



Asia Education Foundation

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## Reorienting Oz Lit and the English Curriculum

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Let's start with a quiz – what do these people have in common?

Brian Castro, Sean Tan, William Yang, Tony Ayres & Jimmy Chi

They are well-known contemporary Australian writers and filmmakers of Asian descent.

**Brian Castro** is the author of nine novels and winner of a number of state and national prizes including the Australian/Vogel literary award, The Age Fiction Prize, the National Book Council Prize for Fiction, four Victorian Premier's awards, two NSW Premier's awards and the Queensland Premier's Award for Fiction.

**Shaun Tan** is an illustrator and author of award winning children's books such as *The Arrival* and *Tales from Outer Suburbia*. **William Yang** is a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Chinese Australian performer and photographer of international standing. **Tony Ayres** is the award-winning director of films such as *The Home Song Stories* and *Walking on Water*. **Jimmy Chi** is an Aboriginal with Chinese-Japanese-Scottish heritage. He is musician and writer including *Bran Nue Dae* that recently adapted to the screen.

Other non-Asian counterparts who engage with Asia in a lot of their work include Linda Jaivin, Alex Miller, Christopher Koch, Nick Jose, Inez Baranay, and Nöelle Janaczewska among others.

These names are well known in literary and arts circles but they rarely feature in the school curriculum, and yet their works play an important role in the development of our national literature. Rather, when Asia does feature in the English curriculum it tends to be refracted through Euro-American literatures. The 2009

report by Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) commissioned by the AEF into Year 12 subjects found that:

there is very little evidence that students are ... receiving [Asian] exposure through English courses. Where texts with content or focus on Asia are listed,... they are often older 'established' texts (eg. Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* or Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*). (3)

I find this rather disturbing – not only because students are getting this experience of Asia through non-Australian imaginaries but because these texts project ideologically loaded images of Asia. In the case of Buck, of *China of the 1930s* (the popularity of the book is said to have helped Americans view Chinese favourably as allies against the Japanese in the Pacific War) and in the case of Greene, the *French War in Vietnam* in the 1950s. Greene's representation of the Vietnamese, and Vietnamese women in particular, is rather problematic, even though it presents an interesting critique of war and masculinity through the figure of the British protagonist and his competition with a young American. It may be fine to have such representations of Asia *if* they sit alongside other literary representation of and by Asia but current research suggests that there is very little of other kinds of literary representations to augment such dated Euro-American dominance.

This begs the question as to why after nearly 20 years of discussion about Asia literacy, is our education system so timorous in engaging with Asian cultures and literatures through Australian and Asian-Australian experiences and literary sensibilities?

I suspect part of the timidity is our lack of understanding of how the development of our own national literature is imbricated in perceptions of and relations with Asia. This is one of my key points: strengthening our own understanding of Australian literature goes hand in hand with understanding our relationship with Asia and Asian literatures. Australia and Asia are not mutually exclusive categories.

Well before Europeans settled in Australia, there was already a tradition of oral and performance exchanges between the indigenous inhabitants of Northern Australia and the Indonesian islands. The strong trading links between the Yolgnu peoples and the Macassans had a significant impact on both cultures. The contact between the 2 communities are remembered today through oral history, songs and dances, and rock and bark paintings, as well as the cultural legacy of transformations that resulted from the contact.

In colonial times, Asia occupied a much more problematic role in literary representations (see Walker). Asia was often demonised as the hungry horde waiting to invade White Australia in popular literature and spurred a whole genre of “invasion literature” from 1880s onwards portraying dystopic images of Asian-controlled Australia. Examples include *The Coloured Conquest* by Rata (T.R. Roydhouse) and Kenneth Mackay’s *The Yellow Wave*.

The denigration of cross racial breeding and the emergence of so-called Eurasian and indigenous-Asian “half castes” were portrayed in these texts as anathema to the purity and vigour of the newly federated Australian nation. The nationalist playwright Louis Esson wrote a series about the “Asiatic menace” and of the need for severe immigration laws in the popular magazine, *The Lone Hand* after a trip to Japan in 1908.

