

Editorial:

Asians in Australian History

This issue of *Queensland Review* makes no argument about Queensland in particular. If an implicit argument about Queensland might be imposed on the papers presented here, it is that historically, the polyethnic qualities of northern townships like Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island, present such strong similarities, and read so differently from the more profuse southern histories, that the differences of experience between geographic regions like north and south, or between pearling belt and metropolis, appear possibly more historically consistent than differences between states.

The north Australian experience was strongly influenced by the massive influx of Asian labour. This influx continued beyond Federation until World War II, largely because the pearling industry, one of the economic mainstays of the far north, was exempted from the provision of the White Australia policy. The legacy of this socio-economic past is the continued survival in the north of large hybrid communities which weave their genealogies into various regions of Asia, the Pacific, and into Indigenous Australia. The north of Australia was closely and intimately linked with Asia long before the south awoke to this neighbourhood in the wake of the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in the late 1970s.

Collectively, the contributions in this issue tell this story of longstanding Asian connections and their reverberations. They are histories of mixed communities with a profound impact on the ways in which Australian identities are constructed today.

These papers emanate from a workshop on 'Asians in Australian History' held in June 1999 under the auspices of the Centre for the Advanced Studies in Humanities at Griffith University. The workshop brought together, for the first time, scholars working on aspects of the Asian presence in Australian history, who are scattered across the disparate fields of linguistics, business, history, prehistory, English, Asian Studies, Australian Studies, and Indigenous Studies, as well as several researchers who do not conceive of themselves as academic scholars, but who engage in heritage, community and native title issues. The aim of the workshop was to affirm the strong role played by various groups of Asians in Australian history, a role which is too often cast as a marginal, curious and colourful appendage to the Australian experience.

Considering the profound impact of the White Australia Policy on national identity, and the way in which this policy was a response to the strong Asian presence, especially in the north, this image of marginality is hardly tenable. Much legislation directed towards Indigenous Australians in the north was also a response to the Asian presence, notably Queensland's *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* of 1897, which carried a concern over Chinese/Aboriginal contact in its title. The centuries-old contact of the northern coast, from Western

Australia across Arnhem Land and into the Gulf of Carpentaria, with the trepang fishers of Sulawesi, which long pre-dated British contact with this continent, contests the way in which the time-frame of Australian history takes the British presence as its cornerstones. The impact of these Macassan visits on Yolngu culture, and the ways in which such cultural contacts have been re-established over the last decade, was the topic of a keynote address delivered by Professor Emeritus John Mulvaney, who argued strongly for the prominent place which such Asian contacts ought to take in Australian historiography. Regrettably, only a small selection of the wonderful papers presented at the workshop can be reproduced here.

Among the Asians in Australia, those of Chinese descent always have been, and still are, the most numerous, and it is not incidental that papers gathered over the topic 'Asians in Australian History' should be skewed towards the Chinese in Australia, with three papers in this volume dedicated to histories of Australian/Chinese relations. The issue of Chinese in Australian History has galvanized considerable scholarly attention in the last decade. As one of the prime movers of this intellectual scene, **Henry Chan** contributes to this volume an insightful discussion of the various ways in which overseas Chinese have positioned their identities, drawing on his own experiences of hyphenated identities and the ways in which they might be theorized. He problematizes some of the key terms we use to reflect on such histories, and indeed, perhaps the term 'Asian' has outlived its historical usefulness. Historically 'Asiatics', 'Asiatic aliens', or 'Asians' were the subject of a common set of restrictive legislation, policy and rhetoric - sometimes together with Africans and Polynesians - , which tended to define their opportunities and experiences in Australia. But the degree to which such collective, and essentially Eurocentric terms have disappeared from formal political rhetoric might also call into question their utility for analytical purposes. The reference to 'Chinese', on the other hand, may have great modern validity but does not stand up well to historical interrogation. Chan argues that the historical interrogation of Chinese in Australia requires not excessive theorizing, but closer grained regional studies with attention to clan and district affiliations.

Michael Williams engages in just such a project. He examines the phenomenon of migration from the Zhongshan district to Sydney. Avoiding the collective term 'Chinese', he refers to these migrants as *huaqiao* (born in China and temporarily overseas as sojourners). Curiously, the dominant *huaqiao* experience which emerges from extant records was one of multiple journeys to China, so that it might be said that they were sojourning there rather than in Australia. He argues that the ethnic differences between Zhongshan Chinese in Sydney, and their regional affiliations, continued to inflect their business and social relationships. He has now moved to Hongkong to continue this research.

Such fine-tuned research is to be greatly welcomed, moving from generalisations over tenuous collective identities to in-depth regional analysis. Certainly studies of other Asian migration into colonial Australia support the idea that chain migration is a fundamental defining characteristic. For example the various families of Sri Lankan jewellers dotted around the north Australian pearling centres radiated from a few small villages around Galle in the southern province of Ceylon.¹ Julia Martínez makes the same observation about the Darwin Malays, and in the case of the Japanese pearling recruits, discussed by Yuriko Nagata in this volume, their origins

from a string of villages on the coast of Wakayama and Ehime has been well documented.²

Personal connections also played a prominent part for the colonial traders. This is aptly illustrated by **Marion Diamond** who emphasises how important personal and family connections were for the colonial trading companies who were quick to take advantage of new colonial outposts to establish peripheral linkages in the colonial trading network. This is a refreshing departure from the centre-periphery orientation which tends to dominate colonial histories. The expanding colonial empires offered opportunities between colonial outposts, along these peripheries, for trade as well as migration, and in both cases personal connections were essential.

