

Graduate Research Essay

COMMODIFICATION OF ASIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN RADIO MEDIA DISCOURSE

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Introduction

Asian international students in New Zealand originate largely from middle class families in East and selected South East Asian nations (Pinches, 1999). For some, a New Zealand education is a gateway to the newly globalising economy (Green, 1999). For others, the promise of New Zealand residency provides an opportunity of a new life outside of their home countries (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). New Zealand tertiary institutions also provide opportunities for a tertiary degree that has proven unattainable in their home country (Mack, 2003). A quality English based tertiary degree is an important goal that has established a strong position for New Zealand public and private tertiary institutions. In the emerging global knowledge economy, New Zealand has become a provider throughout the Asia Pacific Region and beyond. (Ministry of Education, 2001).

Asian international students arrive in New Zealand and begin the (often lengthy) road to gaining a tertiary degree or diploma. As full fee paying students, many of them will pay from \$45,000 to \$60,000 in fees for a full time bachelors degree over three years (AUT, n.d.; University of Auckland, n.d.).² While steep, the full cost can only be calculated once the living expenses for the students are estimated and any additional courses in private language institutions or training academies is added. In fees alone,

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² These figures are based on the current fees in Auckland University of Technology (AUT) and the University of Auckland websites. Specialist courses for medical degrees and so forth would cost significantly more. These details are readily available from the university websites.

export education has returned from \$450,000 per annum in 2000 to a significant \$2.1m in 2004 (Education N.Z., 2005). Typically, many of these students study in New Zealand for over five years. Asian students made up 70 – 85% of the total international student numbers between 2000 and 2005 (Ministry of Education, 2004).³ Over this time many were subject to the attitudes of New Zealanders and utilised New Zealand public services. International students are represented in the media as a source of news and by the organisations that interact, promote and regulate them. In the media, this topic is framed and presented by important educational, economic and political discourses. This study examines the way in which these major forces have influenced the representation of international students to the New Zealand public in the radio newswires from 2000 to 2005. Choosing these years are important as it encapsulates the entire boom of the Asian international students from 2000 when it began to build momentum to the relative lull in 2005.

In the media, Asian international students are consistently viewed as a source of income which is further reinforced by the expectation that educational institutions are forced to source external funds. Communities in New Zealand are unable to make up the shortfall and the only remaining source for many schools is to look off-shore (Kelsey, 1995). Media discourse operates as a forum of social interplay that represents Asian international students as a market base for a seemingly united group of governmental organisations and private educational providers. While economists and governmental educationalists have a rosy view, the actual interplay between the Asian students and New Zealanders is often rocky and fraught with misunderstanding (Asia 2000 Foundation, 2003b).

Key Concepts

While the vast majority of researchers and the media refer to general terms such as ‘international student’, it is important to note that at 82% of the students come from East and selected South East Asian nations. Furthermore, the biggest group of these (43%) originate from China (Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Asian international students attend a diverse number of institutions from short term private language courses to university degree programmes. A large age range is also a significant feature of this group and these can include six year olds from South Korea in primary schools to

³ It is important to note that these figures are exceptionally difficult to ascertain with great precision as the changing tables and sources often show dramatically different totals. However, a secondary analysis of the data shows that a trend of 85% is an accurate portrayal across Education NZ and Ministry of Education data across all years.

mature Japanese students enrolled in language and interest courses (*Education New Zealand*, n.d.).

APEC/ASEAN economic discourses are difficult to locate definitively because they are generated by complex webs of interest groups at social, economic and governmental levels. Educational trade is interwoven with trading initiatives throughout the APEC/ASEAN region. Furthermore, negotiation of these agreements is overseen and brokered by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2003a, 2003b, 2005). For example, education is often referred to as ‘human capital’ in the Malaysian Free Trading Agreement, and has been viewed as an essential element to building ongoing relationships between Malaysia and New Zealand (Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade, 2005). Implementation on the part of the Ministry of Education of APEC educational strategies, which begins with the attraction of foreign fee paying students and moves into offshore education through distance programmes and finally to institutional partnerships, provides further evidence of what? (Ministry of Education, 2002). This partnership has become economically significant, yielding \$2.1b at latest figures in 2004 to the New Zealand economy (Education N.Z., 2005).

