Introduction

Thinking about Asia, *thinking* about Australia

MANY OF THE READERS OF THIS revised second edition, and also the original book, will have travelled or lived in East and Southeast Asia, perhaps as backpackers, students studying a foreign language or tourists enjoying a few weeks in an exotic location. When arriving in an Asian country, the initial feeling often is one of being overwhelmed by new sensations and ideas as the familiar gives way to the unfamiliar. Sights, sounds, smells and tastes are usually different, and often very different, from those with which we are familiar. Things are organised in different and sometimes seemingly bizarre ways. Our expectations of how things should be are frequently proved faulty, and this can be a disorienting experience. For some, one brush with the unfamiliar will be sufficient. Others, and we number the readers of this book among them, will find the initial confusing contact with Asia a challenge. They will want to move beyond first impressions to discover what lies beneath the surface. The tourist's passing interest in the quaint and exotic gives way to a desire to understand how peoples from other cultures live and think, to discover the ways in which their societies are different from and the same as our own.

This is a commendable goal, particularly so for Australians. But how does one achieve it? The answer we give, which also is the central theme of this book, is to *think* about Asia. *Thinking* about Asia implies an understanding of Asia cannot be achieved except by a meaningful engagement with the social sciences and history. If we are to gain more than a fleeting picture postcard vision of Asia, we must have some understanding of the concepts and ways of thinking that only the social sciences and history can provide. We must have some familiarity with the debates between social scientists and historians, both about the theoretical concerns of their own disciplines and how their disciplines are to be applied to the study of Asia. Gaining an understanding of the social sciences and history is no easy matter. It is, however, essential. These disciplines provide the theoretical frameworks and conceptual tools that allow us to organise data about Asia in meaningful ways. To make sense of Asia, we need to be able to make judgments about which information is useful, and which is irrelevant. We need to be able to organise the information we select into categories, and to interpret and evaluate this information in a systematic way. Only the social sciences and history can assist us in these tasks. Merely observing Asia in a random

and untutored way will not do, for the result is almost certain to be a chaotic jumble of disconnected information and superficial impressions.

Thinking about Asia therefore necessitates an intellectual engagement with the social sciences and history, as well as the scholarly literature on Asia. One of the most clearly identifiable characteristics of the latter is its lack of agreement. Whichever aspect of Asian history and societies one chooses to study, one inevitably discovers disagreement between the scholars who have written on it. This disagreement, while no doubt frustrating for students wanting a quick and uncomplicated answer, is a positive manifestation of the core characteristic of the social sciences and history, which is informed debate. Scholars of Asia inform themselves by relying on the theoretical categories and concepts of the social sciences and history in order to make sense of Asia. The categories and concepts they choose and the way they apply these to the study of Asia inevitably strongly influence their conclusions. Scholars have to make theoretical choices, about what to study and how to study it, and this influences the way in which they *think* about Asia. We too must make choices as we *think* about Asia. *Thinking* about Asia is not primarily about assembling a mass of 'facts' about Asia and committing these to memory. The challenge rather is to gain some appreciation of the concepts and ways of thinking of the social sciences and history, for these provide the mental equipment that allows us to move beyond the tourist's image of Asia and to organise impressions and sensations gained from contact with Asia into a coherent pattern.

It follows logically from what we have just said that there is not just one way of *thinking* about Asia. Scholars *think* about Asia in different ways; they consider different things important and they come to different conclusions. The approach to *thinking* about Asia we offer here involves a thematic approach. In this book are twelve themes we consider important to an understanding of Asia. Our choice of themes was guided by a number of considerations. First, it is important, when striving to achieve a broadly based understanding of Asia, to draw on the insights and accumulated wisdom of as many of the disciplines of the social sciences and history as one can manage. The following chapters therefore draw on sociology, anthropology, political science, history, economics and international relations. The concepts and debates of these disciplines have provided the framework from which we have approached each theme. For example, Chapter 2 analyses the family and family change in East and Southeast Asia. The analysis is set in the context of two important debates in sociology and history. One is about the distinction between traditional and modern societies; the other, the way in which modernisation has influenced the structure and function of the family. We have used these debates to frame our observations on the nature of the family in a selection of East and Southeast Asian societies, and to raise questions about the future direction of family change in the region. Chapter 11 meanwhile – a new addition covering the dynamics of China's rise and its possible impacts vis-à-vis China's relations with Japan and the US – provides differing international relations perspectives on what a major shift in the region's balance of power will mean for Australia's own relations with these three major powers.

