INTRODUCTION

Alison Broinowski and Anthony Milner

Chinese, Japanese and Australians have shared an intense curiosity about each other throughout our recorded histories. As is well known, settlers from Europe brought with them to Australia preconceptions about China and Japan, some fanciful, some factual. Some convicts, believing they had been transported almost to China itself, hoped that by escaping from the penal settlements on the east coast of Australia and walking north they would reach China. Others set out in boats and some got to Batavia, while others reached the coast of Japan. What is less widely known is that their curiosity was matched by early investigations of Australia by Chinese and Japanese, which some Chinese claim began in the 15th century. Certainly, small teams of diligent Japanese followed them in the 19th century. The process of mutual exploration continues into the 21st century.

The examination of how Australia is perceived by people from the Asian region is important, yet it remains a much neglected project. To investigate how Australia appears from other points of view, and particularly those of people in two such significant societies, is to challenge Australian self-perceptions. Equally, from Chinese and Japanese reports about Australia emerge interesting suggestions about how the Chinese and Japanese observe themselves. In what Chinese and
Japanese say about Australia, curiosity about difference and the impulse to compare are as potent as in Australian accounts of them. So in this investigation a kind of double vision is at work, juxtaposing two sets of images and three societies.

We asked the distinguished contributors to this book to select examples, from their knowledge of Chinese or Japanese sources, of accounts of Australia, to analyse them in their cultural context and to draw conclusions about how Australia is perceived among Chinese and Japanese. We asked them to take account of the Chinese- and Japanese-language material that our researchers had identified and translated in the ‘Australiana’ collections of the National Library of Australia as part of the ‘Asian Accounts of Australia’ project, the pilot phase of which began in 1999. The results were presented to the public at a conference on 6 February, 2003 at the National Library of Australia, which marked the end of the project. This book is an edited collection of the papers. By publishing them we hope to make the National Library’s wealth of Chinese and Japanese Australiana more widely accessible, for linguists and non-linguists. More information about the project’s findings can be found on the National Library’s web site.

Our researchers, graduate students in Chinese and Japanese from the Australian National University, selected and categorised the material, comprising thousands of items, under several headings:

— Australia as a place of settlement and invasion;
— Australia as exotic and a place for tourism;
— Australia as a model and a place for education;
— Australia as a political entity and a regional participant;
— Cultural Australia;
— Indigenous Australia, racist Australia and multicultural Australia;
— Republican Australia;
— Sydney Olympic Games.

Some of these fields, which were identified in the pilot project in 1999, turned out to be more fertile for our purposes than others. Australia is important as a participant in East
Asian commercial affairs, for instance, but the Chinese and Japanese accounts of this aspect of Australia, being necessarily factual, contributed less of perceptual interest to the project than those on other topics. As a model country, Australia was seen by some Chinese and Japanese observers as setting an example in some respects, but these accounts were rarely without their down-side, and most included warnings that the Australian way was far from perfect. We detected in some accounts an almost conspiratorial tone, as though Chinese and Japanese were passing on home truths about Australia to readers of the vernacular which, if they were writing in English, they might have been more circumspect in expressing. We learned from our research not to try to anticipate how others may see us, since by doing so the very categories we set may distort what the material has to tell us.

An impression left with us by the project is how enduring early impressions of Australia remain among Chinese and Japanese. Many descriptions are so similar they seem either to have been based on the same sources or to result from preconceptions that existed even before the observers arrived in Australia, and which were readily confirmed by what they saw. It seems almost obligatory to affirm readers’ expectations by commenting on Australia’s Westernness or Britishness, its small population, wide open spaces, agriculture, exotic animals and the leisured lifestyle of Australians, before getting down to anything more original. We were surprised by the large number of encyclopaedic, survey-style accounts of Australia for Chinese readers that provide broadly similar outlines of Australian history, politics and society. As well, multiple handbooks instruct Chinese about migration, settlement, education and the social welfare system. In Japanese, accounts of women’s experiences in Australia are almost as numerous as studies of Aboriginal communities, and both categories include firsthand experiences of Japanese who have lived in Australia for extended periods, either in cities or in the outback.

More surprises were in store for us when we read an account of 327 Chinese who were shipwrecked off what is now
Papua New Guinea in 1858 on their way to Australia. According to the Chinese writer, they were captured by local tribespeople who fattened them up for months before killing and eating all but three of them. Equally dramatic is the Japanese attack on Sydney Harbour in 1942 and the experiences of the crew of the three midget submarines. Another Japanese wartime account of Australia in 1944 describes Australians’ reputation for violence, arguing that it derives from their being accustomed as children to killing animals, using guns and training wild horses, as well as the fact that they are the descendants of convicts. For these writers, for different reasons, Australia is a remote, dangerous, frontier place, which East Asians enter at their peril.

