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# ASIAN IN AUSTRALIA

## The Dynamics of Migration and Settlement

Edited by

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Social Issues in Southeast Asia

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## *Introduction*

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Asian immigration is not a new phenomenon in Australia, nor indeed is the tendency for it to be surrounded by political controversy. From the middle of the nineteenth century, Australia was a destination for Chinese migrants who were part of a larger wave of Chinese emigration to the countries of Southeast Asia and the Pacific basin. Together with smaller numbers of other Asian groups they are estimated to have comprised nearly 3.5 per cent of the Australian population in 1861 (Price 1983). The controversy surrounding this early migration and the eventual introduction of the “White Australia” policy as one of the first legislative actions of the new Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 are well known.

The effect of this policy was to substantially reduce the extent of non-European migration so that by 1947, when the extensive post-war immigration policy was being initiated, the Asian component of Australia’s population was estimated to be less than 0.4 per cent of the total. Not until 1967, when the policy was changed to allow the entry of skilled non-Europeans, was there any significant growth in Asian migration to Australia. The decision by the Whitlam Labour government in 1973 not to discriminate against applicants for immigration to Australia on the basis of ancestry or ethnicity removed the remaining restrictions on Asian immigration. The number and proportion of immigrants from this region of the world began to increase rapidly from that point and by 1988 Australians of Asian ancestry were estimated

to once again comprise more than 3 per cent of the population (Price 1988).

The arrival of large numbers of Indochinese in the mid-1970s was the first event that focused extensive public attention on renewed immigration from Asia. More recently, the issue of Asian immigration erupted into public controversy with the so-called Blainey debate in 1984, and then in 1986, when the then leader of the federal opposition, John Howard, expressed concern about the threat to social cohesion posed by Australia's increasingly multicultural population. In 1990, debate about the level and desirability of immigration re-emerged, and is ongoing. In addition to concerns about the impact of population growth on the environment and high unemployment rates caused by economic recession, it appears that an underlying reason for the opposition to further immigration is the increasingly large number of Asians who have settled in Australia during the 1980s.

Immigration debates are rarely conducted in entirely neutral tones and public discussion about this issue in Australia is no different from that held elsewhere, including some Asian countries. Very often, these debates rely on inaccurate or partial information about the characteristics of migration flows. In Australia, there are many widespread misconceptions about Asian migration and this volume is an attempt to provide reliable and detailed information about the extent and nature of recent Asian migration to Australia. This book considers the international context in which Asian migration to Australia has occurred and examines how patterns of Asian migration to Australia have changed over time. Asia is not a homogeneous region and includes countries with diverse social, political, economic and cultural backgrounds. The study contrasts the characteristics of Asian migrants who originate from different countries. It considers the circumstances of their emigration and the changing context in which Australian immigration policy has developed. Finally, the settlement and post-arrival experiences of Asian immigrants of different backgrounds are compared.

More than half of the chapters in this volume are based on papers first presented in Singapore, in February 1989, at a conference jointly organized by the Asian Studies Association of Australia, the Centre for Advanced Studies of the National

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University of Singapore, and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. These, together with the additional chapters, examine the historical patterns and contemporary migration flows to Australia from several Asian countries. New perspectives on Asian migration to Australia have been gained through the analysis of data from such sources as the 1986 Australian population census, which for the first time included information on ancestry as well as birthplace, and tables specially prepared by the Australian Department of Immigration, Local Government and Ethnic Affairs.

The first two chapters by Michael Godley and Neville Bennett examine the phase of Asian migration to Australia beginning in the nineteenth century. In contrast to the accounts more familiar to Australian readers, which focus on Australian policies concerning immigration, they take as their starting point the perspective of the migrants' country of origin. In doing so, they highlight how the policies and decisions of such countries as Japan and China relating to emigration of their nationals were very much affected by domestic considerations and foreign policy concerns, which only occasionally took account of Australia. Prior to federation and even afterwards, the Australian colonies were linked through their ties with Britain into a complex pattern of relations with these countries, which led to specific provisions being developed in Australian immigration policy in response to the perceived need to mollify an influential neighbour. More indirectly affecting the Australian experience was the existence of alternative destinations for emigrants. In the case of the Chinese, countries which attracted far larger numbers were those in the Americas and Southeast Asia. Godley shows that the official attitude to emigration in China was influenced less by Australian policies than by concern about the welfare of its citizens in these other destinations.