Second, our choice of themes also was influenced by a sense of their particular importance to an Australian audience. These themes, in our view, cover the sorts of things that Australians should know about East and Southeast Asia if they are to gain a deeper understanding of Australia's neighbours. Moreover, they are themes that Australians need to know something about in order to better understand their *own* history and society. One of the most persuasive arguments for studying others is that we gain a clearer understanding of ourselves in the process. Like the original, in this revised edition we have tried to encourage this approach among our readers by making comparisons between Australia and East and Southeast Asia explicit. Many of the chapters provide a brief discussion of the particular theme as it occurs in or affects Australia. This invites readers to reflect on their own history and society as well as those of East and Southeast Asia and to consider similarities and differences and why they exist.

The final chapter quite explicitly challenges readers to reflect on the history of Australia's relations with East and Southeast Asia, and particularly the racist sentiment that has all too frequently underpinned Australia's view of the region and itself. *Thinking* about Asia can be an uncomfortable experience for many Australians, for it obliges us to recognise that our nation has been constructed on values that attract more shame than glory. It also obliges us to recognise that our national identity has been forged, in large measure, through a negative and exclusionary response to contact with Asia. Earlier generations of Australians perceived 'Asians' and their societies as alien, hostile and inferior, and therefore sought to exclude them. This exclusion radically reduced the possibility of an effective engagement with Asia, and served to diminish Australia and Australians in the sight of others. It also led to the development of an Australian culture that was simultaneously inward-looking and derivative of the cultures of Australia's 'great and powerful' friends, Britain and the United States. There can be no doubt that Australia is still struggling with the effects of this historical legacy, both in relation to the 'Asia' without and the 'Asia' within. The East and Southeast Asian region is of immense economic and strategic significance to Australia. We cannot escape the reality of our geography or our economic dependence on East and Southeast Asia, and must forge a better way of thinking about and relating to the region. Moreover, it is necessary for Australians to acknowledge that increasing numbers of Australians are of Asian origin. Our view of what it means to be 'Australian' must accommodate peoples of different cultures and backgrounds. We must accept that 'Asia' is now part of the social fabric of Australia (see Chapter 12).

This is a controversial theme, as are the others canvassed in this book. It is unlikely that readers will agree in every respect with our interpretations of these themes. Indeed, our purpose is to encourage reflection and critical thought that will lead to informed personal judgments; and if these differ from what we have presented here, that is all to the good. As we mentioned previously, the social sciences and history are not concerned with the recitation of an agreed body of 'facts', but rather with informed debate. The reader can enter this arena of dialogue and debate by adopting an analytical and critical approach to the themes explored in this book, and by taking a stance. Each theme

invites a personal response from the reader, and it is in this spirit that the chapters should be read.

Readers who wish to deepen their understanding of a particular theme will need to go beyond the confines of this book. This is an *introduction* to East and Southeast Asia, and its scope is therefore limited. We have attempted, in writing each of the chapters, to draw on as wide and representative a sample of the relevant literature as possible. Readers are encouraged to pursue a particular theme by reading the sources referred to in each of the chapters, and listed in the bibliography. These, in turn, will suggest further relevant sources. There is a vast and rapidly growing scholarly literature on East and Southeast Asia. It is so large, in fact, that it is quite beyond the capacity of any one person to read it all. While one should of course aim to read widely, the more important goal is to read selectively. This necessitates reading with a purpose, which involves finding sources that are relevant and reading them in a critical manner that develops one's ability to arrive at an informed conclusion.

