

DIVERSE BANANAS/GLOBAL DRAGONS CONFERENCE**AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND 30th May- 2nd JUNE 2014****MARRIED TO THE REGION****ASIAN/AUSTRALIAN MARRIAGES****By Dr Kathie Blunt****Introduction**

The Asia/Australia relationship is primarily considered in terms of economics, trade, regional security and immigration, but rarely in terms of gender dynamics. From colonial times however, gender relations have played a distinct role in the relationship, as one of the most feared, and perhaps one of the most fascinating aspects to capture the Australian national imagination since colonial times has been the question of intermarriage between the people of Asia and Australia.

A momentous catalyst for change in Australia's attitude towards Asia, both officially at the foreign policy level and at the personal level, came with the advent of World War II, whereby marriages occurred **despite** the maintenance of a restrictive immigration policy.

Specifically, between 1945-1970, the major opportunities for intermarriage occurred through the influx of Asian political refugees and war-time evacuees stranded in Australia during the war; Australia's participation in the Occupation of Japan from 1946-1952; educational and technical schemes from the 1950s and the Papua New Guinea Chinese.

After the complete abolition of the White Australia policy in 1973 and with continuing immigration from Asia, should intermarriage be seen as an indicator of the progress of Australian society, which is wedded to the concept of multiculturalism? Are these relationships indicative of the future composition of Australian society? Are they moving Australia towards loss and fragmentation, or moving it towards a national identity that could give new meaning to the term "Australasian"?

In answer to these questions, it is important to understand why it was considered necessary to implement a racially exclusionist policy and what had been developing in Australia in the decade or two prior to Federation in 1901.

Colonial mentalities

A new Australian nationalism was emerging, but with a distinct ethnocentric ideology as its foundation. That is, a new national Australian *character* was emerging, but its *ethnicity* was still British. The theme of pollution of the white Anglo/Celtic race, the need to maintain a national character, an Australian character,

but based on British traditions and institutions, were ideas that were constantly perpetuated throughout the fledgling colonies after the influx of thousands of Chinese into the goldfields from the 1850s. Whilst economic arguments against cheap labour, the question of whether the Chinese were assimilable and capable of understanding democracy were considerable factors, on their broadest level, haematic ideas were a significant force behind the desire for a “White Australia” policy.¹ The question of hybridity was of paramount concern. The Chinese presence added other qualities to the new nationalist feelings, namely racism, sexuality, respectability, and sensibility, giving Australian nationalism its *emotional* essence, affecting a national consciousness of difference and the notion of “otherness” in relation to Asia. There is ambivalence in all human feeling, and in the historical emotional life of Australia, ambivalence - the feelings of fear and fascination – have been most profound in relation to Asia. Consequently, the conflation of these ideals, together with nineteenth century Social Darwinian ideas of the superiority of the white races were immediately apparent in Australia, once colonial society perceived itself to be under threat from an alien race, and the question of miscegenation, the mixing of the races, came to the fore.

Bearing in mind that communications were limited – how were these ideas instilled into the psyche of the population?

Art, Gender and Nation

The radical press played a great role in the nationalist movement, and the visual thrust, through the medium of the visual arts, used gender as a defining marker of nation, determining how men and women were perceived as gendered beings - men as stoic and strong, women as fragile and in need of protection. Racism strengthened both the historical and the visual thrust of nationalism by emphasizing the stereotypes of superior and inferior races.²

The imagery was crude but powerful, constructing deep psychological fears and anxiety about the threat of invasion from the hordes of Asia. Nation was the figure that had to be defended against this threat. As a tradition in art, women have been used to represent nation, particularly that of a virginal woman in danger of violation. Thus the policy of excluding Asians became conflated with defending the virtue of a sister, daughter, wife or mother. In other words, the nation became genderised in the female form. From a masculine point of view, woman and nation became fused – the desire to protect the virtue of one became the citizenly duty to defend the other.³ Defence, of course, was a traditional male occupation and one supported by women, hence the imagery perpetuated the stereotype of masculine and feminine roles. From a

