

REPRESENTING ASIA, REMAKING AOTEAROA: INTRODUCTION

JACOB EDMOND¹
University of Otago

A striking example of the changing face of contemporary culture in Aotearoa illustrates the poster for the symposium ‘Representing Asia, Remaking New Zealand in Contemporary New Zealand Culture’ from which this special issue derives.² The illustration comes from another poster, created by George Chang for an August 2005 performance and installation event in Auckland titled ‘INVASIAN: Remixing Cultures through Performance and Installation’ (Fig. 1). In some respects, the poster is not at all unusual, but plays on conventional representations of Asia in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It seems at first to evoke a 1950s or 1960s Chinese propaganda poster, suggested by the smiling workers, the towering products of modern technology, and the rays of golden sunlight on a red background. This dated depiction of communism in East Asia is, however, rather unsubtly doctored. Overlaying the warm Technicolour tones of the communist poster, three black and white insertions unsettle what otherwise might safely fall within common New Zealand conceptions about Asia. The collaged figures upset, or ‘remix’, the geographical location and political affiliations of the poster by strongly suggesting, on the one hand, Lenin in a commanding pose, and on the other, a Statue of Liberty that bears not liberty’s flame but white Western decadence and immorality in the form of an extremely leggy young woman. Most strikingly of all, the bold black and white ‘INVASIAN’ rushes towards the

¹ Jacob Edmond (jacob.edmond@otago.ac.nz) is senior lecturer in modern and contemporary poetry in the Department of English, University of Otago. His recent publications include *Russia*, spec. issue of *Landfall* (213 [2007]), co-edited with Gregory O’Brien, Evgeny Pavlov, and Ian Wedde; *Unreal City: A Chinese Poet in Auckland* (Auckland UP, 2006), by Yang Lian, co-edited and co-translated with Hilary Chung; and articles in *Poetics Today*, *The China Quarterly*, *Russian Literature*, and *Avant-garde Critical Studies*. He is currently working on a book on cross-cultural encounter in contemporary poetry.

² See the Asia-New Zealand Research Cluster website for more information about the symposium.

reader through its rapidly expanding font size, uniting and complicating the various stereotypical graphic elements on the poster, while suggesting their immediate New Zealand context. At one level, the 'INVASIAN' ironically registers the anti-Asian immigration rhetoric of various elements within New Zealand politics and media, transforming it into a positive marker of identity. Yet the poster marks more than the consolidation of an identity in response to adversity. Equally, it undermines the very binary of Asian and New Zealand and the concomitant assumed stable notions of identity and representation. The 'Remixing Cultures' of the poster's subtitle at once recognises the impossible vagueness of the term 'Asian', which encompasses well over half the world's population, and reclaims this mixing, clichéd images and all, as a positive marker of performative, unstable, and open identity, the cultural counterpart of the DJ's musical remix. The 'remixing' also highlights the mixed-up, albeit fixed, conceptions of cultural others that might, for instance, as the poster hints, lead to the confusion of Lenin with Mao and so raises questions about the politics of representation and identity while comparing current anti-Asian sentiments to the anti-communist rhetoric of the Cold War. Thus the poster suggests a complex engagement with representation and identity and a complicated relationship between multiculturalism and geopolitics.

The poster might seem only tangentially related to the specific historical, literary, and cultural concerns of the essays in this issue, yet the poster addresses in confrontational terms the same problems of representation and identity that the five essays here interrogate and call into question. After all, this special issue references that same vague term, 'Asia', and likewise questions its claim to represent anything while also acknowledging the powerful political and social pull the term and its various associations have on the New Zealand imagination. At the same time, Asia remains central to the disciplinary rubric under which this project was conceived, as a University of Otago Asia-New Zealand Research Cluster symposium, held in Dunedin on 2 June 2007, and now as a special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, the official journal of the New Zealand Asian Studies Society.

This special issue is thus firmly institutionally positioned within area studies, whose representations, like those of Asia that the poster displays, have a deep connection to the Cold War and its legacy of associations between disciplinary knowledge and geopolitical power projection. Two recent books by prominent literary theorists, Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* and Rey Chow's *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work*, suggest both the problems and importance of engaging area studies in addressing questions of cross-cultural encounter and comparative cultural studies in our current era of globalization in ways that I see the symposium and this special issue taking up in the New

Zealand context. Both Spivak and Chow acknowledge that area studies originated as a means to secure power in the Cold War and as a result still tends to treat 'language and literature', along with other forms of cultural production, as 'tools with which to hypostatize the targeted culture areas [. . .] and make them more legible, more accessible, and more available for "our" use' (Chow 15). In the post-Cold War world, area studies combines geopolitical concerns with an equal emphasis on market opportunities, transforming itself into the key to success in the global marketplace. Within New Zealand, as elsewhere, the contemporary version of this utilitarian attitude towards knowledge of other cultures and countries has become a commonplace of public discourse, so that, for example, the online introduction to an important recent report on the relationship between Asia and New Zealand first stresses that nations of the region have become 'centres of financial and political power' before going on to note some of the broader cultural and social ties ('Seriously Asia').

Both Chow and Spivak contrast comparative literary and cultural studies with the utilitarian knowledge that area studies has traditionally sought, but for this reason they also see the potential for a symbiotic relationship between the two. Literary and cultural studies complicates representation and knowledge production, but area studies offers the in-depth disciplinary knowledge and non-European perspective that might counteract both the Eurocentric understanding of culture still common in Western literary studies and the simplistic identity politics of elements of multiculturalism. Chow and Spivak thus suggest an alliance and transformation of the two disciplines to combat 'the demand for not clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average', which Spivak suggests 'destroys the force of literature as a cultural good' (71).