A final word is required about the organisation of the subject matter covered in this book. Its focus is the East and Southeast Asian *region*. The book therefore adopts a regional approach, one that assumes that East and Southeast Asia can be the object of investigation and analysis (see Chapter 1). Consequently, the individual nations and societies of the region are not in themselves the book's primary focus. Rather, reference is made to them to illustrate themes at a regional level. However, the reader interested in a particular nation or society in East and Southeast Asia will find plenty of relevant sources in the bibliography.

Thinking about Asia is not easy. It requires a great deal of study and critical thought. This in itself is a considerable intellectual challenge. It also raises questions that many Australians find disturbing. Australia's contact with East and Southeast Asia over the last two centuries and more has not, for the most part, been particularly positive. The challenge here is to learn from this history and forge a new understanding of the region in which our country is situated, and through this to arrive at a new and better understanding of who we are, as a nation and a people. This, ultimately, is the reward for *thinking* about Asia.

1 The idea of 'Asia'

Australia's 'Near North' – East and Southeast Asia

DEFINING 'THE REGION'

BEFORE WE BEGIN to study something called 'Asia' we have to decide what it is we are studying. We have to decide what we include and what we exclude; we need to explain and justify our definition of 'Asia'. This is important because, conceived extensively, Asia can be defined as all of the land mass on the continent of Asia east of the Mediterranean Sea, plus the islands of Japan and Southeast Asia. Map 1 provides a visual representation of this very extensive idea of Asia. We would face a difficult task if we employed this definition of Asia, as we would have to cover the following regions:

- Asia (or the sub-continent of Asia – India, West and Southwest Asia (often called the Middle East – Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other countries)
- South Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka)
- Northern and Central Asia (Russia, the Central Asian states such as Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and so on)
- East Asia (China, Japan, North and South Korea. See Map 3.)
- Southeast Asia (mainland Southeast Asia – Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar [Burma], Malaysia; and island Southeast Asia – parts of Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, the Philippines, and East Timor. See Map 4.)

The reader can see at a glance that if we attempted to cover such a huge geographical area, we could only do it very superficially. Rather than attempting this, we will make a judgment about what we mean by the term 'Asia', one that will define our field of study and limit it to more manageable proportions. It is possible to make this sort of judgment as the concept of 'Asia' is not a fixed one, and its meaning and significance are not universally agreed. 'Asia' is a construction, invented and used by human beings to describe something they think exists in reality. For our own convenience, and for reasons relating to the Australian perspective adopted in this book, the construction of 'Asia' we will use will be limited to the region occupied by those countries in the last two dot points listed above, and visually represented in Maps 2, 3 and 4.

This region is described as East and Southeast Asia (see Map 2). The concept of a 'region' implies that there are certain characteristics, or themes, which are common to its societies. While such characteristics do not, as we will see, preclude important differences both between societies and within them, they do suggest shared historical experiences, and similar political and economic challenges and responses. They imply both the perception and reality of an increasing interdependence of the nations, societies and economies of East and Southeast Asia. Interdependence need not imply harmony. There are important tensions between and within the nations and societies of this region, some with the potential to lead to armed conflict. However, interdependence does suggest an increasing integration – in areas such as trade, investment, patterns of economic development, and political response to external threats – sufficient to provide a sense of regional coherence and identity to East and Southeast Asia. One example is ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which is now defining its role as a regional forum more broadly than its original economic purpose conceived. ASEAN's development points to increased regional political and economic integration.