And yet, even while there was this fear of invasion, there was also a consistent fascination with Asia. I find it in the works of Henry Lawson for instance. In his 1905 poem “The Tracks that lie by India” Lawson represents Asia as the site of fascination and freedom for the visitor:

The tracks that lie by India to China and Japan,  
The tracks where all the rovers go – the tracks that call a Man!  
I’m wearied of the formal lands of parsons and of priests,  
Of dollars and of ‘fashions,’ and I’m drifting towards the East;  
I’m tired of cant and cackle, and of sordid jobbery –  
The misty ways of Asia are calling unto me.  
(from *Windchimes* 2006: 22-3)

This fascination with Asia turns to something more complex in “To be Amused” (1906) when he contemplates Asians occupying Australia.

I see the brown and yellow rule  
The southern lands and southern waves  
White children in the heathen school,  
And black and white together slaves,  
I see the colour-line so drawn  
(I see it plain and speak I must),  
That our brown masters of the dawn  
Might, aye, have fair girls for their lusts!

Shore guns and ammunition first,  
Build forts and warlike factories,  
Sink bores and tanks where drought is worst,  
Give over time to industries.  
The outpost of the white man's race,  
Where next his flag shall be unfurled,  
Make clean the place! Make strong the place!  
Call white men in from all the world!  
(from *Windchimes* 2006: 26)

Lawson's writings demonstrate the ambivalent workings of Orientalism: Asia is projected as the site of both desire and disavowal. This tension between fascination and fear continues to be played out, differently, in contemporary Australian literature and film; see for example Sue Brookes' 2007 film *Japanese Story* where Toni Collette's character has an affair with a Japanese tourist who dies tragically in middle of Australia.

The great canons of Asian literature/s have been a source of inspiration for many of our significant poets including Kenneth Slessor, Judith Wright and Robert Gray (see *Windchimes*). Japanese and Chinese poetry read in translation was a major source of creativity for Gray and he worked with Japanese translators to produce his own poetic versions. Gray was deeply interested in Zen philosophy and was particularly taken with the haiku form and wrote several series of poems experimenting with the form but with a distinctly Australian sensibility and image in the 1980s (Broinowski 145). In drama, John Romeril has had a long engagement with Japanese culture (since the 1960s) and Japanese cultural references and aesthetic forms have been present in works such as *Love Suicides* (1997) which references the classical dramatic genre of the double suicide pioneered by the so-called Shakespeare of Japan, Chikatmatsu Monzaemon in the 18<sup>th</sup>C. Chikamatsu developed the genre for the then new artform of bunraku puppetry, a form that Romeril also adopts and adapts in his Japanese-Australian love story. (See Gilbert & Lo)

Australian writers have not only been inspired by the great Asian art forms, they have also contributed to the development of Asian literary canons, particularly in the area of translation. In 2001, the ANU Professor of Japanese Studies, Royall Tyler, translated the entire *Tale of Genji*. Written in the eleventh century, this portrait of courtly life in medieval Japan is widely celebrated as the world's first novel, made all the more significant in that it's attributed to the Japanese noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu. Tyler's translation is only the third translation of the entire *Tale* into English.

Max Lane is another Australian who has played a major role in translating Indonesia literature, and specifically the works by Pramoedya Ananta Toer and W.S. Rendra into English for an international readership. He has translated five novels and one non-fiction book by Pramoedya, including the landmark *Buru* Tetralogy novels. His translations of Rendra include *The Struggle of the Naga Tribe*. Likewise, Harry Aveling has received honours for his translations of major Malay and Indonesian and more recently Vietnamese, texts for the English-speaking world. Through his efforts, the English language readership has come to discover the talents of Shahnnon Ahmad and Dorothea Rosa Herliany.

