

## 10. AUSTRALIA AS MODEL OR MORAL

*Alison Broinowski*

Far from Australia being regarded as ‘a model and a place for education’, as one of the research areas in this project described it, the texts we have examined show that admiration for Australia is not as widespread as we might suppose among Chinese or Japanese commentators, even those who have sought to live or study here. Few of them unreservedly advocate that China or Japan should emulate Australia. Rather, they are often frustrated by Australians’ ignorance about Asia, and the failure of Australians to appreciate or even to care about what to these writers is obvious: the inherent superiority of the ancient civilisations and modern achievements of China and Japan. This concluding chapter therefore raises again a question that other contributors have posed: who cares? Do Australians not care enough how they are perceived in two of the world’s leading countries to do much about it? Do Chinese and Japanese not care about Australia, a country that is not in their league, except for what it tells them about themselves?

Among writers about Australia in Chinese and Japanese, it is true, are some whose impressions are positive, even enthusiastic. Several in both languages admire the lifestyle and the social mobility that they find in Australia. Some compliment

Australians on the country's development and its institutions. Some greatly admire Aboriginal culture. Even the admirers of Australia, however, often dilute their praise with reservations.

In Hiyama Takashi's account of his 5,000km bike ride across Australia, for example, he greatly appreciates the kindness shown to him and his friends by Australians, and praises their egalitarianism and healthy family life. But then he points to the downside: 'You could say Australians are too healthy ... What is most important to Australians is for a person to have a fun life.'<sup>1</sup> The implication is that for him, a fun life is becoming a bicycle fanatic — something hard that he does as a challenge, but not something to which he'll devote the rest of his life.

Similar views are expressed by many Japanese writers about Australia, including the famous author, Murakami Haruki, who visited Sydney for the Olympic Games (see Leith Morton's detailed account in Chapter 6). In *Shidonii!*, he describes young Australians revelling in unrestrained displays of patriotism, and yelling 'Oi oi oi!' at every opportunity. He interprets this as a response to the authorities' aim to promote 'a positive and cheery image' to visitors, to compensate for Australia's guilt for having been a convict colony, for having created the White Australia Policy, and for having suppressed Aborigines. He finds this expression of the new, confident national image annoying, boorish and lacking class. Australia, he warns, is close to economic crisis and the 'money-lenders' (presumably meaning Japanese) may be about to call in their debts. Yet throughout the Olympic Games in this fool's paradise, he writes, 'everyone made a great racket, drank copious amounts of beer, and sang *Waltzing Matilda* about fifty times'.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese observers also tend to dilute their admiration for Australia with reservations. Xiao Ying visits small schools in rural Australia and is unreservedly impressed with the cooperative atmosphere, as well as the fact that the teachers have deliberately left the city to teach there.<sup>3</sup> The contrast with the PRC is clearly in her mind. But another Chinese visitor to

Australia, Hong Pizhi observes a picnic in a park where parents ate, drank and talked while their small children played unsupervised, falling off bikes and chasing balls unaided. He asks, 'Would [Chinese] mothers ever let their own little emperors injure themselves like this?'<sup>4</sup> He admires the way Australian children develop personal independence, are self-reliant in study and get part-time jobs at an early age, but believes children should seek the advice of parents and teachers. He observes the high levels of drug addiction, criminality and homelessness among young Australians as a cautionary example to Australia and China alike.

Liang Qiyun, whose *Australia Overview* was published in 1998, and who emphasises the Britishness of Australian life and institutions, describes the social welfare and superannuation systems in positive terms. But he suggests that suburban life is primitive: 'On the weekend, most husbands go to the bush near their homes to chop firewood, while their wives stay home baking'. Do it yourself, no sophistication, is the subtext. Alcohol, he writes, is the most important part of a meal. There are never more than three courses and Australians are always surprised by the length and variety of Chinese dinners. For Liang this shows that Australians lack the taste and sophistication of Chinese.<sup>5</sup>

Other Japanese and Chinese writers state explicitly that Australia is definitely not a model society, although the themes they choose are similar to those chosen by writers who find some things to admire. For example, Xie Kang, a naturalised Australian resident for more than 40 years, lectures his Australian workmate on the superiority and antiquity of Chinese culture and cuisine, and recites anecdotes of how he and his friends manage to outsmart ignorant, corrupt Australian officials by means of their superior intelligence.<sup>6</sup> Yan Zhen, describing the origins of the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras in Sydney, notes that homosexuals in Australia have civil freedom and are not pursued by the police. He does not approve of this, adding that the extravagant street carnival is a distortion of that freedom and 'a regression of human civilisation'.<sup>7</sup>

Anticipating his argument, an article five years earlier about Australians and their dogs by Hong Pizhu and Zhang Dishan observes that Australians are prepared to send their parents to nursing homes, yet they take their dogs everywhere, feed them imported food and pay high vets' fees for them. A neighbour responded furiously to the writers' polite comment about her dog's high-pitched yapping: 'Piss off back to your damned country!' Their conclusion is that Australians are decadent Western barbarians, who ignorantly fail to appreciate the superiority of Chinese civilisation. Chinese would be wise not to adopt Australian ways.<sup>8</sup>