Moreover, China, Japan and South Korea have become increasingly active in ASEAN forums. In 1999 the ASEAN+3 grouping was formally established, a co-operative arrangement with China, Japan and South Korea (ASEAN 2009), suggesting a growing tendency towards broader regional political integration between Southeast Asia and East Asia. Another example is greatly increased intra-regional trade (that is, between the national economies of the region). In 2008, intra-regional merchandise trade accounted for 51 percent of the region's total trade, up from 45 percent in 1998. China's share of intra-regional trade almost doubled in the decade since 1997, while the shares of Japan and ASEAN have declined (UN ESCAP 2009: 8; 2010: 159). Intra-regional investment has also grown rapidly, accounting for 50 per cent of the region's total foreign investment at the end of 2007. China has overtaken Japan as the largest regional source, with 67 per cent of its outward foreign direct investment (FDI) located in Asia (UN ESCAP 2009: 19–20). Indeed, the economies of East and Southeast Asia are becoming increasingly linked as demonstrated by the regional impact of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Economic collapse in South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia in 1997 had very serious repercussions elsewhere in the region. The slowdown and then recession of the Japanese economy during the 1990s had a similar flow-on effect in East and Southeast Asia.

Some political leaders in East and Southeast Asia have suggested their region possesses a shared cultural heritage based on 'Asian values', distinct from and frequently in opposition to 'Western values'. This is contentious, but it indicates that some people who live in East and Southeast Asia think that the region can be defined culturally, as well as politically and economically. There are, then, a number of reasons for defining East and Southeast Asia as a 'region', and we will be exploring these throughout this book. Such definition does not imply that this region has been or can be immune from external influences. East and Southeast Asia have been and are strongly influenced in numerous ways – historically, economically, politically, technologically, demographically, culturally – by forces outside the region. In the pre-colonial era, for example,

traders brought religious ideas – Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism – from West and South Asia, transforming the politics and cultures of East and Southeast Asia. European colonialism, which commenced in the sixteenth century, had the effect of introducing the European idea of the nation-state to East and Southeast Asia. This had an enormous impact.

Following decolonisation in the mid-twentieth century, the dominant type of political system to emerge in the region was the nation-state; the leaders of the newly independent nations were not interested in reviving the political systems of the pre-colonial era. Other important effects of colonialism were the incorporation of the region into the trading system of international capitalism, and the introduction of the Christian religion and modern secular ideologies, such as Marxism, nationalism and liberalism. From the late 1940s to the early 1990s, East and Southeast Asia were enmeshed in the Cold War, the hostility between the two superpowers, the communist Soviet Union and the capitalist United States of America. This hostility was a major external influence on the ideological and political stance of the nations of East and Southeast Asia, and several devastating wars were fought in the region that reflected the ideological and political differences of the superpowers. Finally, in the era following the Cold War, the process of globalisation has seen greatly increased and more rapid flows of capital, knowledge, people and values into and across this region, and this has constituted a challenge to the sovereignty of the nations and the strength of the cultures of East and Southeast Asia. More recent events, such as the 11 September 2001 (9/11) attacks on New York and Washington, DC, and the US-led so-called War on Terror, have posed new challenges to how we think about the role and significance of the state and the notion of national identity on which it traditionally has been based.

It is the influence of these broader international forces, such as colonialism, globalisation, and transnational actors and threats, which makes the concept of a 'region' problematic. In some respects East and Southeast Asia have been more subject to these influences than other regions. Nevertheless, the shared histories and common experiences of the societies of East and Southeast Asia, as well as their growing economic and political integration, justify the idea of a region as a framework for studying this part of the world. However, we must remain aware of the limits of the idea of a 'region'. We will do this by examining and evaluating the effect of international forces on East and Southeast Asia, and attempting to discover whether there has been a common regional response to these forces and whether the regional character of East and Southeast Asia has been strengthened or weakened by them.