Research Design

Asian international students are well represented in the media under a variety of different discourses. Asian regional growth discourse is vast and would be very difficult to measure. Yet, despite the complexity of the Asian international student discourse and the size of the APEC/ASEAN economic discourses, the actual intersection of these seemingly disparate topics is relatively narrow. For depth, national and regional radio news media data has been collected over a short but significant period of years from 2000 until 2005. Radio articles from the Knowledge Basket, Newztext Database formed the sample. To maintain sociological parameters, search terms prioritised the Asian international students as a social group, restricting key primary search terms to “foreign fee paying students” and “international students”. Manual sampling refinement was done by searching for articles with direct reference to economic terminology such “Cash Cows” or “Profits” (Nash, 2002; Radio NZ, 2003c). Once selected, the articles were then quantitatively analysed.

Article Distribution

Within New Zealand media, radio news plays an essential role in providing news which has the reputation of ‘objectivity’, or is at the very least well

informed (Cross & Henderson, 2004). By using textual archives, it is important to note that the interpretation of the articles may be differently understood as a result of missing aural cues such as tone of voice and pauses (Moss, 1988). Radio New Zealand news is broadcasted nationwide, and is often repeated regularly throughout a 24 hour period. From 2000 to 2005, a total of 69 articles featured international students. Of these, 60 articles made overt linkages to the APEC/ASEAN discourse. A relationship of 87% establishes a strong relationship of a discourse link between Asian international students and the discourse of New Zealand as an emerging player in the Asian regional economic expansion.

Between 2000 and 2005, the total number of news articles has risen alongside the increasing numbers of Asian international students. According to the NZ Immigration Service 2005 report, the figures began at 35,169 in 2000 and rose to 120,142 in 2003, with a slight decrease to 120,136 in 2004 (*Education New Zealand*, n.d.). Articles featuring Asian international students began in 2001 with 9 and decreased slightly in 2002, but increased sharply overall to 21 by 2004. As the overall numbers of Asian international students increased, this was accompanied by increased coverage in radio news of Asian international students linked with the Asian financial regional discourse. Another very noticeable trend was the shift in referent terminology to the Asian international students. Prior to 2003, there were zero articles available that referred to the students as “international students”, and all relevant articles employed the term “foreign fee paying students”. However, in 2003 and 2004, there was a rapid inclusion of the term “international student”, which dropped again in 2005 as the numbers of students receded (see Table 1).

Radio New Zealand articles revealed a linkage of 100% of these articles to the terminology suggesting geographical association such as “Asia”, “Asian” or “China” and so forth. In some instances this was achieved by employing an individual’s name such as “Li”, which implies a similar association. Earlier media studies analysing the media discourse surrounding Asian international students and/or immigrants also revealed this trend (Benson, 2003; Munshi, 1998).

Table 1
International Student Totals and Radio Newswires Totals from 2000 – 2005

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
International Students	35,169	52,695	82,020	120,142	120,136	97,745
“Foreign Students”	0	9	7	12	9	4
“International Students”	0	0	0	6	12	3
Total Articles	0	9	7	18	21	7

Data for 2000 – 2004 based on Education NZ tables (Education N.Z., 2005). The 2005 data based on Ministry of Education report *Key Export Indicators 2003 – 2005* (Ministry of Education, 2006).

Thematic Analysis

Within the radio articles, over 85% of the total articles represented the students within context as customers or clients. References were made to the individual purchases such as fee paying. For example, “The government has significantly increased the amount it levies primary schools for each international student” (Radio NZ, 2004b). In a similar vein, examples of overcharging, such as “The University of Auckland is paying over 120 thousand dollars to international students who it overcharged,” were common (Radio NZ, 2004a). These themes peaked in 2002, which was the year that the Ministry of Education Code of Practice to tertiary institutions and private providers was introduced. “This *New Zealand Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students* was seen as an “investment” and justifications were couched in financial investment – as “worth more than a billion dollars a year to the country” (Radio NZ, 2002b). Scandals were framed as customer complaints about conditions or value for money. “*The Nation* newspaper in Bangkok says 16 students were forced to live in slum-like conditions with Maori families who couldn't speak English” (Radio NZ, 2002a). Although clearly factually incorrect, it is rather unlikely that Maori families in New Zealand *cannot* speak English, the sense of injustice and complaint is apparent. Customer or client satisfaction in the 2002 radio articles was notably absent.