¹ Douglas Cole “The Crimson Thread of Kinship: Ethnic Ideas in Australia, 1870-1914” in Historical Studies Vol.14, No.56, April 1971, p.511

² George Mosse Nationalism and Sexuality (New York, 1985) p.133

³ Anne-Marie Willis Illusions of Identity: The Art of Nation (Sydney, 1993) p.99

female point of view, the imagery connected with their fears of rape and violation, thus the public and private were merged in the ideology of nationalism by bringing together the idea of the figure of family (the woman) and nation.⁴

This form of art made painfully clear the horror of sexual relations between the races, but at the same time, was highly indicative of the power relations between colonial men and women. Sexual fear was a way of controlling colonial women by their white male counterparts. As the prestige of the ruling race was crucial to the maintenance of empire, the control of sexuality and marriage was a way of social distancing the colonised from the coloniser.⁵ The concept of “protection of women” or “women as nation” also concealed not only the ruling group maintaining control over the subordinates in society (in this case Aboriginals and Asians), but it was a way of reinforcing control over its own women.⁶

Through this power relationship, it can be seen that empire had to be maintained and that gender difference between women and men served symbolically to define the limits of national difference and power between men. Thus they were subsumed symbolically into the national body politic as its boundary and metaphoric limit; they were constructed as the bearers of the nation, but were denied any direct relation to national agency, as they were not granted the right to vote in Australia until 1894.⁷ In view of these representations, it is not difficult to see how racism and sexism were constantly layered into the Australian psyche.

Therefore it can be seen that nationalism has been constituted from the very beginning as a gendered discourse.

Despite the fear campaigns of the press and community attitudes, marriages and de facto relationships occurred.⁸ Considering the enormous gender imbalance in colonial society, coupled with virulent anti-Chinese feeling, the question must be asked – why would European women enter into relationships with Chinese, whilst ample opportunities existed to marry men of their own class or others who could perhaps provide upward mobility? Very little is known of these women, and they are usually portrayed as low class Irish girls or women who worked as prostitutes.⁹ One report suggested that European women fared better with the Chinese, who were much kinder and treated them better than the drunken larrikins of their own

⁴ *ibid* p.99

⁵ Linda Bryder “Sex, Race and Colonialism” *The International History Review* Vol.xx, No.4, 1998, p.808

⁶ *ibid* p.808

⁷ Anne McClintock *Imperial Leather* (New York, 1995) p.354 In Australia, it was not until 1894 that women were granted the right to vote, and then only in South Australia which was the first colony to do so.

⁸ Exact numbers of marriages are difficult to ascertain as many were simply de facto relationships, although the “Report on the condition of The Chinese Population in Victoria” by the Rev. W. Young of 1868 cited in Ian F. McLaren *The Chinese in Victoria: Official Reports & Documents* (Ascot Vale, 1985) pp.33-43 gives some statistics for that year.

⁹ See Pauline Rule in Trevor McClaughlin (Ed.) *Irish Women in Colonial Australia* (St. Leonards, 1998) pp.136-141 Also Jan Ryan *Ancestors: Chinese in Colonial Australia* (South Fremantle, 1995) which is particularly useful for accounts of marriages between European women and Chinese in colonial Western Australia, pp.128-147 and Eric Rolls *Citizens* (St. Lucia, 1996) is also useful for colonial accounts of intermarriage, Chpt. 5 pp.239-266

race.¹⁰ There were some notable exceptions where middle-class women married quite successful Chinese men prominent in the community. Examples were Melbourne businessman Lowe Kong Meng who married Mary Ann Prussia in 1860¹¹ and Sydney Chinese tea merchant Mei Quong Tart who married Margaret Scarlett in 1886.¹² Whilst both these marriages were outside the norm, their social insurgence affected an early cultural shift towards Asia.

