

Original Introduction to Growing up Asian in Australia

Author's Note:

When I first wrote my introduction to Growing up Asian in Australia, I felt that the stories and their authors were so brave, so witty, funny, and generous with their experience, that it deserved a weighty introduction worthy of such a significant collection – an introduction that highlighted the historical reasons for the dearth of Asian-Australian literature that did not fit into conventional ‘migrant narrative’.

After the below introduction was completed and edited, I was told by a trusted adviser who had decades of experience in the book publishing industry, that this type of heavy introduction might not make people want to pick up the book at Borders. She was (as she usually is) absolutely right. Academics and students might be interested in the history of Asian-Australians, but we as a popular culture are perhaps not ready. And the thing I wanted to accomplish with this book – first and foremost – was to infiltrate our popular culture - our common culture, our everyday culture - with stories about how integral Asian-Australians are to our national identity. This meant getting the books into the mainstream bookstores.

Growing up Asian has been put on the VCE reading list for Victorian schools, and I recently spoke on a panel at the Melbourne Writer’s Festival session for senior school students, about identity and belonging. At the end of our session, a teacher stood up and comment over the microphone to me that ‘When my class heard they were studying Growing up Asian there was a clear groan throughout the classroom.’

This was in front of an audience of over three hundred students from many different schools. I was taken aback, and admittedly a little bit peeved off. Come on, please don’t ruin it for the other schools, I thought. This anthology has great sex in it, it has meaningful violence, drug references, comedians, comediennes, and cartoons. Wasn’t it better than studying the torments of Henry James?

Then I realised I had misunderstood this well-intentioned, wonderful teacher. Because then she asked through the microphone, “So where can I find that original, longer introduction to Growing up Asian in Australia that you mentioned?”

Here it is.

- Alice Pung, 2009

In 1770, Captain Cook stuck his flag up next to a pile of rocks, conveniently forgetting about the indigenous population, and claimed the land for the British Empire. This early act of property theft was depicted with much triumph in many of the illustrated history books I read in primary school. Usually, the Aboriginal population was drawn as a small and bewildered huddle, eclipsed by the shadow of the great ships. Similarly, history has not been too kind to our ethnic entrepreneurs and Polynesian coolies, who arrived in Australia less than a century after Cook.

History books tell us that Australia’s sense of national identity began in 1901 with Federation; that was also the year the *Restrictive Immigration Act* came into force, giving legal effect to the White Australia Policy. The joining up of all our states to form a Commonwealth was a cause for much rejoicing – but mainly for white, male

landowners, because that wealth was rarely common or shared with indigenous Australians or ethnic minorities. Slogans such as ‘Australia for the White Man’ (part of the *Bulletin* magazine’s masthead until 1961) reflected collective racist sentiment against the ‘Yellow Peril,’ the newly arrived Chinese who hoped to strike it lucky on the goldfields.

So what was it like for a yellow or brown person growing up in a country where ‘Advance Australia Fair’ was taken literally to mean ‘advance, pale-faced patriots,’ while those of a different colour should be effaced? In secondary school, the only representations I saw of our early Asian settlers – people with faces like my relatives – were in illustrations as pigtailed caricatured demons or hanging dead from trees in the goldfields; even though the early pre-mining-boom Chinese were known to be carpenters, merchants and free-settler farmers.

The Australian government provides a simple explanation of this skewed representation for curious new arrivals and inquisitive schoolchildren: ‘The colonists, like most people then, believed that there were differences between races, and that the Chinese were inferior, but they also did not want a society with deep divisions or where foreign outcasts worked for low wages and lowered the dignity of all labour.’¹ This is the reassuring explanation provided in the 2007 guide to the Australian Citizenship Test for the racial violence that erupted during the riots in Lambing Flats and other areas in the late 1850s and the 1860s.

Thankfully, the legal end of the White Australia Policy came about in 1973 under the Whitlam government. But what has it been like for the next generation, which has grown up under a policy of multiculturalism and committed the lines of our new national anthem, - written by a Scottish immigrant - to memory? I sang ‘Advance Australia Fair’ every Monday morning, standing outside on the asphalt during school assemblies as the Australian flag was raised. I know the lyrics by heart, even though back then I did not understand the irony of ‘we’ve golden soil and wealth for toil’. We tried hard to be good Australians.