Education as an industry is another significant feature in the radio articles. A significant 50% of the radio articles made direct reference to international education industry or to educational institutions. These often include both public and private sectors, with very little media distinction: “nearly 12 thousand foreign students enrolled in public tertiary institutions and an estimated 20 thousand in private training schools” (Radio NZ, 2001d). Some tertiary institutions were mentioned by name however. For example, the University of Canterbury in “Foreign Students at Canty Uni Having Problems,” as well as polytechnics such as Nelson Polytechnic (Radio NZ, 2001c, 2003d). Additional associations are often made through the inclusion of spokespeople on behalf of national organisations, such as Bill Rosenberg from the of Association of University Staff commenting on student numbers. Similarly, Amanda Coulston of New Zealand Education International provides ‘expert’ analysis on the potential fall of international students in 2002 (Radio NZ, 2002c, 2004d).

Governmental involvement with both the Asian international students and the APEC/ASEAN economic forces emerged strongly at 75% of the total newswires from 2000 to 2005. The Ministry of Education or Education NZ is strongly present in many of the radio newswires and they are included in 41% of the articles making direct reference to governmental agencies. Earlier mentions tend to reflect the promotional aims of the education

industry (Radio NZ, 2001e), in which the Ministry of Education attributes the influx of Asian international students with the low value of the NZ dollar (Radio NZ, 2001e). Whereas in the following year the Ministry of Education is portrayed as an authority which the Post Primary Teachers Association approaches to reduce the numbers of international students (Radio NZ, 2002d). Domestic political pressures gain influence in 2003, when the Ministry of Education announces a cap on international students (Radio NZ, 2003a). By 2004, the Ministry of Education resumed its position as a proponent on behalf of the international students with headlines such as “International Students Contributed \$2 Billion to NZ Economy” (Radio NZ, 2004c). In the same year, the Ministry of Education also recommenced the earlier position as enforcers of pastoral care which can be seen in the headline “Steep Rise in Complaints from International Students” (Radio NZ, 2004c, 2004e).

Other governmental departments or agencies have also been regular features of the radio newswires. These have included the Ministry of Health, the Labour Department and Immigration NZ. A strong regulatory theme emerged on the part of the governmental departments. The Ministry of Health showed this by newswires announcing “Health board Says Foreign Students Squeezing health” (Radio NZ, 2003b), while the Department of Labour bars known drug traffickers from entering New Zealand (Radio NZ, 2005a). Surprisingly, Tourism NZ adds weight to this unwelcoming news discourse with an accusation of “Foreign Students Driving Down International Visitors” (Radio NZ, 2005b).

Another well represented figure in the radio newswires is the Asian NZ Foundation (previously known as the Asia 2000 Foundation). Rather like the radio newswires, this organisation operates as a meeting point for APEC/ASEAN discourse in that it promotes social, educational and political relationships between New Zealand and the Asian region. Importantly, one of the three stated key objectives of the Asia NZ Foundation is to “Inform – Initiate and provide well informed input into policy and public thinking on Asia-related issues” (*Asia NZ Foundation*, n.d.). This was a strong influence throughout the 2001 to 2003 radio newswires and can be clearly seen in examples such as this headline: “Asia 2000 Welcomes Govt Moves to Help Foreign Students” (Radio NZ, 2001b). Asia NZ Foundation also placed itself in an advisory capacity in this discourse and an example of this can be seen in the headline: “Asia 2000 Chief Says Sister Cities Important for Foreign Students” (Radio NZ, 2001a). In 2003, Asia NZ tended to place itself in a promotional position which was evident in a newswire drawing attention to the \$200m that Asian international students contributed to Auckland and even a much needed \$6m to the Bay of Plenty region (Radio NZ, 2003e). From this period, however, there was little further representation by Asia NZ in the national or regional newswires.

Discussion

Asian international students are placed within an APEC/ASEAN discourse that has sought to frame them as a potential market for the educational institutions, a source of external revenue for governmental organisations and beyond that to a financial opportunity for individual entrepreneurs. Effectively, this presents the students as commodities to a diverse listening public. Further support and sanctioning by governmental institutions has served to reinforce this and legitimise the 'message'. In this manner, the news media serves to contribute to the processes of commodification, as it frequently does with many other issues (Mosco, 1996). Radio newswires present a 'natural' relationship between Asian international students and the resulting income, so there is little likelihood of challenge to this underlying theme.