AESTHETICISM & ORIENTALISM

Despite the anti-Chinese sentiment, ambivalence was still very evident as Australia continued its fascination with Chinoiserie and Japonisme, that is, the arts and crafts of China and Japan. This trend was synonymous with, and eventually operated as, an integral part of the fashionable Aesthetic Movement.¹³ The European masters of the Aesthetic Movement used the props of fans, parasols, kimonos as metaphors for exoticism, ease, languidity, sexuality - feminising Asia as a seductress. Australians artists were also heavily influenced by Aestheticism, such as Roy de Maistre's 1927 *Woman with Parasol at Palm Beach*, Max Meldrum's 1928 *Chinoiseries*. The poster from 1933 Hollywood film by Frank Capra, *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* is another form of art depicting Asian stereotypes. This was one of the first films that openly dealt with inter-racial relationships, but one that demonized the Asian male. All the examples depict Eurocentric/Orientalist assumptions that used gender to both masculinise and feminise Asia.

Imagery aside, with the advent of WWII, Australia was forced to reassess its relationship with Asia, and colonial mentalities dissipated to a large degree. The war created the circumstances whereby Australians found themselves in the vanguard of race relations with Asia, meeting and marrying people of the region, despite the "White Australia" policy. Due to time limitations, today I am going to focus on one particular group – the Papua New Guinea Chinese.

¹⁰ Charles Price *The Great White Walls are Built* (Canberra, 1974) p.249

¹¹ Lowe Kong Meng, born in 1831 in Penang, arrived in Australia 1854. Aware of mercantile opportunities and set up import business in Little Bourke St. He extended his fleet of ships to six, procuring beche-de-mer in Torres Strait, trading with Hong Kong. He had several mining interests including the rich Kong Meng mine at Majorca. With another prominent Melbourne Chinese leader, Louis Ah Mouy, he was a foundation member of the Commercial Bank of Australia in 1866, becoming one of its largest shareholders. He co-founded the Hop Wah Sugar Company in Cairns, had company branches throughout Australia and New Zealand, and held large tracts of prime land devoted to vegetables and tobacco. By the time of his death in 1888 he was recognized as one of Melbourne's wealthiest men. He was highly regarded philanthropist and with Louis Ah Mouy and Cheong Cheok Hong, co-authored a pamphlet "The Chinese Question in Australia" in 1879 in order to help people understand the Chinese. In an attempt to counter one of the problems of the day, opium, he conferred with Mei Quong Tart in Sydney. He was a champion of racial tolerance. Pamphlet, Australian Chinese Cultural Museum, Cohen Place, Melbourne, Vic. July, 2000

¹² Margaret Scarlett was reasonably well educated and a school teacher. However, their marriage caused considerable angst to her family as "her father was enraged, and refused to attend the wedding, and threw out all gifts previously given by Quong Tart and erased Margaret's birth from the family Bible". It was one example where respectability and sensibilities were deeply offended. Perhaps to assure her family of his good intentions, or perhaps he realised the need to protect himself against bankruptcy, a Deed of Marriage Settlement was lodged at the Registrar General's Office. See Book No.352, p.656 Lands Titles Office, Sydney. Margaret bore six children and the marriage was quite successful despite her family's initial horror. See Margaret Tart *The Life of Quong Tart or 'How a Foreigner succeeded in a British Community'* (Sydney, 1911) and Robert Travers *Australian Mandarin: The Life and Times of Quong Tart* (Kenthurst, 1981) and Eric Rolls *Citizens* (St. Lucia, 1996) pp.39-247 See also Tart/McEvoy papers at Australian Society of Genealogists, Richmond Villa, Sydney and the Quong Tart Papers, ML MSS 325.1901 for a collection of articles on the life of Quong Tart.