Since the nineteenth century there have been major shifts in international relations as a result of economic and social developments in different parts of the world, and changes in political systems. Chapter 3 by Stephen Castles shows how Australian immigration policy and patterns have altered, in particular in the post-World War II period. Castles argues that changes in the world economic system have had a major impact

on Australian immigration policy in the 1980s. The globalization and restructuring of the world economic order have led to a preference for skilled labour migration and those who bring substantial amounts of capital with them.

In spite of this, Australia still accepts large numbers of refugee settlers. In Chapter 4, James Coughlan examines the experiences of Indochinese immigrants in Australia. Though there are variations in the settlement patterns of this group according to their country of origin, the Indochinese refugees in general have not yet achieved the same level of economic attainment as voluntary migrants. Additional insights into the lives of the refugees are provided by Frank Jones in Chapter 5, in which he examines the economic well-being of Chinese residents who came from different parts of Southeast Asia to Australia.

To the extent that Australia is successful in implementing the policy to attract skilled migrants who will make considerable contributions to the country's economy, it has the potential to contribute to a "brain drain" from the sending countries. This is explored by Gerard Sullivan and S. Gunasekaran in Chapter 6. They point out that the term "brain drain" is not precise. Since some countries in Southeast Asia are currently experiencing labour shortages, their governments are now concerned with both mind and muscle migration, that is, the loss of skilled and unskilled workers, and have considered recruitment of others to replace them. One of the conclusions which Sullivan and Gunasekaran reach is that while there is evidence of a flow of skilled migrants from Southeast Asia to Australia, this does not necessarily indicate a significant "brain gain" for Australia because of the different levels of skill of the labour forces of the sending countries. They also find that some of the countries with the greatest "brain drain" are probably the beneficiaries of a "brain gain" from other countries which are less economically developed.

The recent efforts by the Australian Government to attract a larger proportion of skilled migrants and individuals with capital have resulted in a decline in the proportion of unskilled immigrants, which was common in nineteenth century Asian migration, and in European migration in the immediate post-World War II period. As Christine Inglis and Chung-Tong Wu illustrate in Chapter 7, there remains considerable economic diversity among

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recent Asian settlers which is associated with their country of origin and the conditions preceding their migration. Inglis and Wu also discuss new patterns of migration in which people commute between the sending and host countries.

The economic experiences of the Asian migrants is discussed in most of the chapters in the book. There is mounting concern about the economic outcomes for both migrants and Australia in a time of increasing economic difficulty. Employment data are a readily available economic indicator of this and all except the two historical chapters provide data on Asian migrants' employment patterns. Another significant area of economic activity relates to occupational status. It has often been suggested that self-employment or employer status provides opportunities for individuals who would otherwise be unable to realize their economic potential because of social or political barriers. This issue is explored by Stephen Castles in Chapter 3.

The suggestion that there may be institutional barriers to economic attainment or assimilation is opposed to explanations of labour market attainment in terms of differential human resources (especially training and job skills). While Castles uses the former in his analysis, Jones explores the latter. Inglis and Wu argue that a historically informed approach which combines a macro-level analysis is desirable. In this regard, the study of the role of social networks is important because it links these two levels of analysis.

While important, economic outcomes are only one aspect of immigrants' adjustment to life in Australia. Social experiences are equally relevant but receive only limited attention in this volume. This omission is in part the result of reliance by the majority of the authors on the most recent population census and immigration figures. This approach reflects the absence of broadly conceived research which examines the social experiences of Asian immigrants. Apart from extensive research on refugee groups, detailed qualitative studies of Asian communities in Australia is lacking. However, the undertaking of such research is slowly beginning. It is hoped that this volume will provide an impetus for the study of many of the issues identified in this book as requiring more detailed understanding.

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