
Asians through Australian Eyes :

A Review of *The Yellow Lady : Australian Impressions of Asia** by Alison Broinowski

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Australia has a long history of trying to establish its identity, or, more particularly, of trying to define itself as part of Europe despite its geographical location. It has been over 200 years since the British colonized Australia. Since that time, Australians (except native Aborigines) have speculated their identity, some times as part of the British empire and at other times as more independent. In either case, it has almost always been in terms of a white, Western nation despite its physical location being not in the West but in the East and the obvious presence of other skin colours. Asia was seen as much more of a “yellow peril” than a neighbour for Australia.

Because of this tendency, Australian images of Asia have usually been unfavourable : “Asiatic” has meant incomprehensible, subordinate, hostile, chaotic, dangerous and so on. Australian images of its neighbours were formed mainly through lack of knowledge, indifference, and phobia. On the other hand, for some people, those images were formed through a different kind of ignorance : imaginative yearning, curiosity, or fantasy about the unknown. The images formed through the former are easily observed in the slogans, posters and articles in such representative magazines as the *Bulletin* during the period of the two world wars and the policy of White Australia. The latter is seen in the works of some artists and literati who used Asia as the source of their creative imagination.

Alison Broinowski's *The Yellow Lady* is, according to the author herself, “a study of impressions of Asia in Australia, and of how they have been formed, reflected, and changed throughout Australia's history by the arts.” This is an extensive, “almost encyclopaedic” volume in which she traces the works of as many novelists, journalists, poets, playwrights, cartoonists, film directors, painters, potters, architects, illustrators, and other artists and their works as she could.

Broinowski was a diplomat for many years and spent a total of 15 years in Japan, Burma, Iran, the Philippines, South Korea, Jordan, and the U. S. A. Through her career and as an author of 3 other books on Southeast Asia, she has devoted herself to a decade of research.

The book does not “claim to be a critique of Australian foreign policy or of

Australia's relations with Asian countries, nor is it an analysis of immigration policy, multiculturalism, or cultural exchange", however, readers are made aware of the interaction between arts and politics. The chapters of the book are arranged according to major historical and political events such as those world wars, White Australia policy, changes in immigration laws and today's multicultural policy.

Through the author's discussion of a vast number of artists, their works and backgrounds, certain characteristics become clear. One such characteristic is that in the field of visual arts, few negative elements are obvious unless they are in the form of political posters, cartoons or films. Painters, potters, and architects who have shown an Asian influence in their works have usually done so in a favourable way, regardless of whether their knowledge of Asia was good or poor. On the other hand, many films, literature and reports, although not showing excessive hostility towards Asia, did reveal a confrontation of attitudes. In such cases, the image of Australia used very often was that of white women surrounded by vicious and dangerous Asians: "fragile flowers of Australian womanhood" for which the savages were "maddened with lust." Despite its self-image of being a manly country, Australian writers seemed to like to use such romantic expressions, and this may, in a way, be a curious indication of Australia's uncertainty and fear of its Asian neighbours.

Another image of Asia was often that of a seductive woman to young, innocent Australia. "The Yellow Lady", the title that Broinowski used for the book, is the name for both Norman Lindsay's etching and Hugh McCrae's poem. Lindsay and McCrae took up the sensuous figure of Asian womanhood in imaginary fantasies of the Orient, the "fallacious Far East" where anything could happen. However, their attitude to the real contemporary Asia was a rather hostile one. Broinowski points out that this double standard view has been the mainstream in Australian images of Asia, and that might be why she herself used it as the title of book. It shows the Australian paradox of mentally leaning on historical English background and at the same time being bound by its geographical location. Broinowski points out that this dilemma often appears as the theme in verbal artists.

Broinowski's chapters show that the images naturally reflect such historical events as World War I and II. It is obvious that cartoons, posters, slogans and articles which appeared in major journals and magazines caused Australians to have an antipathy towards Asians even though they might not directly be fighting each other. However, on the other hand, the author also tells us that during these periods there were poets who were "more serious", and so "less hostile" in their portrayal of Asia. As an example, W. Kent Hughes, who wrote an epic published as *Slaves of the Samurai*, provides "accounts of Japanese atrocities with warnings that Australians must learn tolerance of Asians." It is remarkable that, despite it being the war time when people often had extreme stereotypes, Kent Hughes observed the situation in a composed and

fair manner even though he had to record it on 20 pages of tissue paper while being a POW in Changi, Singapore.

Broinowski seems to put an emphasis on Vietnam War as a turning point in Australian attitudes towards not only Asia but also former allies like the United States. Until then, the United Kingdom and subsequently the United States were Australia's mentors, both of whom Australia followed with little questioning. During World War II Australians were closely united to their allied countries and defended their own country with them, under the fear of the real threat of Japanese invasion. During the Vietnam War, however, they fought only to invade another country for another country's advantage, and during the process lost many lives. It was at this point that many people started to have doubts, discontentment and antipathy, which in turn was reflected in the works of many artists and literati.

After World War II vast number of immigrants from Southern and then Eastern Europe came to Australia. After the Vietnam War this was followed by the boat people from Indo-China. These immigrants started to change Australian society, from its coveted identity as an Anglo-Celtic nation to that of a multiracial one. With the change in identity came a change in its images of Asia.

Although British-oriented at the beginning, Australia has always been aware of its physical position through various experiences : the gold rush and the arrival of Chinese diggers, or wars that they fought sometimes for uncertain reasons and on faraway continents. In its present multicultural society, the policy of White Australia has faded away and a new consciousness of its position in Asia, both mentally and practically, has come to be recognised.

There are some interesting contemporary comments in the last chapter, made by both the author and by others. For example Broinowski's feministic speculation is that some women writers "who themselves knew what it meant to be the 'Other'", and seeing themselves as one of the oppressed minorities, generally held less hostile images of Asia than men. Asian Australian novelist Brian Castro regards himself as a "perpetual exile" and feels uneasy about being called any nationality. This suggests the images of Australia itself are also being changed by its own people.

Image, just like art, is a product of the time and people in which it occurs. The formed image in turn reinforces the current trend or opinion by allowing people to become aware of the view of their contemporaries. The author says :

What this study taught me is how powerful images are and, once received, how resistant to change. Asian images of Australia may equally inflexible.

and

(artists generally agreed that) Australia is not Asia but Asia and the Pacific are part of Australia's hemisphere and culture, an interesting and growing part. It is

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clear from their work that images of Asia reflect and affect Australians' images of themselves.

Australian images of Asia, both good and bad, have provided a source of imagination, stimulation and suggestion to Australian artists and literati, very different from that available to other Europeans. This in itself has been important in forming Australia's culture. Culture is affected by location and situation. This book is remarkable in that the author has shown how true this is in the case of Australia, and at the same time has provided "psychological reorientation" not only to Australian cultural scene specifically, but also generally towards the next century. It now seems important for the Asian side to know how Australia has looked at them, and thereby not to make the intercultural communication one-sided. This is essential if they really hope to establish mutually beneficial relationships in the Pacific region.

The book contains a rich glossary, an index, notes, and a list of references and sources. Each chapter has its own summary at the beginning. *The Yellow Lady* will be of important use for students and researchers who are interested in Asian or Australian culture, cross-cultural affairs, history, art, and literature.

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