ibid., 92.

14 Jason Wing, conversation with the author, July 2013.

Wing has returned to China since *In Between Two Worlds* opened: 'The more I travel to China the more I see similarities between Chinese and Aboriginal people struggling with the dispossession of land and traditional culture by Government policies.' During a residency in Beijing in 2012, he made a three-metre-high fibreglass red-bellied snake: 'The concept refers to the Australian status quo, promoting fear of both China and Aboriginal people. This work explores themes of power, fear and survival. Travelling overseas has made me focus more on international human issues.'

Aboriginal–Asian artists, such as Wing, activate an older subaltern narrative of contact between Asia and Australia, which in Wing's case, places the matter centrally within the space of Sydney's Chinatown. In recovering this heritage of Asian connections, our national history connects with other histories in the region in more meaningful ways than the current transactional model of engagement. As David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska point out:

Acknowledging this diversity of Australia's past is not only important for our sense of self, but also for how others perceive us. Revealing the full extent of Australian Asian contacts links our past to that of our region, and supports the sense of interconnectedness vital to sustained economic, political and cultural relations.¹⁵

Diasporic Agency

The discourse of Rising Asia is frequently conflated with 'Rising China', which produces specific challenges as well as opportunities for Australians of Chinese descent. John Young's story illustrates the politics and poetics of diaspora. He was born in Hong Kong in 1956, the youngest child of a westernised Catholic family. His parents sent him to a Sydney boarding school in 1967 to remove him from the immediate consequences of China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. Aside from annual trips back to Hong Kong, Young has made Australia his home.

Young belongs to what might be considered the first wave of Chinese Australian artists—including Lindy Lee and William Yang—who grew up and began their professional careers at a time when the White Australia policy was still in place and there was little cultural space for notions of diasporic or hybrid identities. Although the work of all three artists investigates, in different ways, their Chinese cultural heritage, this was not always the case: their early works are

15 David Walker & Agnieszka Sobocinska, 'Introduction: Australia's Asia', in *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century*, eds David Walker & Agnieszka Sobocinska (Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2012), 19.

underscored by modernist and postmodernist Euro-American precepts. It was only in the 1990s, when contemporary Asian art gained increasing currency in the international arts market, that Young's work was studied through diasporic frameworks. While the dominant multicultural paradigm operating at the time created new spaces for non-Anglo artists to present their works, the interpretation of the works tended to be subsumed under simplistic identity discourses of hybridity and fusion.

Young's recent work is instructive in this respect. Rather than focusing on issues of racial or transcultural identity, his interest has turned instead to the question of how people act in cross-cultural situations. Globalisation has had a profound impact on the international arts market, opening new opportunities across national borders. There has been a surge of interest in contemporary Chinese art since the 1980s, with artists such as Cai Guo-Qiang, Gu Wenda and Xu Bing becoming major figures in festival circuits. Although the international art world is now a diffuse network of institutions and circuits of collaboration, production and exchange, Young maintains that the work of these Chinese artists is still required to perform racialised roles and deal with Chinese issues in order to maintain currency. He also sees international curators adopting a deterritorialised approach to the works themselves, specialising in the thematic manipulation of artworks drawn from diverse locations with little attention to the historical contexts that support the artworks.¹⁶

For Young, the speed of globalisation has exacerbated this sense of ethical indifference in the constant search for the next new commodity. He sees a role for art in linking the present to 'a world of forgotten stories, discarded objects, and memories ... Making art not only means to recollect stories, but to reawaken an intrinsic ethical impulse in the present'. This shift to 'situate ethics and moral judgment within the context of crossing from one culture to another'¹⁷ is demonstrated in *Safety Zone*, which comprises 60 drawings and digital images organised as a panel display, three large paintings entitled *Flower Market (Nanjing 1936)*, and two vertical paintings entitled *The Crippled Tree*. The exhibition premiered at Anna Schwartz Gallery in 2010, was restaged at the University of Queensland Art Museum in 2011, and the Drill Hall Gallery at The Australian National University in 2013.

Young used a series of chalk drawings on blackboard-paint covered paper interspersed with inkjet prints from archival images for the *Safety Zone* panel. Most of these images focus on atrocities enacted by the Japanese in Nanjing in the 1930s. As the Japanese marched closer to Nanjing in 1931, most foreigners

16 Carolyn Barnes, 'Towards a Layered Imaginary', in *John Young* (Fisherman's Bend, Victoria: Craftsman House, 2005), 61.

17 John Young, cited in Thomas J. Berghuis, 'John Young: Situational Ethics', *Art & Australia* 48, no. 3 (2011): 440.

left the city, except for 15 Americans and Europeans who stayed behind and formed the International Committee to protect the Chinese. They set up a Safety Zone of some 3.85 square kilometres. At the height of the Nanjing invasion, the International Committee protected some 200,000 civilian Chinese. In this essay I focus on two foreigners whose stories especially resonated with Young.