Closer to the present, Chinese observers of Australia often have comparisons with China in mind. One of them in 1999 describes the relaxed and comfortable atmosphere of visiting time at ‘Long Beach prison’ (Long Bay Jail), and calls it ‘a really nice place’. But three years earlier, a Chinese man with a medical degree who is working as an orderly in a geriatric hospital is sworn at in the street: ‘Bloody stupid Chinese go home!’ He reflects bitterly that he is caring for the parents of these rude people, while the elderly are looked after at home in China. Variations appear between mainland, Hong Kong and Taiwanese observations of Australia, with the latter often reporting more positive experiences. A satire from a Hong Kong newspaper in 1997, however, comments on how little work is done in Australia during the week, because it is squeezed between the overriding demands of the weekend.

Similar comments about Australian laziness and inefficiency are recurrent in Japanese accounts of Australia where, according to some business people, the serious work of the day is done after 5pm. But these observations about the way Australians divide their time between work and leisure, together with commentaries on the relative autonomy of Australian schoolchildren, and the comparative equality of gender roles, reflect long-standing concern in Japan about rigidities in their society and about lifetimes of hard work that
may not be fulfilling, no matter how sophisticated the possessions they deliver.

While long-standing patterns of perception exist in texts in both languages, and remain powerfully influential, it is at times when those images undergo revision that we have the most to learn about Chinese and Japanese accounts of Australia. Such moments of change are discussed by several of the contributors to this book. They are leading scholars in their fields of Chinese studies, Japanese studies and Australian studies. They include associate researchers who have worked with the project since 1999. Included in the collection is the opening address to the conference given by the Opposition Spokesman for Foreign Affairs, himself a scholar of Chinese.

In their famous pamphlet of 1879, *The Chinese Question*, prominent Chinese residents of Melbourne put their case for equal treatment with other migrants to Australia. They compared starving and over-populated China with prosperous Australia and argued that the same Christian and Confucian principles, of treating others as you would be treated, should apply to all God's children. As Paul Macgregor shows in Chapter 3, their claims to be model citizens were founded on the unspoken premise that Chinese civilisation was superior, which made the injustice done to them in Australia even greater. More than a century later, some echoes of these views, but also marked changes, are noticed by Kam Louie. In Chapter 4, he reviews Chinese fiction written by post-Tienanmen students and their successors. All are enthusiastic supporters of Australian multiculturalism, and all aspire to Permanent Residency as their new identity. Many are prepared to enter into complex mating strategies to get it. Some succeed, yet others are as disappointed in their hopes for a new identity in Australia as were their sojourner predecessors. Ouyang Yu updates this further, describing in Chapter 8 how Chinese abroad who have Permanent Residency are now being wooed
back to China by attractive job offers. Chinese leaving Australia say it’s quiet and dull, with blue sky, clean air and nothing else: a place for old people. So for Ouyang, the latest and greatest change is that many Chinese, once pushed back by the West, are now being pulled back by a vibrant, dynamic, prosperous China where their talents are better appreciated.

An immature, derivative culture, which has borrowed its civilisation from Britain and America, is how Chinese frequently observe Australia. But in the decades in which Kevin Rudd has observed China, he has seen that change twice. Australia came to be seen by Chinese in the late 20th century as taking the region seriously and as trying to build Asia literacy to enhance its place there, even if Chinese suspected that Australians were still fearful of the growing power of East Asia and were opportunistically eager to take advantage of East Asian growth. Then, as a result of Prime Minister John Howard’s explicit association of Australia with United States policy, even to the point of threatening pre-emptively to strike against suspected terrorists in the region, a powerful impression has been created among Chinese that Australia has abandoned an appropriate view of its role and status. Perceptions, Rudd warns in Chapter 1, shape behaviour, and changed Chinese impressions of Australia will be hard to wind back.