Japanese writers who reject Australia as a model also tend to repeat familiar themes. Murayama Kenji describes his experience of visiting Uluru as cohabiting with white 'brutes' who stuff themselves with meat, have bad table manners and dance to loud, primitive music all night. He and his compatriot, Kageyama, secluding themselves from the barbarians, speculate about who are the savages, themselves or the *hakujin*.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, an account in *Nichigō Press* in 1999 of the 'Melbourne Incident' of 1992 asserts that five Japanese tourists who were jailed for importing heroin were unquestionably innocent — as Australian media reports have also suggested — and blames the Australian court for failing to understand them. In spite of being provided with Japanese interpreters, the writer says, the accused tourists were reluctant to assert themselves 'for fear of becoming a burden to others'.<sup>10</sup> The writer, Kondo Atsushi, makes no comparison with the Japanese legal process, and pays no attention to the coverage of the case in the Australian media. But by suggesting the superior sensitivity and moral stance of the Japanese accused, the writer appeals to reassuring, customary responses among Japanese readers in Australia.

A common perception of Australians among Japanese businessmen, Kyoko Sheridan reported in 1992, is that they 'only work hard after 5pm'.<sup>11</sup> Making a similar comparison, Zhang Xinke remarks that while Chinese work as hard and as long as they can to maximise their income, Australians are satisfied with a rough balance of income and expenditure, and

live only for the present.<sup>12</sup> This article from Hong Kong by Cai Lan reflects the same idea.

*In Hong Kong, everyone does five things in one day. But in Australia, you are lucky to get one done. So if you want to discuss business with an Australian, when is the best time?*

*How is Monday morning? If you think there is no better time than the beginning of the week to get some work done, you are wrong. All Australian workers are busily chatting about their weekend ...*

*Tuesday morning? There is a lot of Monday's work that must be cleared, they are simply too busy ...*

*Wednesday morning? They are all planning their weekend activities. It is simply impossible to turn their mind to anything about business ...*

*Thursday afternoon. Everyone got paid in the morning and has had an expensive meal at lunchtime with a glass of wine. It is foolish to ruin the good mood with serious business ...*

*Friday afternoon? All of them are getting anxious rushing to the start of the weekend. They have been waiting for this for five long working days. How can one expect them to concentrate on work? ...*

*'Is it possible for us to have morning tea and a short talk with you on Saturday morning?' we asked.*

*'What? You want me to work on the weekend? Go away!'*<sup>13</sup> (Ellipses added)

Whether or not this is an accurate characterisation of Australians, it is often repeated, reflecting a widespread view that Australia has profited less from its unearned advantages than China or Japan could have done. But it seems also to evoke doubts among Chinese and Japanese about whether the long hours they work pay off by providing them with the happy, fulfilled lives that Australians appear to have.

In these and many other extracts the project has researched and translated, Australia is represented as a country whose outstanding natural assets are scarcely matched by the

talents or energies of its people. The longevity of Chinese culture, and in particular its superior cuisine, are used repeatedly by Chinese writers to put uncaring Australians in their place, or to warn them that China will soon be able to define it for them. The achievements of modern Japan, and its unique national ethos, are a subtext of Japanese writers who are irritated when Australians seem not to know what their proper place is, or even to care to find out.

### Footnotes

- 1 Hiyama Takashi. 1980. Australia is a Free Country. In *Saikuru Yarō Chūō Toppa (My Escape to Become a Cycle Fanatic: 5,000km crossing of Australia)*. Tokyo: Rippu Shobō.
- 2 Murakami Haruki. 2001. *Shidonii! (Sydney!)*. Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū.
- 3 Xiao Ying. 1998. *Feng yu Aozhou meng (Trials and Hardship: the Australian dream)*. Beijing: Zhongguo guoji guangbo chubanshe: Xin hua shu dian jing xiao.
- 4 Hong Pizhu and Zhang Dishan. 1993. Aozhou ren he gou (Australians and Dogs). In *Aozhou fend qing ji shi (A Record of Australian Scenery)*. pp.26–9.
- 5 Liang Qiyun. 1998. *Aozhou feng qing hua (Australia Overview)*. Hong Kong: Xing dao chubanshe.
- 6 Xie Kang. 1983. *Travelling and Living in Australia for Forty Years*. Hong Kong: Yuan Fang.
- 7 Yan Zhen. 1998. Gay Mardi Gras Parade. In *Gaosu ni yi ge zhen Aozhou (I'll Tell You a Real Australia)*. pp.118–29. Beijing: Zhongguo dian ying chubanshe.
- 8 Hong Pizhu and Zhang Dishan, Australians and Dogs.
- 9 Murayama Kenji. 1978. *Kaze no, Torō no Shisha (The Wind, the Fruitless Messenger)*. Tokyo: Shūeisha.
- 10 Kondo Atsushi. 1999. What is the 'Melbourne Incident'? Gaoled for 7 years, Japanese who received guilty sentences in Australia. In *Nichigō Press*. pp.22–3. October 1999.
- 11 Kyoko Sheridan (ed.). 1992. *The Australian Economy in the Japanese Mirror*. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press.
- 12 Zhang Xinke. 1995. Aozhou ren he zan bu yi yang (Australians differ from us). In *Hua ren zhi sheng (Voice of the Chinese)*, 16. pp.22–3.

### Further Reference

- Cai Lan. 1997. *Australia: overseas emotions*. Hong Kong: Tian di tu sho you xian gong si.