¹³ Mary Mackay "Objects, Stereotypes and Cultural Exchange" in Maryanne Dever (Ed.) *Australia and Asia Cultural Transactions* (Surrey, UK, 1997) p.187

GOING, GOING, GONE BANANAS – THE PAPUA NEW GUINEA CHINESE

As one of Australia's nearest neighbours, Papua New Guinea has a very special place in Australian history. It is usually considered in terms of its former colonial status, or as the place where Australians fought bravely to stem the advance of the Japanese during World War II, or simply as an exotic and primitive travel destination. Rarely has the Chinese population of Papua New Guinea been considered a source of historical investigation, or considered in terms of their contribution to the development of that country, and even more rarely, as a source of intermarriage.¹⁴

Under Australian colonial administration, Papua New Guinea was more than an exotic place. It was a microcosm of racial and sexual ferment, set in a tropical landscape where gender, race and sexuality not only intersected, but were constantly in sharp focus through the enactment of one specific piece of legislation - the White Women's Protection Ordinance of 1926.¹⁵ This legislation aimed at protecting white women from sexual attack from black men, and was the most definitive expression of relations between black and white. Whilst this policy did not apply to Asians, they were subject to the "White Australia" policy and were socially segregated and discriminated against in a variety of ways that prevented intermixing. The Chinese lived under a virtual apartheid. Consequently, intermarriage between the Chinese and Australians was a very slow process.

An Asian presence in Papua New Guinea was introduced by the German New Guinea Company, after German annexation of New Guinea in 1884. The company found indigenous labour unsatisfactory thus Chinese, Malays and Ambonese were introduced. By the time Imperial Germany took over the administration of New Guinea from the company fifteen years later, the Asian population numbered between 300 and 400.¹⁶ From that time until World War I, labour was sourced mostly from Hong Kong. After World War I, Australia began civil administration of New Guinea in 1921, at which time there were 1,424 Chinese and 163 Ambonese and Malays.¹⁷ The Chinese ultimately became the small shopkeepers and artisans of New Guinea and their numbers gradually increased. They were located primarily in Rabaul, East New Britain and to a lesser degree to other townships such as Kavieng in New Ireland, and Kimbe in West New Britain.

¹⁴ See David Wu The Chinese in Papua New Guinea: 1880—1980 (Hong Kong, 1982) See Chpts. 1 and 2 for the demographics and history of migration and settlement. Also Stewart Firth, Chpt. 9, "Labour in German New Guinea" in Papua New Guinea: A Century of Colonial Impact 1884-1984 National Research Institute & University of Papua New Guinea in association with PNG Centennial Committee (Port Moresby, 1989) Also The Hon. M. Staniforth Smith Handbook of Territory of Papua Commissioner for Lands, Director of Agriculture (3rd edition) 1912 for a history of the Territory of Papua and population census of coloured people, 30th June, 1912

¹⁵ For an excellent account of sexual anxiety and politics in Papua that resulted in legislation being enacted, see Amirah Inglis The White Women's Protection Ordinance (London, 1975). It is an example of how gender power played a crucial role in maintaining white women as boundary markers of nation, by using sexual fear in order for the white man to control not just the black man, but their own women.

¹⁶ PNG Handbook 7th Ed. 1974 p.25

¹⁷ ibid p.25

Due to Australia's rigid enforcement of its restrictive immigration policy, the Chinese and other Asians were not permitted into Australia, other than for education or business reasons, nor into the Territory of Papua until 1958, when they were given the right to become naturalised Australians.¹⁸ They were designated "Australian Protected Persons". In the 1920s the government reinforced racial segregation by separating the European, the "Asiatic", and the native in residential quarters and in other aspects of life. For example, segregation applied to schools, hospitals, residential and commercial quarters, public parks, gaols, cemeteries, libraries, public baths, public theatres, social and sports clubs, employment and wage opportunities.¹⁹ As Bernard Chan relates:

Growing up in Rabaul, the Chinese were treated as second class citizens. There was always discrimination between the Australian and other whites towards the Chinese. For example, we were not even allowed to swim in the swimming pool there, unless you were Australian or white person. The Chinese were expected to swim at the beach and that was only as long as we didn't have any contact with any Australian people.²⁰

At the beginning of the Japanese invasion of New Guinea, a small number of Chinese were evacuated to Australia, but the majority remained. Some were sent to concentration camps, and some were allowed to work under Japanese control, but mainly they scattered into the bush, eking out a living as best they could.