AUSTRALIA'S 'NEAR NORTH' – EAST AND SOUTHEAST ASIA

Another important reason for defining East and Southeast Asia as a region is that this part of the world is of great economic, political and cultural significance to Australia. East and Southeast Asia is 'our' region. The health of Australia's economy relies very heavily on economic development in the region. There are considerable complementarities between the Australian economy and the developing economies of East and

Southeast Asia. Australia provides raw materials – minerals, energy and agricultural products – for their industrial development, and in return receives manufactured products, such as cars, communications and electronics products, and clothing from countries like Japan, Korea, and China. Australia's concerns in the region are also strategic. Like other nations, Australia is concerned about its defence and security, and to ensure these it strives to develop good relations with the nations of the region and to encourage harmony within the region as a whole. From the early 1970s, Australia has done this by attempting to establish good relations with individual states in East and Southeast Asia; by playing a role in regional forums; by facilitating peacekeeping processes in situations of conflict, like Cambodia; by cooperating with regional governments in the War on Terror; and by assisting after natural disasters such as the devastating 2008 and 2011 tsunamis in Southeast Asia and Japan. Through such political and humanitarian initiatives, Australia attempts to remove or reduce the possibility of a threat to its security from the region.

Australia's interests in the East and Southeast Asian region are not just economic and political. The region is also increasingly important to Australia in terms of Australia's own national identity. While many Australians still remain ambivalent about Australia's identity in the Asia–Pacific region – with some rejecting the idea of 'Australia as an Asian country' with considerable vehemence – Australia's perception of itself and its position in the world has been and is increasingly influenced by the geographical closeness and economic importance of East and Southeast Asia (Fitzgerald 1997). The weakening of Australia's traditional links with Britain has reinforced this tendency, as has the increased diversification of the ethnic composition of Australia's population. Australia is now a multicultural country, and amongst its many ethnic groups are included those of 'Asian' origin. In that sense, 'Asia' is not 'out there', separate from Australia; it is an increasingly important part of Australian society. Asia is evident in Australia in things as obvious as its many Asian restaurants – Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Indonesian – and there has been widespread acceptance of these various Asian cuisines amongst Australians. Even 30 years ago this was not the case, and this demonstrates at a simple level the changing nature of Australian society and the way in which Asia is involved in this process of change. Similarly, the countries of East and Southeast Asia have become popular destinations for Australians travelling abroad; the region is not just somewhere one flies over on the way to Europe, but an attraction in its own right.

Despite the increased economic and political importance of East and Southeast Asia to Australia, many Australians still feel considerable ambivalence towards the region. This reflects the continuing influence of Australia's historical legacy as a colony of Britain. Australia was colonised primarily by peoples of Anglo–Celtic origin. Consequently, Australia's major language is English, and Australia's political institutions and culture bear the stamp of their British ancestry, although these have been modified over time as they have adapted to Australian conditions. Only since World War II have peoples from other places – southern Europe and East and Southeast Asia – become significant to the growth and changing ethnic composition of Australia's population (although see Chapter 12 for discussion of Chinese immigration from the

mid-nineteenth century following the discovery of gold). The changing composition of Australia's population has not been without controversy, and racial hostility, which had earlier excluded these peoples from settling in Australia, has been rekindled amongst some Australians.

The ambivalence of Australians towards East and Southeast Asia reflects the ambivalent stance taken by Australia's political leaders who have, since the early 1970s, recognised the importance of East and Southeast Asia to Australia, both economically and strategically. They have pursued this perceived national interest, externally by cultivating good relations in the region, and internally by encouraging Australians, especially young Australians, to study Asian languages and societies. However, this positive recognition of the importance of East and Southeast Asia has often been coloured by negative perceptions, suspicion and misunderstandings. Threats to Australia's defence are, usually implicitly but sometimes explicitly, perceived as originating from East and Southeast Asia. This perception of threat was heightened in the wake of the East Timor tragedy of 1999 and the Bali bombing of 2002. Australia's stance on democracy and human rights, as muted as this has sometimes been, has also created tensions with the region. While Australia has sought and achieved closer defence ties with a number of East and Southeast Asian nations, its most important security alliance is with the US – a partnership that was reaffirmed by the Howard government's (1996–2007) strong support for US policy responses to the 9/11 attacks and also John Howard's close personal relationship with George W. Bush (then US president). Indeed, some political leaders within the region took Australia's unwavering support under Howard for US policy, including the Bush administration's policy on climate change, as confirmation that Australia was determined to remain a Western country, less than fully committed to its Asian neighbours. This opinion is shared by some sectors of the Australian population.