Australia has also contributed to the development of modern Singaporean drama through the works of the late playwright, and director, Kuo Pao Kun. Kuo is acknowledged by Singaporeans and the international theatre sector as the pioneer of postcolonial Singapore theatre. Kuo finished his matriculation in the late 1950s in Australia and went on to work as a translator/announcer with Radio Australia. In 1963, he took up an intensive, two-year drama programme with the National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) in Sydney, while working in technical theatre at the Old Tote. Kuo asserts that NIDA gave him a “strong, solid grounding” in many aspects of contemporary Western theatre and introduced him to Western classical theatre, and he continued his professional as well as personal links with Australia right up to his untimely death in 2002.

The presence of Australian writers (in English) of Asian descent began to be felt in the 60s, pioneered by writers such as Mena Abdullah whose collection of short stories *Time of the Peacock* (1955) gave Australian readers a completely different image of rural Australia through the eyes of migrant Afghani children growing up in the bush. Writers such as the Yasmine Gooneratne, and Ee Tiang Hong followed in Abdullah’s wake in the 60s and 70s, followed writers such as Brian Castro in the 80s; Beth Yahp, Hsu Ming Teo and Simone Lazaroo in the 90s, and Tom Cho and Nam Le and filmmaker Khoa Doa, more recently.

One of the most common responses to the question as to why teachers do not teach Asian literature is that it is too different, hence the resort to North American and European canonical works that are more familiar and familial. I hope this brief genealogy offers a sense of the lines of kinship between Australian and Asian literatures – our relations are closer than usually understood.

### **Asia literacy and Interculturalism**

Much has already been said at this summit about Asia literacy. It’s not a new concept of course. Alfred Deakin wrote 2 books about India before becoming a Member of Parliament. He believed that anyone wanting to understand the modern world must understand the struggle for power between East and west,

and that knowledge of India played a critical role in this engagement. In *Temple and Tomb in India* (1893) he predicted that Australia and India would show a growing convergence of interests, arguing that the two countries were allied already “politically and intellectually as well as geographically”. Deakin felt that Australia should also be well-informed about other nearby ‘Asiatic empires’ whose future would be bound up with our own (Walker 20-1).

This kind of geo-political rationale for engagement with Asia was given an added economic imperative by Keating’s enmeshment with Asia campaign in the early to mid 90s when the economic tigers and dragons in Asia were seen as the lifeline for an economically depressed Australia. Asia literacy was largely understood as ways of understanding (Asian) cultural differences to facilitate better ways for Australian to operating in and with Asia. Despite critiques of the economic motivations of the enmeshment campaign to position Australia in Asia, this was a period of significant cultural reorientation. This was the time when there was significant investment in education and the arts with the emergence of events such as the Asia-Pacific Triennial exhibition in Brisbane and organisations like the Asia Education Foundation and Asialink.

Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard’s push for Asia literacy today echoes much of the rhetoric of past leaders, and from my perspective, it is a welcome echo and shift in focus in education. I have some reservations however about the ways in which engagement with Asia remains largely couched within a discourse of maximising geo-economic opportunities. The concept of Asia literacy is understood as a process of intercultural cultural engagement whereby “we” get to know “them” better. In this calculus, better communication leads to better political strategising and stronger trade figures. Asia and Australia, us and them, remain mutually exclusive categories despite the well-intended aims of bring us together.

I have reservations about the effectiveness of this imperative for promoting long-term sustainable intercultural understanding within a pedagogical framework. Asia literacy and intercultural understanding calls for a shift away from an emphasis on knowledge outcomes and on a perception of knowledge as impersonal and disembodied, towards something that students of English and literature know very well: that knowledge is experiential, embodied and personalised. The wonderful thing about literature as a subject matter is that we can work towards Asia literacy in these affective ways.

“Word Gifts for an Australian Critic” by the Filipina-Australian poet Merlinda Bobis

I bring you words freshly  
prised loose from my wishbone.

*mahal, oyayi, halakhak, lungkot, alaala*

mate those lips,  
then heave a wave in the throat  
and lull the tip of the tongue  
at the roof of the mouth.

*mahal, mahal, mahal.*

'love, love, love' – let me,  
in my tongue.

then i'll sing you a slumber tale.

