



Asia Education Foundation

ASIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION NATIONAL SUMMIT

LEADING ASIA LITERACY

March 23, 2010

Novotel Brighton Beach Hotel, Sydney

## **The Australian Story and the Development of Australian Curriculum for Geography**

*This paper was prepared and presented by Nick Hutchinson, Lecturer, Macquarie University, at the AEF National Summit Leading Asia Literacy on 23 March 2010 in Sydney.*

*This work is copyright. It may be produced in whole or in part for study or training purposes subject to the inclusion of an acknowledgement of the source and no commercial usage or sale.*

I have been asked, as a Geography teacher and educator, to talk about the 'Australian story', and to do so in the context of the forthcoming Australian Curriculum: Geography. In particular, I refer to two documents approved by Geography teachers, academics and community Geographers. They are *Towards a National Geography Curriculum for Australia, Background Report*, June, 2009 and a shorter report *Towards a National Geography Curriculum for Australia*, also published in June 2009. Both reports can be accessed from the Towards a National Geography Curriculum for Australia Project [www.ngc.org.au](http://www.ngc.org.au)

I start by outlining some of the Asia-Pacific connections from the documents, what they say about engaging young Australians with Asia and which places should be selected for study. The documents include two sections that refer to student voices: one about the 2004 Asian tsunami, others from Asian students about the environment. My aim is to see Australian-Asian connections through a geographer's eyes, to refer to geography's major concepts such as place, space and environment and other subordinate concepts such as region, boundary, graphicacy, ecotone and entrepôt. I want to demonstrate how geography has changed from the 'capes and bays' model that some members of the auditorium may recollect but also to remind us that some of continuities of this model are still valid. Geography intersects the physical sciences, social sciences and humanities; there has been a distinct cultural turn in contemporary human geography. Two concepts, allow me to examine the Australian story: our proximity to Asia and consequent changes to our Australian cultural identity. Several traditional topics, typical ways of engaging young Australians with Asia in geography classrooms are listed. I conclude with a number of questions about the forthcoming Geography curriculum and Australia's engagement with Asia.

### **Asia-Pacific Connections**

A number of respondents to the documents from the state forums, via online contributions, and, through printed submissions emphasised Asia-Pacific connections. The Steering Committee for the reports concluded that,

*Geography is well-placed to help deliver the Australian Government's emphasis on engaging young Australians with Asia. With Australia being part of the Asia-Pacific region, existing and future geography curricula ensure that places in Asia are selected as topics or case studies, reinforced by the need to study Asian countries because of their importance in world affairs. Geography's ability to nurture intercultural understanding also contributes to giving students the skills to engage with Asia.'*

When referring to 'Selecting places to study' the Steering Committee advised, *In studying whatever content is selected, students should apply their growing knowledge and skills to an understanding of a variety of places. These should include a student's own place, and other places around the world with which the student's own place is connected through environmental processes, population movements, trade and investment, tourism, cultural influences and political relationships, or which illustrate particular aspects of geography. This means that the places selected will vary from school to school, and can be chosen by teachers, subject to some guidelines. They should also include a balanced selection of examples from Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere around the world, for the aim of the syllabus is to teach students about the world, and not just Australia.*

### **Student voices**

The reports contemplated the value of learning geography. Consider the experience of Tilly Smith, aged 11. She lived in the Home Counties of England but was holidaying in Phuket, Thailand in 2004. Remembering her geography lesson in a Surrey Primary School two weeks earlier she persuaded her parents, seven-year-old sister and other tourists to flee their beach and hotel. When the tsunami struck, no-one was killed on that beach.

The reports also considered other student voices. The authors referred to studies examining Korean and Pakistani student's views about environmental issues that found that:

- about 60 percent of Korean students thought environmental problems would increase in the future in their local area, whilst only 14 percent thought the condition of the environment would improve
- 61 percent of Pakistani students were optimistic that environmental problems would decrease in future whilst 18 percent felt that the condition of the environment would become worse
- Korean students are concerned about a worsening environment and fear the extinction of the human species by natural disasters. They are less optimistic for the global future than they are for the future of their local community.
- Pakistani students expressed their greatest concern about war and violence in the global context, however, the majority of students thought there would be fewer environmental problems in the future.

### **Geographic concepts**

A number of geographic concepts are alluded to in these extracts from the reports. Region is a highly contested geographic concept, one that has been revived by reassertion of space into contemporary critical social theory and through the work of economic geographers on the roles of globalisation on regions.