The Japanese occupation served as a catalyst for change in the status of the Chinese, as the destruction caused by the Japanese resulted in a post-war reconstruction boom, creating a great demand for the Chinese as skilled tradesmen and artisans. There was also greater demand for commercial skills, and with increased educational opportunities, the Chinese opened trade stores, becoming the intermediaries between the indigenous population and the white colonial masters. Important factors that favoured the growth of retail trade were increased government spending, spread of the cash economy and the growth of urban areas.²¹ These factors offered opportunities for self-employment. This is a major hallmark of all Chinese diasporas throughout South-East Asia, and by the 1970s, due to their entrepreneurial skills, most Chinese had prospered. The fact that they began to prosper so soon after the war caused much resentment, particularly amongst the planters. They were suspicious of Chinese allegiances and loyalties, a view clearly espoused in a letter to the *Pacific Islands Monthly*:

¹⁸ *ibid* p.25 Also see Ian Downs *The Australian Trusteeship of Papua New Guinea: 1945-75* pp.196-199 which gives a useful insight into the Paul Hasluck period 1951-63, as Minister of External Affairs. He proposed working towards a goal of common citizenship as early in his Administration set rigid limits on immigration so that at the time of self-government the problems facing the indigenous majority might be simplified, especially relating to land, business and employment opportunities.

¹⁹ Wu, *op cit.*, p.33

²⁰ Interview with Bernard Chan, Sydney, 5th January, 2003

²¹ Christine Inglis "Particularism in the Economic Organisation of the Chinese in Papua New Guinea" *Anthropological Forum* Vol. IV, No.1, 1975-76 p.70

The Chinese are not pioneers. They are camp-followers, or “squatters,” who move into a country like locusts, after it has been made safe by others – usually the British. They take all and give very little. They give us lip service, but have no real regard or loyalty to us...²²

Unfortunately, isolation from other Chinese diasporas scattered throughout South-East Asia contributed to the social insularity of the New Guinea Chinese. As Bernard Chan related:

Being in Papua New Guinea we have never met any other group of people except the Chinese and a few other Australian kids at primary school and majority New Guineans. Coming to Australia and mixing with other Australians, the barriers were broken and gradually disintegrated as we got to understand more and more.

From the 1960s onwards the rigid social stratification that existed with the plantation owners at the pinnacle, often described as a “plantocracy”, began to crumble. The actual smallness of the townships themselves contributed greatly to eroding barriers, as their size ensured that people saw each other regardless, across the social and business milieu, creating circumstances for intermarriage, for example:

Bill & Elsa Hamilton²³

Bill Hamilton and Elsa Leo were married in Rabaul in 1960. Whilst they were aware that their marriage offended some people’s sensibilities, Elsa said, “We didn’t worry about what other people thought. I know there was some finger pointing.” The couple experienced first- hand the exclusionary practice of barring Chinese from clubs. Elsa was refused entry to the exclusive Kokopo Club, also known as the “Planter’s Club”. Elsa also experienced prejudice at the accountancy firm where she worked. The Hamilton’s three children were born in Papua New Guinea, and they enjoyed a very carefree lifestyle without encountering any racial difficulties. Upon returning to Australia in 1973, the children experienced racial prejudice at school which was a completely new experience for them and caused them to question their identity. These early difficulties were overcome, and today, all three children identify very strongly as Australians. The family returned to Australia prior to PNG Independence and live quietly in Brisbane, comfortable with their Australian way of life and identity.