Approaching China historically, John Fitzgerald in Chapter 2 finds word-for-word echoes of Prime Minister William Morris Hughes in Howard’s pronouncements on refugees and asylum-seekers, and more resonances in his pragmatic, xenophobic interpretation of the national interest. Australians alone, said Hughes, would decide who ‘should enter in’ to this country. Australians, says Howard, will decide who comes into this country and the circumstances under which they come. Hughes’ notoriety was much greater in Japan than in China, where little was known about Australia beyond the long-standing view that it was a convict colony, a police state and a lackey of the US. Yet as Fitzgerald proposes, the collapse in 1919 of the Chinese republic, the cession of Shantung to Japan and China’s turn toward communism were all outcomes of
Australia’s blocking of racial equality in the League of Nations. Seventy years later, what a change! Equipped as many Chinese now are with wide Internet access to accurate information about Australia, they often ask about Pauline Hanson and the ‘new’ racism, and Australia’s anti-migration policies. They want to know why Australia’s assertion of sovereignty over its borders is not matched by a desire to ‘stand up’ (as Mao said of China) for its own Head of State. An impression derived from China’s own preoccupations as much as from fact, which has not changed, is of Australia’s lack of maturity and independence.

Leith Morton has read a diary written by a famous Japanese author/journalist during three weeks in Australia at the time of the 2000 Olympic Games. He finds in Chapter 5 that Haruki Murakami, like modern observers in China, researched Australian history and society from the copious, electronically available information as well as from standard sources and the daily press. These inform Murakami’s observations about anti-Aboriginal racism, stolen indigenous children and Australia’s propensity to fight for Britain and America in war after war. Unlike the Chinese, who remark on Australia’s neatness and cleanliness, however, he comments on the crumbling, faded Sydney suburbs he sees on the way to Parramatta. Rather than the orderliness on which Chinese often remark in Australia, the criminal tendencies of Australians, resulting from their convict ancestry, are confirmed for Murakami by the theft of his expensive laptop computer from his hotel room. Like the Chinese, Murakami notices a change: for him, it is a new Australian assertiveness, which he sees as being officially encouraged in the Olympic crowds in order to displace Australians’ guilt for their convict past and for their discrimination against Aborigines — and he finds it irritating.

Yoshio Sugimoto, who, like his wife Machiko Satō, has written and broadcast many commentaries on Australia from the viewpoint of Japanese for some 30 years, is a contributor to as well as an analyst of perceptions of Australia in Japan. But he says in Chapter 7 that the segment of the Japanese audience with an interest in Australia remains small. Two assumptions
are widespread among them: that Japanese business people are more stressed and tense than Australians, and that Japanese society is less multicultural than Australia. These are among the considerations documented by Machiko Satō that lead Japanese ‘lifestyle migrants’, particularly women, to migrate to Australia. Masayo Tada further divides gender-related perceptions of Australia in Chapter 9 into three groups: Japanese businessmen, who pity and scorn the uxorious ‘Australian husband’; married women, who generally prefer the educational practices and gender equality in Australia to those in Japan; and single mothers, for whom Australia provides comparative liberation. But Sugimoto draws attention to the change in Australia since 1996. As a result of Hanson, the Tampa affair and Australia’s support of the attack on Iraq, he says Japanese no longer see Australia as a successful multicultural society. Questions are asked about whether Australians are now a militaristic people, more so than Japanese.

Even though she agrees that Australian affairs are not widely reported in East Asian capitals, Tessa Morris-Suzuki observes in Chapter 6 that refugee and asylum-seeker policy has been more intensively covered in Japan than the Hanson issue was. In spite of the fact that Japan, like most countries in the region, seeks to exclude refugees, Japanese have in the past admired Australia’s success in accepting them, and the reformist press has used Australia’s example to press for change in Japan. The Tampa episode was at first reported blandly and briefly, but then the Government’s ‘Pacific Solution’ and the efforts of Melbourne lawyers to oppose it were widely discussed in the Japanese media. This brought about another change: the Asahi Shimbun wrote that tolerant Australia, which took in many more Indo-Chinese refugees than Japan, had been transformed, and that attitudes were hardening in Australia and elsewhere. Australia, as a counter-model for Japan, is now seen by several commentators to be losing the esteem it once had.

The research that led to these papers and this book proves, if it was in any doubt, that perceptions are powerful in the way societies respond to each other. Long-established images may be in
need of change, but when they change, it may not always be for the betterment of Australia’s reputation. Australia has opportunities to be admired and even influential in China and Japan; because of recent changes in Australian behaviour we appear to be squandering them. Behaviour is one side of our image problem; projection is the other. In Chapter 10, David Carter argues the case for more and better Australian cultural diplomacy in China and Japan and, in particular, for the gaps in Australian studies abroad to be filled. A country that does not appear to care whether its history is well known or its culture admired risks diminishing such influence as it has in China and Japan. Plenty of other small and medium-sized countries are competing to have their voices heard there, and if Australian studies are not invigorated and promoted as part of a coordinated image-improvement strategy, Australia’s small voice will easily be shouted down.

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Footnote