Intercultural understanding is identified in the reports, *'One of the aims of a geographical education is to develop geographical imagination and geographical empathy—the ability to imagine other places and to understand why people in other places think and act the way they do.'*

Place and environment are central geographic concepts, or big ideas. The Steering Committee maintains, *'Geography is the study of places - their biophysical and human characteristics, their interconnections and interdependencies, and their variation across space'*. One

submission to the Background Report explained many of the ways that geographers use the term environment, '*The characteristics of places that geographers study include both their biophysical environment - climate, landforms, soils, vegetation, water resources, minerals and scenic quality - and their populations, built environment, economy, communities and culture*'. The Korean and Pakistani students were using the term environment in a different, more popular context. 'Environment' like 'Geography' are polysemic constructions that vary greatly between schools and the academy, and, in popular perception.

### **Environmental considerations**

An examination of environmental considerations illustrates the notion of 'geography as an intersection of the physical sciences, social sciences and humanities'. Geographers are trained to understand much of the chemistry of the brown haze over the Asian region. A pungent, persistent cloud that significantly reduces the amount of solar radiation reaching the earth's surface to the extent that the intensity of the wet monsoon is significantly less in northern India where the pollution layer is thickest—and more intense in southern India where the haze is less strong. Further, environmental impacts of the brown cloud include human respiratory disease, lower life expectancy, higher birth defects, decreased water quality, acid rain and fog, reduced agricultural outputs and psychological damage.

I counted more than two dozen books on my bookshelf about climate change and look forward to adding one more, Ian McEwan's new satirical novel *Solar*, which also focuses on climate change. One of the earliest of the books on my shelf, written in 1974, was about the threat of a new ice age. I note that schools in three US states – Louisiana, Texas and South Dakota have been told to teach alternatives to the scientific consensus on global warming. I wonder how their geography teachers will be able to accomplish this?

There is much evidence to sift through. In 1997 at a Climate Institute Symposium the Maldives Foreign Minister explained that the archipelago's average height is about one metre above sea level. In successive IPCC reports increasingly dire projections have been made about rising sea levels. In Australia, our snow country is threatened.

The projected loss of the Australian snow country has implications for both the natural environment and cultural activities and values - alpine biodiversity lost, hydrological resources endangered as well as the loss of Australian landscapes associated with bush mythologies of the Snowy River, Aboriginal bogong feasts and tourists' playgrounds. The effects of climate change may well play out in similarly through Australia and Asia.

### **Capital 'G' Geography versus Geographical Imagination**

Of the four 'Aces' that add force to Geography, graphicacy is the most singular. The other three: literacy, numeracy and oracy are common to many school disciplines. Geography builds the skills of graphicacy through work with visual images such as maps, remotely-sensed images, photographs, sketches and diagrams. Graphicacy is a way of seeing. On a visit to Sapa in the mountains on north western Vietnam my contemplation of Hmong villagers was immediately informed by a mental map of Hmong settlements stretching from the Golden Triangle of northeast Burma, northern Thailand, and north-western Laos through northern Vietnam to southern China.

Capital 'G' Geography is elegantly expressed by North American geographer Bill Bunge, *'Every educated person should carry about in his [or her] mind's eye an instantaneously available globe ... On it, the mind's eye should see at least the continental outlines, major political divisions, vegetation and climatic belts ... the world's outstanding cities and their economic flows, and ultimately the people, themselves, and the quality of their life... With such a mental map, a person can read a newspaper, see a play or make a trip and each dateline, or place name, or view ... can be referred back to the mental map, thus constantly enriching and changing the map.'*

### **True Blue in the Orient**

The geographical imagination is somewhat more complex. Propinquity and cultural identity are two powerful ideas to contemplate the Australian Story.

In 1988, Prime Minister Bob Hawke maintained, '*The assertion that Australia's future lies in Asia has become a common place of Australian political and commercial dialogue. But we are still learning to come to grips with the practical implications – the challenges and opportunities – of that assertion.*' The AEF would go further to assert that the practical implications of engagement with Asia will help us to self identify as Australians. In 1994, Prime Minister Paul Keating declared that '*no country is more important to Australia than Indonesia*'. Keating's Australia, moreover, distanced itself from the British crown and searched for regional distinctiveness. It was predicated on Kokoda rather than Gallipoli dreaming. Former Prime Minister Howard still cannot quite live down the 'deputy sheriff to the American eagle' accusation from modern-day Indonesian political commentators. Prime Minister Rudd's vision of Australia becoming the "*most Asia-literate country in the collective West*" speaks to both propinquity and cultural identity.

### **New geographies**

How does the geographical imagination shed some light on these considerations? It should be said at the onset that capital 'G' geography of Australia and Asia has largely been substituted by 'geographies'; and, the geographical tradition replaced by 'geographical imaginations'.