The term ‘model minority’ was coined in the mid 1960s by the sociologist William Petersen to describe Asian-Americans who, despite marginalisation, had achieved success. On the face of it, the term is complimentary. But delving deeper, it is a label that often insidiously delineates the boundaries for minorities. It implies that external indicators of success – money, education, fame and material goods – define the value of a minority, and it requires that migrants display obedience to the ideals and expectations of the dominant culture. A ‘model minority’ should be seen but not heard, providing innocuous cultural enrichment to Anglo-Australian monoculturalism. Uyen Loewald’s poem, included in our anthology, mocks this with sardonic irony: ‘Be good, little migrants, prepare cheap exotic food, sew costumes, write music, and dance to our tune – Our culture must not be dull.’ The notion of a ‘model minority’ is a dangerous one. It ignores those on the periphery, and blames their failure not on the inequalities of our social structures and political systems, but

¹ Commonwealth of Australia, *Becoming an Australian Citizen* (2007), ‘Part 2: Our Land, Our Nation,’ p. 29.

on the individual; those who do not conform to the ‘model minority’ ideal are condemned for making the rest of the group look bad, and for adding fuel to arguments about assimilation.

Throughout Australian literary history, Asians have often been written about by outsiders, as outsiders. Our outside identity oscillates between being a grave threat to white nationhood and being the obedient racial group least likely to offend, depending on the political climate. In 1996, a fiery-headed maiden declared in parliament that we were in danger of being ‘swamped by Asians,’ who ‘have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.’² We were back to being the Peril again.

Many people continue to subscribe to a particular version of Australian history – one that spans only two centuries, and one that tries hard to cram everyone into a very rigid national narrative. Perhaps the reason Asian-Australians find it difficult to fit into this national narrative is that we rarely get to do the storytelling.

So in this anthology, Asian-Australians are the writers, and our writers span generations, races, states and continents. Whether growing up in the 1950s with ancestry from the goldrush days, or arriving more recently and attempting to find solidarity in schoolyard friendship, our authors show us what it is like to be inside an outsider.

Unlike many well-intentioned stories about refugees or cross-cultural conflict written by Anglo-Australians for the edification of young adults, these stories are the real deal. Their authors are not distant observers, plucking the most garish fruit from the lowest-hanging branches of an exotic cultural tree. These writers *are* the tree, and they write from its roots. Their stories are rich with heritage – South Asian, East Asian, South-East Asian and Eurasian – but they also reveal that there is more to a person than inherited cultural identity.

Asian-Australians did not sit around all day meditating on cultural identity when we were growing up. We did a host of other things largely ignored in mainstream Australian literature, perhaps because they did not fit the mould of the exotic. Perhaps they were not the predictable stories of food, festivals and traditional dress that appear in ‘celebrating diversity’ issues of glossy magazines. The food was there in all its steaming glory, but no one seemed interested, for instance, in the chatter of the children behind the counter of a country Chinese restaurant.

The poet Horace said *Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur*: ‘Change only the name and this story is also about you.’ I felt this way when reading many of these stories. Compiling this anthology also made me more aware of the difficulties faced by earlier generations of immigrants – parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Even with our mastery of ‘Strine,’ those born in Australia in the past four decades find it difficult to be Asian-Australian. Imagine what it must be like for Asian-Australians who didn’t and still don’t have the language. Usually, it is the second generation that accumulates enough cultural capital to be able to put their parents’ experiences into

² Pauline Hanson, ‘Maiden Speech to Federal Parliament’, 10 September 1996.

words. They also have their own stories to tell about mediating between two cultures. Stories such as Hoang Thao Nguyen's 'Water Buffalo,' Pauline Nguyen's 'The Courage of Soldiers' and Nam Le's 'Love, Honour, Compassion' explore the generational divide with compassion, while Mia Francis's ode to her adopted son and Blossom Beeby's acceptance of her adopted heritage move us with their unassuming love.