Three of the papers deal with the poly-ethnic communities which emerged in the northern pearling centres of Broome, Darwin and Thursday Island. All three make an argument about the great degree of acceptance of Asians in these communities. The most convincing demonstration of this sentiment must be the way in which a small Japanese community was able to re-establish itself at Thursday Island after World War II. Tracing the fates of these families in detail, **Yuriko Nagata** demonstrates that despite strong anti-Japanese feelings elsewhere after the war, a number of Japanese at Thursday Island found ready acceptance and career opportunities, including an election as deputy mayor.

It might be well to remember that the postwar re-establishment of cohesive Asian communities was hampered by the disappearance of poly-ethnic spaces such as Darwin's Chinatown and Police Paddocks (the home of Filipino, Malay and other 'coloured' residents) and the Japanese quarters of Thursday Island and Broome. Eyewitness reports from all these places concur that poly-ethnic pre-war townships had been 'razed to the ground' during the time when the towns were under military command and the civilian population had been evacuated. Malaytown and Chinatown in Cairns also disappeared during the war, and in all these cases the former Chinese and Japanese areas became prime real estate in the central business district. This concerted wartime transformation might be read as another indicator of the difference in attitudes towards poly-ethnicity between the business and residential communities of these northern townships and the agendas of policy-makers and observers further south.

Julia Martínez addresses this phenomenon of contrasting agendas with reference to the the Malay community in Darwin, where a resident population with strong family links into the local community was overlaid with a more transient population of indentured workers. Martínez observes that although people from a wide geographical region were subsumed under the term 'Malay', the Darwin Malay community came predominantly from Sabu, a small island between Roti and Timor. Sporting activities here served as a way of drawing various groups of sojourners into the local scene. Rasping against this picture of community acceptance, however, was the fact that many Malays formed families with Indigenous Australians, giving rise to the phenomenon of 'coloured' communities, which caused much consternation among officials.

Sarah Yu takes up this discussion of official concern in Broome, showing how much vigilance was exerted in an effort to keep Asians apart from Indigenous Australians. Interestingly, though not entirely surprisingly, her case study of an Aboriginal/Malay family in Broome, torn apart by policy, leads to the same small

island identified by Martínez as the origin of most Darwin Malays. Her informants tell the story of Asian/Aboriginal contact from the Indigenous point of view — stories of subterfuge and avoidance of the police and welfare authorities with a distinctive Broome flavour. Far from the moral condemnation that burdens official sources, these oral testimonials of the interactions between the Asian men and Indigenous people in Broome are more suggestive of the dynamics of youth culture. Sarah Yu's view from Broome conveys a sense of affirmation of hybridity, of Broome creole, of shared history — to the point where it finds literary expression in the suggestion that all of Broome could be related!

This view is reminiscent of an analysis by Beverley Ormerod of multiracialism in the Caribbean, where a unifying Creole language asserts the diversity which has been inherited from the colonial past, and has displaced the complex hierarchy of named skin colours. Although an emphasis on 'negritude' has been important to weaken the hold of colonial culture, 'creoleness' appears to have far greater local relevance.³

Perhaps the ideas expressed in this volume about shifting and multiple identities are pointing into the future in Australia, even for Indigenous identity politics. From the South African idea of the 'rainbow nation' to the notion of multiculturalism in Canada and Australia, we see a contestation of fixed and incompatible positions such as black and white, and an assertion of inclusive, liminal positions. Several of the papers here take issue with the implied polarities of generalizing terms like 'Asian', 'Chinese', 'Malay' and assert the value of more fine-grained, regional and local readings. And while Asian descendants in Australia are problematizing the implied essentialism of the ways in which they are discursively positioned, many Asian/Aboriginal descendants are reconnecting with their severed links by embracing Islam, by retracing their silenced histories, and by initiating contact. It is perhaps ironic that these shifts are taking place with hardly any reference to the poststructuralist theories that explain them so thoroughly. But they are certainly (post)modern trends, and they are certainly powered by their (post)colonial histories.

Notes

- 1 W.S. Weerasooria, *Links Between Sri Lanka and Australia*, Colombo, 1988.
- 2 David Sissons 'The Japanese in the Australian Pearling Industry' *Queensland Heritage*, 3(10), 1979:18–19; Regina Ganter "Australia Seemed Closer than Tokyo" in *How Others See Us - Outside Images of Australia*, Don Grant and Adam Seal (eds), Perth, Black Swan Pr. 1994, pp. 330–337.
- 3 Beverley Ormerod "The Martinician concept of "creoleness": a multiracial redefinition of culture" *Mots Pluriels* No. 7, 1998.

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