Miriam & Michael Huckins²⁴

Miriam Seeto, from the prominent Seeto family of Rabaul, and Michael Huckins were married in 1961. Michael was a British migrant whose family arrived in Perth in 1949. Miriam experienced discrimination both in the workplace and at school. The learning of English was harshly enforced, as she said, “if caught speaking Chinese I was fined a shilling”. From 1956-57 under the Australian subsidy system, Miriam attended Meriden College at Strathfield in Sydney which was a great adventure, and opened up a new world. It was a very happy time and one in which she did not experience any discrimination. To this day, she still

²² Letter from Leslie F. Gill, planter in British Solomon Islands to the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, September 1946

²³ Edited extract from Blunt, Kathleen Unpublished PhD Thesis “Married to the Region: An Historical Perspective of Asian/Australian Marriages 1945-1970, 2005, held Macquarie University, NSW

²⁴ Ibid

keeps in touch with her old school friends. It was only in Rabaul, under the colonial administration, that discrimination was experienced. However, as Miriam pointed out, “there was discrimination on the Chinese side too. My parents did not want me mixing with Australian people”. Even though she had received the education subsidy and was naturalised in 1958, her parent’s attitude was one example that contributed to the criticism concerning the question of Chinese allegiance, as well as the criticism that the Chinese took everything and gave nothing in return. Although as Michael emphasised, it was important to understand the cultural difficulties that contributed to Chinese social isolation and attitudes:

Particularly for the older Chinese there was a language, a communication problem, as they could not converse in English properly, only Pidgin. They also did not want their sons and daughters, particularly daughters, intermarrying. There was a great deal of distrust that the daughters would be bedded and then the male would disappear over the hill so to speak.

Miriam’s relationship with Michael caused ructions. Her mother, who had been away in Hong Kong, received word that her daughter had been seeing a European and came back post-haste, and according to Michael, “all hell broke loose. Things were difficult for a while.” Miriam continued:

My mother tried to stop the relationship, even threatening to commit suicide. Luckily, there was another older Chinese lady, a very good Christian lady, who took my mother aside and said look, if you stop her from marrying Michael, and force her to marry a Chinese person, if it doesn’t work out, she will always blame you. If you let her marry whom she wants, and it doesn’t work out, then she will never blame you. So bit by bit, my mother came round, and once my mother had given her consent, other relatives came round to accepting the relationship as well.

After 15 years in PNG they returned to Brisbane where they settled with their three children, all of whom identify strongly as Australians with a mixed race heritage. Whilst there were many pressures to contend with, the secret of success in any marriage according to Miriam and Michael:

is give and take. It is up to the individuals concerned. The differences in cultures just make life more interesting, it adds another dimension to the relationship.

Bernard Chan²⁵

Bernard met his first wife, an Australian, in Rabaul in 1969. This was a path-breaking relationship, as at that time, relationships between Australian women and Chinese men were a rarity in Papua New Guinea. The racialised sexual double-standard was very much in place, with Chinese women being considered available to white men, but not the reverse. Bernard soon discovered that politics included sexual politics, as he felt a great deal of animosity and racial tension directed towards himself, as he described:

At that time I could feel tension, and jealousy amongst the white Australians living in Port Moresby – seeing a Chinese boy with an Australian girl. It made me feel uncomfortable, but at the same time, in my

²⁵ Edited extract from Blunt, Kathleen Unpublished PhD Thesis “Married to the Region: An Historical Perspective of Asian/Australian Marriages 1945-1970, 2005, held Macquarie University, NSW

situation, because I am the only son, my parents felt uncomfortable too. They much prefer me marrying a Chinese girl. I was in a no-win situation. Her parents were great. Geez, I couldn't find better Australian people than them. Even to this day I still keep in touch with them, which is great. Wonderful people.

However, the Chinese patriarchal system commanded high expectations. Bernard was expected to conform to his designated gender role. These factors caused the relationship to break down. Gender as a social construct, played a striking role in this marriage as Bernard's identity was defined in gender and race specific terms: as male, as the only son, and as Chinese. The expectation was that his wife would accept this and take a secondary role in the relationship. In Chinese culture, commercial success is linked to kinship and entrepreneurship, thus the cultural difference – the expectation of success in a family business – added enormous pressure to the marriage.