These stories also reveal that there is more than one voice within any given culture, from Tom Cho's brilliant satirical surrealism to Vanessa Woods' wonderful self-deprecating humour, from Paul Nguyen's aching account of adolescent loneliness to Chi Vu's bewildered young lovers, from Hoa Pham's painful personal journey towards acceptance to Francis Lee's arrival in the 'Upside Down Year' of 1961, and from Jenny Kee's jubilant adolescent sexual awakening to Quan Yeoman's insightful meditation on art and family. As Benjamin Law tentatively steps towards manhood with Mariah Carey's *Music Box* blaring in his ears, as Shalini Akhil works towards becoming Indian Wonder Woman, as Annette Shun-Wah helps run her family chicken farm, and as Hai Ha Le leaves Jehovah to become an actress – these stories show us what it is like behind the stereotypes.

I have arranged the anthology around loose themes selected with a certain irony, picking out traits that have been worthy of collective national pride – the Battler, the Pioneer, the Legend – to show that these meritorious characteristics are not confined to those with white faces and First-Fleet heritage.

Strine explores the difficulties of navigating a different language: Ivy Cheng receives careful Chinese lessons from her father, Sunil Badami tries to change his name, and Amy Choi reminisces about her late grandfather. **Pioneers** includes Ken Chau's personally political poems, their impact like a punch to the gut, while Simon Tong surmounts a loss of words through sheer will and quiet observation and Christopher Cyrill shows that a sense of home has to do with more than the physical landscape. **Battlers** features Hop Dac's charming carnivorous pigs, Kevin Lai's nostalgic supermarket through Matt Huynh's incredible artistry, and Lily Chan's deft observations of the characters who turn up in her family's country-town restaurant. **Mates** explores stories of school, from the warm humour of Oliver Phommavanh, Tanveer Ahmed and Aditi Gourvernel, to Ray Wing-Lun's poignant insights, gleaned from his struggles with institutional learning. **The Folks** includes Oanh Tran's charmingly stilted conversations with her parents, Rudi Somorn's affection for his Acha and Amma, and Simone Lazaroo and Bon-Wai Choi's sensitive reflections on the death of a parent. **The Clan** features stories as diverse as Diem Vo's 'Family Life,' with its gentle sense of security and place, Kenneth Chau's beautifully narrated account of feuding grandparents and Benjamin Law's hilarious yet heartbreaking look at parental separation. In **Legends**, Phillip Tang and his father find a connection through the death of screen icon Leslie Cheung, while Chin Shen's 'Papa Bear' paves the way for his progeny and Cindy Pan's father dreams of her winning every single category of Nobel prize. **The Hots** explores love and sexuality: we meet Xerxes Matsa's incredibly virile family, and Lian Low recounts coming to terms with her 'forbidden' obsessions.

UnAustralian deals with issues of identity and race, from Tony Ayres' unsettling encounter with homophobic racism to Leanne Hall's fear of serial Asian fetishists, from May Yen Chau's special menu of cultural secrets to Michelle Law's 'call to arms' and Joo-In Chew's unusual childhood with hippy parents.

I have also subverted the term **Tall Poppies**, a term often used disparagingly, but in this instance used to cast a new light on inspirational Asian-Australians: artists, film directors, writers, rock musicians, actors, lawyers, politicians, journalists, comedians, radio DJs, even the first Asian presenter on *Play School*. The diversity of our authors shows that Asian-Australians have flourished in almost every occupational field. Their stories are included here not because they are 'model minorities,' but because they express, with great depth and generosity, what it is like to persist in pursuing one's passion, to surmount racism and overcome adversity.

Leaving Home explores the painful journeys we make in order to reconcile our internal and external struggles, including Diana Nguyen's achingly funny instructions about 'how to disappoint your Vietnamese mother' and Emily Sun's lyrical tale of frustrated ambition and love. Finally, **Homecoming** is all about returning to a feeling of home, whether it is an actual physical journey like Kylie Kwong's return to her family's ancestral home in China, Jacqui Larkin's sweet tale of a return to childhood, or Sim Shen's reflections on having his first child and 'returning' to South-East Asia.

I hope that these loose themes will help bring to the forefront questions of identity, place and perspective. Because the stories deal so insightfully with the challenges of coming to terms with multiple identities, they move beyond crude labels such as 'bananas' and 'coconuts.' We are not fruit, we are people. These are not sociological essays, but deeply personal stories told with great literary skill. They show us not only what it is like to grow up Asian in Australia, but also what it means to be an Asian-Australian.