The process of commodification itself does not begin with the radio newswires, but within the structures of education. Once education is forced to 'pay' its own way, a use value or service is turned into a commodity or one that can be purchased. The value that can be placed on this is measured by the 'market' together with an indication of what the client may need, as well as the amount they are prepared to pay for it (Mosco, 1996). In this way, the newly emerging 'user pays' in New Zealand educational structures provides a framework which places the Asian international students into a position which they, and the media, thus represent as a 'market' (Kelsey, 1995). Effectively, the students are not wilfully placed in this position by institutional intention, but rather as a result of the process of commodification which tends to "take on a life and power of its own, over that of both its producers and consumers" (Mosco, 1996). Finally, this creates a domino effect of commodification which appears to make sense to the listener.

Like many audiences, the New Zealand public themselves are engaged in a process of commodification through the media. On one hand the newswires produce the news, on the other the audience interests are also constructed through the various institutional aims and goals of the APEC/ASEAN economic discourse. For this particular discourse, the listeners are assumed to be 'Pakeha' mainstream which have a 'natural' predominance due to larger numbers and cultural objectivity implied in economic discourses. The representation of the Asian international student is seamlessly incorporated by an assumption that the listeners will be non-critical of this process and that in the interests of economic objectivity, be willing to adopt this mainstream identity. In this way, the audience themselves are constructed and commodified (Gandy, 2000).

Critical examination of the thematic linkage between Asian international students and the APEC/ASEAN economic discourse shows that educational governmental agencies and institutions have been promoting the growth of Asian international education. This promotion of Asian international student growth has not been universally accepted by other governmental agencies, creating contradictory regulations within the actual news discourse. Asian international students have also been seen as a drain on domestic health funds and competition for other, more profitable forms of tourism. As regular representatives in the media with readily available press contacts, the governmental institutions have often been placed in a position to provide emphasis to their particular causes (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995).

Importantly, since 2003, the Asia NZ Foundation has shown a noticeable change of emphasis from education to immigration. Asian international students as a 'market' are rapidly becoming less topical and the APEC/ASEAN economic discourse is changing form and finding new expressions in immigration debates. Although it is difficult to be certain, this is a likely result of the falling numbers of Asian international students and their capacity to deliver a rising profit to the national economy.

The incorporation of Asians into mainstream discourses of economy when it appears that they will deliver a profit echoes older themes in colonial representation. Historical associations of Asians with New Zealand began with the early Chinese settlers in the Otago Gold Rush in the 1860s (Ip, 1995). Invited in to work as labourers, the Chinese sojourners rapidly became subject to the resentment and externalisation of themselves and their lives by openly racist laws, race-based taxation and a persecution of their drinking and gambling past-times for the next hundred years (Grant, 2002). Similar themes can be seen in the radio newswires in that the Asian international students are invited in to purchase an education through a seemingly 'open' system. Once here, however, they are subjected to governmental dominance and regulation, represented in the media as a market rather than a social group, and placed within a media discourse that inserts them into the category of 'other' to mainstream Pakeha society.

Predictably the APEC/ASEAN economic discourse emerges more strongly in this analysis than do the Asian International Students. Not only are the Asian international students subsumed behind the assumed Pakeha mainstream audience, but they are also subordinated by the same economic discourse that places them centre stage. This process of social distinction is outwardly based on geographical boundaries, but is symptomatic of the Orientalist theme that underpins the relationships between the Asian international students and the APEC/ASEAN economic discourse (Said, 1991). In this discourse, Western forces must incorporate the Asian/Islamic influence and control its expression throughout each step of the process.

Effectively, the Asian international students are imagined, described and disseminated rather than represented in the radio discourse.

Preconceptions of an imagined Asian international student body are also symptomatic of the process of assigning an 'Asian' identity onto people from many nations in East and South East Asian nations. This identity is not necessarily shared and assumes similarities between cultures which are in fact more frequently differentiated by separate histories, languages, cultures, philosophies, and world views (Mathews, 2000). This is a recurring theme in New Zealand news media analyses and is a regular tool for politicians and governmental agencies as well as the 'public' (Benson, 2003; Munshi, 1998). In this case however, this process is even more pronounced as there is a tendency to assume that Asian international students are also similar in age and that their educational aspirations are similar. In fact, many of the South Korean students attend from a very young age and their aim is to go through the school system and onto tertiary education. Also many of these students live with their own family members in New Zealand. The needs of each of these two groups are very different, and yet the radio newswires assign the master identity – Asian international student – to each. This process of Asianisation is very pervasive and has a tendency to influence the radio newswire discourse and to render it non-critical in its approach.