*oyaiiyaiiyaiiyayiiii* – once,

mother pushed the hammock

away – *oyaiiyaiiyaiiyayiiii*,

the birthstrings severed from her wrist

when i married

an australian.

so now I can laugh with you

*halakhak!* How strange

your kookaburras roost in my windpipe

when I say, 'laughter!'

as if feathering a new word,

*halakhak-k-k-k-kookaburra!*

but if suddenly you pucker

the lips – lung –

as if you were about to break

into tears or song – watch out,

the splinter cuts too far too much – *lunggggggg* –

unless withdrawn – *kot* –

in time, *lungkot*.

such is our word for sadness.

ah! For relief, release, wonder or peace  
in any tongue, 'ah!'  
of the many timbres;  
this is how remembering begins – ah! –  
and is repeated – lah!-ah!-lah!  
*alaala*. This is our word for memory.

how it forks  
like a wishbone

*mahal, oyayi, halakhak, lungkot, alaala*

how they flow  
east-west-east-west-east  
in one bone wishing  
it won't break.  
(Bobis 9-10)

In this poem, Asia and Australia are not positioned as either us/them or inside/outside but rather part of the movement of to-ing and fro-ing, like the hammock swinging. Asia and Australia are part of the one body, part of the one wishbone that holds 2 parts in tension. The wishbone holds up the body, makes the body whole. The poem suggests a different kind of Asia literacy – one where intercultural engagement necessitates a dialogue where both parties are subjects (rather than subject and object), and where the dialogue affects and changes both interlocutors. Listen to how halakhak feathers into kookaburra in the mouth; see how the Tagalog word visually transforms itself into something more familiar. Intercultural engagement here becomes a process of intersubjective relations – intercultural understanding happens not with one or other subject but rather the dynamic between. It is experienced in the to-ing and fro-ing, the action and reaction and action again, between subjects that lead to a process of mutual transformation and reorientation.

When I consider the three strands identified in the English curriculum -- language literature and Literacy – it's not difficult to see how they apply to the poem for a middle to upper level classroom. There is wonderful lyricism in the poem, the play of languages and the ways in which the taste and shape of the



words – English and Tagalog – morph in the mouth as rich material for study of language. For the literature strand, we could perhaps talk about Bobis' choice of the imagery of the wishbone and the juxtapositioning of the Filipino and Australian references. For literacy, we might perhaps look at the oral elements of the poem and the kinds of emotive language employed.

My point here is that you can use Asian or Asian-Australian texts to teach core English aims and objectives.

### **Reorienting English: possibilities and challenges**

I want to now close by briefly considering what reorienting the English curriculum entails. Teachers, like their tertiary counterparts, are already stretched by an increasingly demanding workplace. Some teachers say that while they have teaching resources in the school or have access to them e.g. through libraries and internet, they don't know what to do with the material. Some say they would love to do more with Asia but don't have the time or support (especially financial support) for professional development. In all these responses, the underlying assumption is that Asian literature is not core but surplus, additions to enrich but not essential to a core English curriculum.

How are we going to make the connection between the aspirations of our leaders for an Asia literate curriculum and evidence based educational outcomes? There is a danger that the emphasis on the functional nuts and bolts aspects of language and literacy will overshadow the desire to incorporate more Asian literature in the English curriculum.

How can we reorientate the perception that incorporating Asian literature is not about doing more on top of core texts, but rather doing it more cleverly, more strategically? Just as Bobis rejects the choice of us or them/Asia or Australia but chooses both, exposing students to the literary canon does not automatically mean Shakespeare, Yeats and Graham Greene but also Pramoedya Ananta Toer and Brian Castro. How can we get this message across the education sector? How can we support teachers to make strategic decisions about what to drop off and how to incorporate Asia into the English curriculum to better reflect the best in world literature.

Julia Gillard told the 2008 AEF National Forum that "It is impossible to conceive of a future Australian education system that does not take the study of Asia seriously". As education professionals, our challenge is to build a sustainable environment where teachers are empowered to delivery Asia literacy seriously. Does the draft of the English curriculum help us to this end? How can we do better?

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