While the situation in New Zealand is different to Chow and Spivak's North American context in a number of respects, there are also many parallels. Official government programmes of national identity and multiculturalism, for example, seem to be built on a commodification of identity that parallels the production of stable utilitarian knowledge in area studies. Likewise, there is a definite divide between Asian and New Zealand studies at least within art, culture, and literature. Thus the combination of area studies and literary and cultural studies in Aotearoa offers similar possibilities and challenges to those sketched by Chow and Spivak. These possibilities are now beginning to be explored, perhaps first and foremost by cultural practitioners such as George Chang in his 'INVASIAN' poster but also within the academy, as this special issue attests. This issue expands on other scholarly initiatives that have so far crossed the boundary between area studies and literary and cultural studies, such as *Asia in the Making of New Zealand*, edited by Henry Johnson and Brian Moloughney, and the 2003 Chinese New Zealand seminar series at the Stout Centre at Victoria

University of Wellington and the subsequent collection *East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination*, edited by Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar, and Keren Smith. It does so not so much through the breadth of its concerns, amongst which China does indeed still loom large, but through its contribution to a critical rethinking of the very basis of such binaries as Asia and Aotearoa or China and New Zealand. What unites the five essays here is a commitment to resisting the demand for ‘immediate comprehensibility’, to complicating in different ways the simplistic models of knowledge, identity, and representation that this demand compels, and to insisting on what Spivak calls the ‘irreducible hybridity’ of all languages and cultures (9).

This special issue questions the terms ‘Asia’ and ‘New Zealand’ in order to unsettle the assumption of essential identities that is often inadvertently produced by, on the one hand, ‘Asia-in-the-New Zealand-imagination studies’ and, on the other, various studies of Asian diasporic communities. While both these approaches are important, I want to suggest a more dynamic understanding of the relationship between concepts of Asia and New Zealand that does not ‘lead to the assumption that the cultural traffic of the imagination only operates in one direction’, nor to the easy delineation of Asia from New Zealand (Hayot 5). A crucial element of this dynamic understanding involves reading representations of Asia not as outside New Zealand, but rather uncovering the diverse ways in which Asia is already and for a long time has been inside New Zealand cultural practices. This also means equally resisting an easy multiculturalism based on static, essentialised identities and instead addressing the complexities of and problems with the very notions of representation and identity. Thus reconceived, there are no simple essential identities that allow one to speak of ‘Asia in New Zealand’ as if it were a matter of what is ‘outside’ coming ‘inside’. The rethinking or remaking of representations of New Zealand and Asia in this issue instead recognises how the study of literature, along with other forms of cultural production, ‘even in a single national context, requires an attention to the transnational contexts and flows that shape and define the relationship between literature and nation’ (Hayot 4). Such ‘relational’ rather than ‘nominal’ thinking is becoming increasingly important to transnational literary studies (Friedman), and has been felt within New Zealand historiography (Moloughney; Ballantyne and Moloughney), but its possibilities within Aotearoa/New Zealand literary and cultural studies still remain to be fully explored.

These five essays make no claim to represent all the various possibilities for inquiry that a rethinking of identity and representation in relation to Asia and New Zealand requires, but they do point to various pathways. Diana Bridge’s opening essay describes the author’s own imaginative encounter with China and India as a ‘search for understanding and cultural knowledge’ that takes her ‘right across into the territory of the

other'. Bridge's description underscores Eric Hayot's argument, drawing on Naoki Sakai, that modernist literary practice is itself (wherever it arises) the product of a 'desire to know what we have supposedly known in our own language', arriving 'by way of our desire for the figure of a foreign language' (Hayot 2; Sakai 59).

It is this unsettling of place and language that continues through David Bell's exploration of the multiple imperial and ideological motivations for New Zealand collectors of *ukiyo-e*. Bell tracks these motivations not just between Japan and New Zealand but through colonial processes, English art schools, and Anglo-American modernism, unsettling, as he points out in his conclusion, 'deficit theories of cultural history in New Zealand'. Rather than viewing New Zealand in the nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries as a periphery of an English centre largely 'insulated [. . .] from international interests and exchanges', Bell instead suggestively describes a much more complex and multidirectional network of pathways between New Zealand and the wider world.

Henry Johnson, similarly, places New Zealand gamelan-inspired composition in the context of broader Western imaginations of Asian music but also notes that the gamelan in New Zealand is a particularly rich area for the study of multiple forms of appropriation, imagination, cultural representation, and identity formation, of 'culture in the making'. Simultaneously, he provides an introduction to the cultural politics of multiculturalism in contemporary New Zealand, explored in different ways in the final two essays.

Paola Voci develops the investigation of multiculturalism in New Zealand by showing the intersection of community formation, commerce, and government interests in the rise and fall of TCTV. While Voci reads the station's demise as the result of the 'failure of the Chinese community to define itself as a minority within both the old and still conflicted bicultural context and the newly introduced, but far from accepted, multicultural model', what marks her study is its refusal to accept the easy static models of identity promoted by the 'play-it-safe tone' of mainstream media and of officially sanctioned multiculturalism.

The relationship of multiculturalism to questions of identity and representation is called into question in a different way by the work of Tze Ming Mok, which I examine in the concluding essay in an effort to unsettle further some of the boundaries that still tend to force an inside/outside vision of 'Kiwis' and 'Asians' within New Zealand society. By turning, like Bridge, to modernist estrangement, now transposed to the digital age, Mok's 'borderline poetics' underscores what this issue as a whole seeks to show, namely, that 'representations of "New Zealand" and "Asian," and in particular the notion of "New Zealand culture" [. . .] are always the products of hybrid, cross-cultural, and transnational interchanges'.

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