Despite this ambivalence in attitude and response to East and Southeast Asia on the part of Australia's political leaders and population, the brute fact remains that this region is close to Australia geographically and extremely important economically. Australia cannot afford to ignore it. But why, given Australia's geographical location in relation to the region, should we describe it as East and Southeast Asia? It is not east and southeast in relation to Australia, but north and northwest. The East and Southeast Asian region might be better described as Australia's 'Near North' (Warner 1957). East and Southeast Asia's geographical position was originally identified in terms of its geographical relationship to Europe, and particularly Britain. The Far East, as we shall see, was a focus of European interest because of the benefits that it could bring to Europe; the naming was Eurocentric. Despite this, there are good reasons for retaining the term 'East and Southeast Asia' for this region of the globe. In particular, the name has passed into everyday language, and the peoples and leaders of the region often use it to describe their own location on the globe in relation to other countries and regions. Nevertheless, it is important for Australians to recognise that this region is, geographically, Australia's 'Near North', and to reorient themselves spatially in relation to it. This need not imply an act of identification with the region, but the point of reference for the term 'East and Southeast Asia' is Europe, rather than

Australia, and the act of naming a region – the East, the Far East, Asia, the Orient – is not a neutral exercise, but one involving the exercise of power.

THE IDEA OF 'ASIA': ORIGINS, USES AND IMPLICATIONS

The idea of 'Asia' emerged in Europe, rather than in Asia itself. It was in many ways more of an attempt at defining and locating 'the West' than it was about attempting to say anything meaningful about the region and its peoples (Goody 1996: 1–10). Although the origin of the names, Europe and Asia, is not certain, it appears that they were first used to designate, from the perspective of the Aegean Sea (in the Mediterranean), where the sun rose (Asia) and where it set (Europe). According to Tessa Morris-Suzuki, 'Asia was originally a name by which Phoenicians distinguished the lands to their east (Acu – the land of the rising sun) from those to their west (Ereb – the land of the setting sun)' (1998: 5), By the fifth century BCE, Greek writers were distinguishing Europe from Asia in a way designed to differentiate from Europe the hazy and uncertain lands and peoples that were *not* European. It was therefore defined, in its first literary conception, negatively. Hecataeus (died c. 475 BCE) divided the world into two major regions: the first was Europe; the second was divided into Asia and Libya, these latter two divided by the Nile. Following what had become tradition, he divided Europe from Asia along a line linking the Dardanelles, the Black and Caspian Seas and the Caucasus Mountains. This dividing line between Europe and Asia was largely accepted by Ptolemy (CE 90–168), in whose geography Asia appeared as a large land mass to the east of Europe (James and Martin 1981: 19–38). This view persisted into the Middle Ages. The crude world maps of this era were 'oriented' towards Asia (the 'oriens' or the East), with the 'occidens' (the Occident, the West) being the direction of Europe (James and Martin 1981: 42–4). This appears to be the geographical origin of the term 'the Orient', which was later widely used to describe Asia. It was not until the sixteenth century that the modern notion of the clearly delineated continents of Europe and Asia began to make an impression on the European mind. The idea of Asia began to be widely accepted in most parts of 'Asia' itself only in the nineteenth century. The naming of Asia has, therefore, had an enduring impact. As Morris-Suzuki points out, 'Of all the European inventions which have transformed the modern global world view, one of the most successful must surely be Asia' (1998: 5).

'Asia' has not been just a name for a region of the globe. The early negative geographical identification of Asia by the Greeks (Asia equals not-Europe) has been reflected, according to some scholars, in the negative way in which Asia and Asians have been subsequently described and treated by Europeans. Naming and defining Asia were not innocent, value-neutral acts whose purpose was merely to identify a certain area of the globe. Rather, naming and then knowing 'Asia' was part of a very broad historical process of engagement between Europe and Asia, which had much more sinister implications and intentions: the domination of Asia by Europe.