Australia and India nestled very closely together 140 million years ago in the Jurassic Period when both dinosaurs and mammal-like reptiles roamed the Earth. Just as India eventually squeezed up oceanic sediments into the Himalayan Mountains, as the sub-continent moved north to collide with the Asian mainland, so to Australia will be adjacent to China in 50 to 60 million years time, drifting inexorably northwards at about the same rate as our fingernails grow.

Geographers are suspicious of clear-cut boundaries. On close examination Wallace's zoogeographic line is not so much a boundary that runs through Lombok Strait between Bali (in the west) and Lombok (in the east), between Borneo (in the west) and Sulawesi (in the east), but rather the site of an ecotone where Australian species gradually diminish as you approach Asia, and vice versa. This did not stop Emma Roberts, writing in *Oriental Herald*, in 1839, seeing this boundary as marking the '*lands beyond European touch.*' Clearly the forces of British imperialism did not recognise the impacts of the Dutch, the Spanish and the Portuguese beyond our northern shores.

### **The Australian Moat**

In the 1950s The Timor and Arafura seas were seen by some Australian geographers as 'The Australian Moat', an isolating and protective feature that separated Australia from Asia just as surely as the English Channel/La Manche cut off Britain from France, and the Sea of Japan/East Sea disconnect the two north-eastern Asian powers, Japan and South Korea. In reality, our northern seas interlace Australia together with Asian climes. Moisture laden air flows in a regular monsoonal pattern from Southeast Asia and Indonesia to form the 'Wet' over northern Australia.

As the austral summer approaches Southern Bluefin tuna spawn in the Indian Ocean just south of Java. Larval fish drift southwards in warm surface currents down Australia's west coast to make successive long journeys, many to find their way into the nets of South Australian fishers off Port Lincoln.

For centuries fishers from Southeast Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara, called variously Bajo, Sea Gypsies or Sea Nomads have collected trepang, shark fin, turtle shell, trochus shell and reef fish in the current 200 nautical mile Australian Fishing Zone off northern Australia. Some still have fishing and gathering rights under a Memorandum of Understanding signed with Indonesia in 1974 but the situation has been complicated by a series of waves of illegal fishing activity involving a number of more opportunistic groups of people from the region who generally do not demonstrate a history of fishing activity in the Timor and Arafura seas.

### **Escaping to China**

There is an authoritative argument that trade involving trepang and other resources could have resulted in mutually beneficial trading between the colony in Port Jackson and China in the early days of settlement - trade that was prevented by the English East India Company. Since 1600 the Company had enjoyed under a Royal Charter proclaiming the exclusive right of trade and navigation to all countries lying between the Cape of Good Hope and the Straits of Magellan. Three commodities were identified as potentially precious merchandise and Port Jackson was to operate as an entrepôt. Seals abounded on southern shores, trepang were found locally in tropical and sub tropical seas and sandalwood was available from Fiji. All three commodities were in strong demand in China but the East India Company closely guarded its monopoly. The early colonists were cut off from their natural market. These arguments are made in a wonderful article in the Australian Geographer, published in 1932, titled Austral-Asia. The author explained that, *Seen from Europe [in the first half on the 19thc] New Holland appeared almost as an Asiatic region, a part of the Indies, a land, as Lord Auckland described it, "on the borders of the East."* There is little wonder that when convict prisoners in Van Diemen's Land shed their chains and took to bush they tried to escape to coterminous China.

The 'Australian Moat' was also all but invisible to French eyes in the late 18thc. In 1789, Pierre Lemontey, a French lawyer, wrote somewhat presciently about Australia's Asian geography,

*'The position of New Holland will one day make it the meeting place of the world. China will deposit its superfluous population there ... The isolated Japanese will come to mix themselves there with the great human family. Europeans and Malays, Americans and Asians will encounter one another there without astonishment. The vast country, cultivated by European hands, will naturalise European plants and European flocks there, and from thence they will be transported to all parts of the Southern hemisphere.'*

Would that Lemontey had foreseen the two factors that have blighted this vision – the destruction of Aboriginal society and damage to the Australian biophysical environment. As geographer R.L. Heathcote explained, *'The atonement was to be not only for spilt blood but for a lost relationship with the earth.'*

### **A Big Subject**

The US Geography Education Standards Project acknowledged that *Geography is a "big" subject; how do you decide what is most important and most enduring?* The Project went on to explain what it would choose to include in a study of geography with Earth as the home of people.

