My experience of Asia has been shaped largely by the experience of studying Chinese and working as a diplomat in China. There I was struck by the importance of mutual perceptions between China and Australia, and China and the West.

The Chinese devote much effort to understanding the Western — or, most commonly, the American — mind and how it works in business. But I was also impressed with the widespread reverence among Chinese for antiquity and continuity, something they see Australia as lacking.

For decades, scholars in Asian studies in Australia have been working to get other Australians to appreciate the necessity of improving our knowledge of our neighbours’ languages and cultures: indeed, there have been 16 or 17 reports on Asian studies in Australia since the 1960s.

In East Asian societies, perceptions of Australia have their roots in the distant past, in folklore and tradition. For many in those countries, their first contact with Australians was with missionaries, who typically saw Asia as an ‘ocean of souls’ to be ‘fished’.
Australia was widely associated with white Western colonialism and, as a result of promotion of the White Australia Policy, its defining characteristic in the region for more than a century became whiteness itself. The long-term impact of that period remains with us.

Australia is commonly perceived in East Asian countries as having a derivative culture: a mixture of British and American. To the extent that we are seen as taking the Asian region seriously, it is often assumed that we do so for two reasons: because Australia fears the rising power of Asia and because Asian countries offer Australians opportunities to make money.

Even before the negative developments of recent years in Australia’s relations with Asian countries, there was an underlying cynicism about Australia’s motives for increasing its engagement with the region. Now, that feeling has been compounded by the perception that Australia is abandoning those efforts, and reforms that began with the abolition of the White Australia Policy in the late 1960s appear to have been wound back.

The latest perception problems began with the rise of ‘Hansonism’ and the Howard Government’s partial embrace of One Nation’s policies. The evidence of the damage that episode did to perceptions of Australia in the minds of East Asian people is quite conclusive.

Then came the Howard Doctrine Mark I, which asserted a role for Australia in East Asia as the ‘deputy sheriff’ to the United States. Although this had a short life among issues of public concern in Australia, it has been run and re-run at conferences and in the editorial pages of newspapers in East Asia for the past three years.

As well, we now have Howard Doctrine Mark II, by which, in the name of regional military pre-emption, the Government reserves the right to launch a strike against a sovereign state in the region if it judges it necessary in pursuit of its anti-terrorism objectives.

Whatever merit pre-emption may have as an internal operations policy, as an external policy of any government it
has none. It has created a powerful, negative impression of Australia in the region, and has confirmed in the minds of many in East Asian countries that Australia is reverting to becoming anti-Asian.

This is significant because perceptions shape behaviour, and the perceptions of Australia among the politicians and business people in East Asian countries condition their dealings with us. Thus the way we prosecute our interests is endangered, but so too is our self-image as Australians.

The growth of an Asia-literate Australia has been appreciated in the region — and if we continue to learn Asian languages and study Asian cultures that appreciation will grow.

Australians should, however, develop an appropriate form of national modesty, which enables us in our dealings with people in East Asian societies to avoid being over the top or grossly humble. Only by doing so can we hope to undo the damage that has recently been done to perceptions of Australia in the region.