

What it means for WA to better connect with Asia



Dr Yu Tao

Senior Lecturer and Coordinator in Chinese Studies, UWA School of Social Sciences

According to the historical population data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics, only 410 Western Australian residents were born in China in 1947. As the new century unfolded in 2001, 10,730 Western Australian residents recorded their birthplace as the Greater China region. According to the latest census data, this figure increased fourfold in the following 15 years, reaching 42,710 in 2016.¹

In other words, more than 1 in every 60 Western Australian residents today were born in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau or Taiwan.

This figure does not include any second-generation immigrants and their descendants. Nor does it cover people with Chinese ancestry who relocated to Australia from Southeast Asia, North America and other parts of the world. A similar trend can be observed among migrants from India, the Philippines, Vietnam and other parts of Asia. As more and more Asian people reside in WA, Asian communities have become inherent components of our State's culturally diverse population. Moreover, many members of Western Australia's Asian communities are active contributors to our State's continuing economic and social development. They provide labour, skills, knowledge and experiences to WA's large and small business entities, government and public agencies, as well as TAFE and university campuses.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Historical population", (2016), accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/historical-population>.

WA has an excellent record of pioneering engagement with Asia. James Stirling listed trading with China as one of the four competitive advantages for the prospective Swan Colony. The first Asian immigrants arrived in the same year as the appointment of the first Governor. As proudly stated in the introductory materials displayed in WA Museum Boola Bardip alongside the artefacts from local Chinese communities, in the early era of the White Australia policy, our State provided a relatively friendly environment to Asian workers, benefiting from the group's contribution to easing labour shortages.

WA occupies a unique geographical location that, if properly utilised, can define it as a natural gateway for Australia and Asia to interconnect. We are, however, now living in an era when connectivity is no longer defined by geographical proximity but travelling time. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there was only one direct flight between Perth and mainland China, and it was more convenient to travel to London than to Delhi and Islamabad. Therefore, WA has become less competitive than the eastern states in attracting human capital, international students and tourists from Asia. For example, data from the Federal Government shows that WA only attracted 2.86% of the country's Chinese international students, 4.97% of the country's Vietnamese international students, and 6.19% of the country's Indian international students between January and October 2021.²

² Australian Government, Department of Education, Skills and Employment, "International student numbers", accessed January 25 2022, <https://www.dese.gov.au/international-data/data-visualisation-international-student-numbers>.

WA also has ample room to improve its understanding of and engagement with the Asian communities. For example, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, it made national news that a local landlord evicted a Malaysian student of Chinese descent, citing coronavirus fears. As Mark McGowan pointed out, the landlord's behaviour was "disgraceful and un-Australian", and the Premier admitted that "we are hearing far too many stories about people facing hate and discrimination just for their heritage".³ Moreover, given that Australia's restrictions were applied solely to mainland China when the incident happened, the landlord seemed not to understand that many people of Chinese descent live outside the People's Republic of China. As exposed by this incident, the lack of knowledge, skills and understanding of Asian cultures, societies and politics among some Western Australians is worrying.

Unless efforts are made to help Western Australian Asians feel welcomed, understood and respected, the globalisation process that has brought many Asian talents to Western Australia will also take them away.

Two proposals

1. Western Australia should brand itself more strongly as Australia's primary gateway to Asia and Asia's primary gateway to Australia. The State Government should

work more closely with the transport, tourism, international education, hospitality and public relations industries to further enhance WA's connectivity to Asia. For example, given that India is the State's top sending country of international students, incentives should be provided to establish direct flights between Perth and major Indian cities such as Delhi or Mumbai. In addition, targeted campaigns, such as deploying tailor-made Asian-language advertisements in Asian countries, should be developed to attract more workforce talent, international students and tourists from Asia.

2. Western Australia should proactively enhance its governments, business and people with knowledge, skills and understandings of the histories, geographies, societies, cultures, politics and languages of the diverse countries of Asia and their engagement with Australia. Following the successful example of the National University of Singapore's East Asian Institute, the State Government should support and incentivise universities to develop policy-orientated knowledge-exchange units with a specific regional focus on Asia. In addition, further support and incentives should be provided for the emergence of cultural consultancies that can provide professional advice for Western Australian businesses and people to better engage with Asia and embrace multiculturalism. ■

³ Frances Bell, "Coronavirus fears see Malaysian student evicted from Perth share house by landlord", *ABC News* (February 12, 2020), accessed January 25, 2022. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-02-12/foreign-student-evicted-from-perth-house-over-coronavirus-fears/11959530>.