Conclusion

The process of political and media commodification has situated the Asian international students as a minority presence in the APEC/ASEAN economic discourse. This process has to some degree gone largely unchallenged due to the strong colonialist theme that persists in the APEC/ASEAN economic discourse. In fact, resistance to the current Asian international students persists as attention is drawn to their 'bad behaviour' such as gambling, poor driving and so forth. Orientalist themes also persist and this makes the illogical connection of Asian international students as a priority for export rather than a potential for trading relationships appear 'natural'. Effectively, both colonialist and Orientalist themes operate simultaneously in this Asian international student discourse as the major themes around them is based on current or future export profit for the New Zealand economy.

At around 99,000 in total, Asian international students are a relatively smaller social group than the Pakeha New Zealanders who make up the target for this mainstream discourse. These subjugations are based on ideas which are relatively simple to deploy in the limited format of Radio NZ newswires. Media production on the other hand is also rapidly globalising and news production is incorporated into this process. As newspapers are now moving to online formats, so too is radio (Sparks, 2000). News items which are

understood in New Zealand as a part of the colonial discourse may have different audience interpretations in other countries such as Japan (Negus & Roman-Velaquez, 2000). The potential of these same newswires to be represented internationally in other discourses is now imminent. Away from the influence of the proponents of the APEC/ASEAN economic proponents' influence, it is difficult to predict how discourse will be understood or how the role of the governmental agencies or private institutions will be viewed in a discourse without colonialist and Orientalist themes. Perhaps the position of national governmental agencies, as the radio articles report them, will be viewed as unsympathetic by another discourse outside the New Zealand environment. This environment may even be one of the East Asian or South East Asian nations who may feel justifiably aggrieved by the perceived interest in national revenue rather than pastoral care that should be compulsory with education. This is rapidly becoming more likely in view of the size of the populations of the East Asian and South East Asian nations (United Nations, 2005).⁴ Local meanings can potentially become absorbed into greater global discourses. Effectively, rather than this being understood as a dialogue between APEC/ASEAN economic discourse proponents and domestic resistances at a governmental level, there is a potential for this to be reconstructed by an audience that is attempting to learn more about the social context of New Zealand that their much loved daughter or son will currently be studying in. While autocratic 'control' of the news media is a foreign concept and anathema to most social theorists, a consideration of international audiences and a discourse that welcomes smaller ethnic and cultural groups is potentially possible. On a practical level, if the proponents of international education wish to facilitate long term growth, there needs to be some attention to the way that news discourses include and exclude specific social groups. Globalisation as a social process may be a hotly contested terrain, but the actual presence of increasingly complex social, political networks between disparate nations is an increasing reality.

Beyond the economic benefits, inclusive discourse will have key benefits for many New Zealand groups as well. According to Ward & Masgoret in 2004, 53% of the international students in their survey expressed a desire to remain in New Zealand upon completion of their studies. Rather than acting as a bastion of resistance to this emerging social reality, the news discourse could become a site for better, social relations conducive to better understandings between ethnic and cultural groups, rather than as a tool that reinforces divisiveness. Continuing to present the students in a discourse of

⁴ With the exception of Singapore, which has 4.7 million, the East Asian and South East Asian nations have population sizes ranging from 25 million in Malaysia, 84 million in Viet Nam, 47 million in South Korea, and a massive 1.3 billion in China.

'other' is in fact misleading when so many of them are likely to become residents. By doing this, the radio media provides a false impression, which may actually reflect on internal governmental agencies and private educational and service industries and prevent them from equipping their clients for a New Zealand life. Rather than 95,000 Asian international students, we need to be aware that a large number of individuals from a range of East Asian and South East Asian nations are currently sojourning in New Zealand and may in time become residents. As residents, they will be in position to work, consume, vote, and to participate in positions of power throughout the national infrastructures. Essentially, this period in which they are students is an opportunity to become familiar with them, and it is the best time to form lasting relationships with them on an individual and ideological level. The media is in a unique position to represent a discourse of inclusiveness and to be responsible and representational of all of its audience – even future citizens.

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