

Introduction

“Asia in New Zealand Lives”

This special issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* focuses on “Asia in New Zealand Lives.” The issue illustrates the relationship between Asia and New Zealand through the individual stories of a range of New Zealanders. By focusing on Asia in the lives of key New Zealanders, the articles argue for the importance of Asia in the making of New Zealand.¹ Collectively, they also demonstrate the extremely diverse roles that Asia has played in the lives of individual New Zealanders and in our nation as a whole.

“Asia in New Zealand Lives” extends recent work on the relationship between Asia and New Zealand through articles that explore the people behind these interactions. Ranging from the nineteenth century to the present day, each article investigates an individual who has been particularly influential in contributing to New Zealand’s links with and influences from Asia. These individuals include such well-known New Zealanders as Edmund Hillary, Truby King, Anand Satyanand, Rewi Alley, Max Bickerton, and Jack Body and other New Zealanders whose lives are no less significant but whose contributions have so far received less popular and scholarly attention, such as Vic Percival and Nancy Wai-lan Kwok-Goddard. Collectively, these biographical essays illustrate the critical role that Asia has played not only in the lives of these individuals, but also in the lives of New Zealanders in general.

The articles in this special issue place the common currents in Asia–New Zealand relations alongside the remarkably singular ways in which New Zealanders have interacted with Asia. Questioning how we understand individual biographies in relation to national and international history, the issue reconsiders commonly held assumptions about the categories “Asian” and “New Zealander” in the light of the biographies of a group of remarkable individuals from politicians to missionaries, from artists to activists.

To adopt a biographical approach might seem curiously anachronistic in the early-twenty-first century. After all, in the twentieth-century, scholars repeatedly attacked biographical approaches, whether in history or literature, for telling the story of a group of “great,” mainly dead, white men, at the expense of attention to the diversity of actual societies in which they lived and the wider structural, social, economic, and political forces that a biographical approach threatens to obscure.

And yet there are equally good reasons for returning to biography, while keeping in mind its limitations. The rise of social history told from the ground up brought with it a renewed attention to biography. In today’s context of reality TV, a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for popular biography, and the online performances of self

1 In this, we build on earlier works such as Henry Johnson and Brian Moloughney, ed., *Asia in the Making of New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006) and the 2008 *NZJAS* special issue “Representing Asia, Remaking Aotearoa.”

in social media, people arguably more than ever attempt to grasp larger social and political forces through individual life stories.

This special issue builds on a growing literature on the relationship between Asia and New Zealand and on Asian New Zealanders that reflects the renewal of biography and the upsurge of interest in New Zealand's relationship with Asia.² But unlike previous studies, the essays here focus on the dynamic interactions among a web of different Asian cultures and traditions that have helped shape the lives of all New Zealanders—and not just those immigrant communities commonly termed “Asian.”

Here, then, lies a further advantage of a biographical approach: rather than transforming complex large-scale relationships into simple life stories, biography can, alternatively, provide insights into the web of interactions between these complex forces that help constitute an individual's life. For example, as Manying Ip's essay demonstrates, one can find in Nancy Wai-lan Kwok-Goddard's life a response to a nexus of issues relating to New Zealand and Chinese politics and racial discourse shaped by shifting geopolitical and economic realities across the latter half of the twentieth century. Vic Percival's story, as recounted by Paul Clark, likewise shows that, alongside large-scale geopolitical and economic forces, New Zealand's turn to trade with Asia depended on individual actors and moments of chance encounter—as between a left-wing Auckland bookstore and a future National Party office holder. Similarly, Anand Satyanand's family history illuminates the complexity of South Asian migration and diaspora, and the way larger stories of cultural change always take place and are inflected by particular places, such as the Ponsonby in which Satyanand grew up.

Recent New Zealand historiography has interrogated our country's past position in the web of interactions that constituted the British Empire and its equally complex enmeshment in today's globalizing world, in which Asia plays an increasingly central role.³ One way to grasp this complexity is through studies of regions or individual settlements—or even suburbs like Ponsonby—as in the work of Tony Ballantyne and others on the networks of transnational connections that constituted places within New Zealand.⁴

2 For example, Jacqueline Leckie, *Indian Settlers: The Story of a New Zealand South Asian Community* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2007); Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, ed., *India in New Zealand: Local Identities, Global Relations* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2010); Johnson and Moloughney, *Asia in the Making of New Zealand*; Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar, and Keren Smith, ed., *East by South: China in the Australasian Imagination* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2005); Manying Ip, ed., *The Dragon and the Taniwha: Māori and Chinese in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2009); Manying Ip, ed., *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity: The Chinese in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2003).

3 For example, Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2012); James Belich, *Replenishing the Earth: The Settler Revolution and the Rise of the Angloworld, 1783 – 1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

4 For example, Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney, “Asia in Murihiku: Towards a Transnational History of Colonial Culture,” in *Disputed Histories: Imagining New Zealand's Pasts*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Brian Moloughney (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2006), 65–92.

Conceptually such studies of place help undermine national paradigms for doing social, political, economic, and cultural history. Biographies equally offer a way to see beyond monolithic accounts of nation and culture. Our special issue's particular contribution lies in its insistence on the singular sometimes serendipitous relationships and encounters that have helped shape New Zealand's links with Asia and the country's own sense of Asian identity. Through a biographical approach, the collection insists that uniform accounts of cultures and intercultural interactions and of broader social and political forces, such as empire and globalization, are inadequate to the many, multifarious relations that constitute the role of Asia in New Zealand and New Zealand in Asia yesterday and today.

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