John Young, *Safety Zone* 2010; installation view, 60 works, digital prints and chalk on blackboard paint on paper, 3.2 x 15.9 m overall.

Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist

John Rabe was a businessman working for the German electronic and engineering company Siemens. He was appointed leader of the International Committee largely because he was a member of the Nazi Party, which afforded him negotiating capacity with the Japanese, as the Germans were then allies with the Japanese as part of the Anti-Comintern Pact. When the Safety Zone was disestablished in 1938, Rabe was sent back to Berlin. After Hitler's reign, however, he and his family encountered great hardship because of his Nazi association; he was first held by the Gestapo and then, after the war, by the Soviet NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs), and later by the British army. He was forced to undergo an arduous de-Nazification process and lost his job at Siemens. He and his family lived in poverty to the point of starvation until the citizens of Nanjing heard of his situation. They sent money and later monthly food packages to help the family. Rabe died in 1950 in pitiful circumstances.

In the panel inscribed with 'You have the heart of a Buddha' (*Du hast das Herz einer Buddha*), the interplay of two languages operates dialogically. Written in Chinese is 'This is a drawing for John Rabe'. Text under erasure denotes: 'You have saved thousands of poor people from danger and want', which is juxtaposed against Rabe's own writing, 'Everyone thinks I am a hero and that can be very annoying. I can see nothing heroic about me or within me'. Then, in Chinese, 'for Mr. Rabe'.

John Young, *Safety Zone* 2010 (detail).

Collection of the artist. Image courtesy of the artist

Another person of note who is explored in Young's work is Minnie Vautrin, an American who established the Ginling Girls College and saved hundreds from rape and worse fates. The inkjet photograph of Vautrin shows her in the college compound in what appears to be a uniform. Ultimately Vautrin could not prevent numerous incursions by Japanese soldiers, who came into the college and raped girls as young as three, as well as their mothers and grandmothers. Vautrin was sent home along with other foreigners in 1938, when the Safety Zone was abolished after the Japanese army claimed formal control of the city. Traumatized by the events she had witnessed and feeling responsible for the lives she could not protect, Vautrin committed suicide by turning on the gas stove in her apartment in Indianapolis in 1940.

An inkjet portrait, of girls playing in the Safety Zone compound are identified with the caption 'Ginling College'. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's quote is reproduced in Chinese: 'The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children'. For this writer, these words are all the more chilling when accompanied by the image of youth. The image with 'Victim' inscribed depicts the only full-face portrait of a Chinese subject in Young's panel and, thus, is an important assertion of embodied Chinese agency and resistance to the violence of the time. It is likely that this young girl was the victim of rape and a patient of the only foreign doctor who stayed behind at the University of Nanking Hospital, Robert Wilson.

The affective images in *Safety Zone* provoke us to reflect on humanitarian actions that transcend narrow ethnic and nationalist sentiments. The sensitivity and immediacy of the works reveal Young's own position and anxiety as a Chinese Australian. He poses a profound challenge to Asian Australians: perhaps it is not what one identifies 'as' or how one is categorised 'with', but rather what one chooses to 'do,' that truly matters.

New Narratives for an Asian Century?

The works of Asian-Australians, such as Wing and Young, point to more nuanced ways of engaging with the complexities of Asia 'out there', but also the ways in which an understanding of 'Asia within' can enrich our understanding of who we are as a nation, and how we can relate in more meaningful ways with our near-neighbours. As Asian Australians, the artists are not prescriptive in either politics or poetics, but they proffer alternative narratives of being both within and without normative Asia and Australia. By focusing on the impact of an older contact history, Wing challenges and supplements the transactional logic of Asian regional integration as exemplified by the *Australia in the Asian Century* white paper and positions Australian-Asian engagement within an unresolved postcolonial context. Young, on the other hand, brings a transnational approach

to nationalised histories of war and trauma. The humanitarian acts witnessed by his artwork defy exclusive national and cultural ownership, and testify to how everyday people rise up to assist each other in periods of extreme moral deficit.

The works of the artists and scholars represented in this collection of essays point to the potential (as well as pitfalls) of assuming a simplistic portrait of contemporary Asian visual culture. Instead, the intellectual and cultural complexities, as well as the self-reflexive models of interrogation, that are gathered in this volume, raise the stakes in asking us to rethink what lessons might we, as artists, scholars, activists and citizens, activate and emplace in our engagement with the political imaginary.

Acknowledgements

Excerpts from this essay previously appeared in catalogues for the following exhibitions: *Passages*, Brian Castro, Khai Liew & John Young, Tarrawarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Victoria, 2012; and *John Young: The Bridge and the Fruit Tree*, Drill Hall Gallery, The Australian National University, Canberra, 2013. My thanks to Jason Wing and John Young for permission to use images of their work. Research for this essay was supported by a grant from the Australian Research Council DP08: 'Being Asian in Australia and the United States'.

This text taken from *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and world-making*, by Michelle Antoinette and Caroline Turner, published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.