*First, in order to look at the world geographically, students need to integrate an understanding of subject matter with skills and perspectives. Take a simple example, someone looking at a newspaper map of tropical rain forest destruction in the Amazon Basin. To understand this map, you have to know something about cartography, how maps are put together; you have to understand spatial context (the Amazon as a river in the equatorial*

*region of South America) and spatial scale (it is a huge area); you have to know about ecosystems and people and migration and economic development. You have to think about the spatial picture—world trade in hardwoods—and ecological perspectives—possible impacts on global climate. In reading this map, knowledge, skills, and perspectives are inseparable; that is true for all of geography.* (Geography Education Standards Project, 1994)

Now this is a perfectly valid and useful perception of geography but it is aimed at North American students. For Australian students, the newspaper map of tropical rain forest destruction would/should be centred on Indonesian or South East Asian forest destruction. In Thailand, where 53% was covered by forest in 1961 less than 25% exists today and no more than 10% is in natural or near natural condition.

North American Geography students see Asia as somewhere beyond Pearl Harbour or across the Bering Strait; European geography students see Asia from astride the Ural Mountains or from a steel pylon suspension bridge across the Bosphorus. Perceptions of Asia can be confusing. Paradoxically, for Australians, President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan has just been made chair of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe!

### **Meeting in space**

A contemporary reading of the geographical concept, 'space' sees space as a 'meeting place' where interrelations interweave and intersect. Thus space and places in Australia are intertwined with Asian ones. They are made and remade, flourish and perish in concert with the incessant flows of people, goods, services and ideas across space.

Australia has been referred to as a new nation in an old continent with some 98% of its citizens having arrived from elsewhere either in their own lifetime or within the last six or eight generations. A former Vietnamese 'boatperson', the current Lieutenant Governor of South Australia, Mr. Hieu Van Le, talked of a monochromatic Australia where cultural and linguistic diversity were disavowed to one that has blossomed into the celebration of diversity we call multiculturalism.

In response to the onslaughts of more conservative voices about this conception geographers have examined the geographies of 'racism' in Australia. In metropolitan Sydney, for example, the researchers found that racism was regionally specific reflecting the mix of cultural groups, recent migration histories, disparate levels of education, exposure to housing shortages and varying access to employment. In other words, geography matters. Responses from residents of Auburn were consistently intolerant; people from Ashfield consistently tolerant. Leichhardt's residents were generally tolerant in regards to Asian-Australians but most intolerant of Islamic Australians; those in Campbelltown expressed diametrically opposite attitudes to those citizens in Leichhardt.

Over the last twenty years, Australian out-going and incoming migration engagement with the rest of the world has been approximately double that of migration engagement to and from Asia. The composition of incoming Asian migrants has changed. Most immigrants in 1990 were Vietnamese, likely to have been family reunion settlers, and Hong Kong Chinese who settled in Australia prior to the handover to mainland China in 1997. More recently, it is China and India whose share together makes up approximately 50 per cent of migration to and from Asia. Australia's ability to absorb immigrants rises and falls in line with the Australian economic cycle but migration engagement with Asia must also respond to other realities. As Professor Michael Wesley said, at the opening of the Australian Government's 2020 Forum, *'For the past 220 years Australia has lived in a world dominated by societies that spoke our language, shared our sense of right and wrong, and had similar institutions and outlooks. ... That world is passing. The English-speaking powers and their close allies must now negotiate with Asia's giants to manage the big issues. The rules governing how we act and what we can achieve in the world will be less familiar to us.'*

### **Other big issues**

The kinds of big issues that are often examined in Australian geography classrooms examining Australia's engagement in Asia include trade, strategic considerations, population, megacities, food security, humanitarian assistance, refugees and environmental issues, including sustainability.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century Geography**

- What should the Australian Curriculum: Geography include in examining Australia's engagement in Asia as part of the Australian Story?
- How can we articulate a geographical imagination in terms of the tension between a European cultural past, superimposed on Indigenous cultures, all located in the Asian region?
- What are the major issues that will stimulate geography students' interest in the context of Australia's engagement in Asia?
- How can a study of such ideas cement bonds of understanding and interdependence?
- Can a study of Asian geography promote an appreciation of global patterns and processes and cultural universals that are necessary for mutual understanding and global citizenship?
- How can the Geography curriculum inspire students to become global citizens by exploring their own place in the Asia-Pacific region, their responsibilities to other people, to the environment and to the sustainability of the planet?
- How can the Geography curriculum reflect the Asian cultural heritage of an ever increasing number of Australians?
- How can the Geography curriculum assist students understand contemporary Asian societies, cultures, environments and beliefs, and current connections between the cultures and peoples of Asia and other parts of the world, including Australia?
- How can the Geography curriculum assist students understand how increasing cultural diversity through Asian immigration, tourism, investment and trade has influenced Australian society and culture?