Bernard remarried a Rabaul Chinese girl, Davina Lam in 1978, and their four children have been educated in Australia at private boarding schools. In 1973 when Papua New Guinea obtained its independence from Australia, the Asian population was in a state of anxiety. Their future seemed uncertain and many closed their businesses and fled to Australia or Hong Kong. Bernard remained PNG but moved the family permanently to Australia in the 1990s. He maintains a property development business in PNG, commuting between the two countries. At Independence, Bernard decided to take out Papua New Guinean citizenship as it was reasoned that it would be far more beneficial from a business point of view, otherwise he would not be able to contribute to the Papua New Guinea economy as effectively. His wife and children are Australian citizens. Bernard has indeed contributed to PNG and the Australian relationship, not only through his business activities but to the community, particularly through the PNG Paralympics Association, and only last year retired as President, a position which he held for 12 years. He was awarded an OBE²⁶ in 2013 for his outstanding contribution and will have this honour conferred upon him in July this year at Windsor Castle UK.

Today, the barriers that Bernard faced during his first marriage have been dismantled. However, the isolation of the Chinese in Papua New Guinea, coupled with their long affiliation with Australia, has had the effect of altering their identity. This realisation completely shocked Bernard, and perhaps his experience, as related in 2003, encapsulates the essence of this conference:

I took the whole family back to China a few years ago and we couldn't wait to get out of there. We look Chinese but we are not Chinese. We are more Australian. There is a saying now amongst a lot of Chinese people, 'my generation and my kids' generation are just like a banana – yellow on the outside but white on the inside.' That is how they describe us now. My youngest, Brendan cannot speak Chinese anymore. That is a big difference. In another five or ten years there won't be any Chinese culture anymore. From my parent's days, to my days, to Brendan, it has all disappeared now. It has all changed, it is a changing world.

²⁶ Order of the British Empire – this information was provided to the author in May, 2014

Indeed it is a changing world, but in each case history, both the Chinese and Australian parties were prepared to defy convention and move beyond their racial and gendered parameters. Whilst the expression “going bananas”, implies loss and fragmentation of the Chinese culture, should that necessarily be viewed in a negative way, especially from an Australian perspective? Perhaps it is a question of “gain” not “loss”, as in each case, the partners have “gone bananas”, blending cultures to create a more dynamic, tolerant future for Australia and PNG.

A new national identity for Australia?

As the most recent census data tells us, intermarriage rates across all ethnic groups are quite high, especially by the third generation. There is also a trend of Pan-Asian intermarriage, particularly amongst the Vietnamese. In my own family, my niece in Adelaide married an Australian born Chinese from Melbourne, whom identifies strongly as Australian. However, they are making a concerted effort to ensure their children appreciate both cultures. My daughter-in-law is an example of ethnicity and nationality being two entirely different things. Her parents are Peranakan Chinese from Indonesia. They went to study in Germany in the 1960s and stayed where both their girls were born, hence they are German nationals. Her sister is married to a Malaysian Chinese – they are an example of Pan-Asian intermarriage.

Visually, in the minds of many, intercultural couples are symbolic of their respective nations, as gender and nation become fused. As partners in intercultural marriages, they have all been exponents of regional diplomacy at the most visible level – the everyday community level.

Marriage is an emotional experience, and one that affects the respectability and sensibilities of families, thus intermarriage has played a significant role in the historical *emotional* life of the Australian nation. These couples have given life and meaning to the historical process, a process that has married Australians to the Asia-Pacific region *despite* the “White Australia” policy and have given a deeply personal meaning to the term “regional relations”.

Almost invisibly, during the period 1945-1970, the marriages between Asians and Australians have demonstrated that the “crimson threads of kinship” were slowly but surely weaving their way towards Asia, weaving a new national identity that could truly be deemed “Australasian” in the true sense of its original meaning – that is – Australia and Asia in a harmonious relationship.