



ON
NOT SPEAKING
CHINESE

Living Between Asia and the West

Ian Ang

ON NOT SPEAKING CHINESE

Living between Asia and the West

Ien Ang



London and New York

First published 2001
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

*Routledge is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group*

© 2001 Ien Ang

Typeset in Galliard by Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge,
Wolverhampton
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
MPG Books Ltd, Bodmin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced
or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means,
now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording,
or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission
in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-25912-6 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-25913-4 (pbk)

ON NOT SPEAKING CHINESE

In this major new book, leading cultural thinker Ien Ang engages with urgent questions of identity in an age of globalization and diaspora. The starting-point for Ang's discussion is the experience of visiting Taiwan. Ang, a person of Chinese descent, born in Indonesia and raised in the Netherlands, found herself 'faced with an almost insurmountable difficulty' – surrounded by people who expected her to speak to them in Chinese. She writes: 'It was the beginning of an almost decade-long engagement with the predicaments of "Chineseness" in diaspora. In Taiwan I was different because I couldn't speak Chinese; in the West I was different because I looked Chinese.'

From this autobiographical beginning, Ang goes on to reflect upon tensions between 'Asia' and 'the West' at a national and global level, and to consider the disparate meanings of 'Chineseness' in the contemporary world. She offers a critique of the increasingly aggressive construction of a global Chineseness, and challenges Western tendencies to equate 'Chinese' with 'Asian' identity.

Ang then turns to 'the West', exploring the paradox of Australia's identity as a 'Western' country in the Asian region, and tracing Australia's uneasy relationship with its Asian neighbours, from the White Australia policy to contemporary multicultural society. Finally, Ang draws together her discussion of 'Asia' and 'the West' to consider the social and intellectual space of the 'in-between', arguing for a theorizing not of 'difference' but of 'togetherness' in contemporary societies.

Ien Ang is Professor of Cultural Studies and Director of the Institute for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. She is the author of a number of books, including *Watching Dallas* (1985), *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (1991) and *Living Room Wars* (1996), and recently co-edited *Alter/Asians: Asian Australian Identities in Art, Media and Popular Culture* (2000).

PREFACE

‘On not speaking Chinese’, the opening chapter of this book, was first presented in 1992 at a conference in Taiwan. The conference organizers said it was up to me what I wanted to talk about. I was elated, of course, for I had never been to Taiwan before, but when I started to prepare for the event I was suddenly faced with an almost insurmountable difficulty. Imagining my Taiwanese audience, I felt I couldn’t open my mouth in front of them without explaining why I, a person with stereotypically Chinese physical characteristics, could not speak to them in Chinese. In anticipation, I wrote this essay, which is now also the title of this book.

My scholarly work until then had mainly focused on mass media and popular culture – globally ubiquitous phenomena which fascinated me deeply but the analysis of which did not really implicate my personal identity (although I did make it a point, in the mid-1980s, that I liked watching *Dallas*). To all intents and purposes it was an academic pursuit which I could articulate in an ‘objective’ voice. In Taiwan, however, I felt that I couldn’t speak without recognizing explicitly who I was and responding to how I was likely to be perceived by the people in this country. I expected much questioning, which turned out to be more than warranted: again and again, people on the streets, in shops, restaurants and so on were puzzled and mystified that I couldn’t understand them when they talked to me in Chinese. So my decision to present a semi-autobiographical paper on the historical and cultural peculiarities of ‘not speaking Chinese’ resonated intimately with this experience. It was the beginning of an almost decade-long engagement with the predicaments of ‘Chineseness’ in diaspora. In Taiwan I was different because I couldn’t speak Chinese; in the West I was different because I looked Chinese.

The politics of identity and difference has been all the rage in the 1990s. All over the world, people have become increasingly assertive in claiming and declaring ‘who they are’. This book is perhaps a symptom of this trend, but it is also a critique – not in the sense of dismissing identity politics altogether, but by pointing to ‘identity’ as a double-edged sword: many people obviously need identity (or think they do), but identity can just as well be a strait-jacket. ‘Who I am’ or ‘who we are’ is never a matter of free choice.

In the past decade, identity politics has also been extremely salient for me in my newly adopted country, Australia. As a person of Chinese background I became identified as 'Asian' in a white country which has come to define itself increasingly as 'multicultural'. But while I am of Chinese descent, I was born in Indonesia and grew up in the Netherlands, before relocating to Australia as an adult. Coming from Europe to this part of the world, I did feel somehow reconnected with 'Asia', but only obliquely. The plane flew over my country of birth but landed thousands of kilometres further south, in the only corner of the 'Western' world which has ever imagined itself as 'part of Asia'. Identity politics – including that of nations – can take strange turns!

To a certain extent then, any identity is always mistaken, and this may be taken as the overall motto of this book. My personal biographical trajectory compels me to identify myself neither as fully 'Asian' nor as completely 'Western'. It is from this hybrid point of view – the ambiguous position of neither/nor, or both/and – that this book has been written. It is also from this point of view that I argue beyond identity and difference toward a more dynamic concern for togetherness-in-difference – a crucial issue for cultural politics in the twenty-first century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of this work has been made possible by an Australian Research Council Large Grant on ‘Reimagining Asians in Multicultural Australia’, which I received jointly with Jon Stratton. I thank Jon for being such a stimulating and searching intellectual companion throughout the decade. Short-term residencies at the Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, University of Iowa, the Center for Cultural Studies, University of California, Santa Cruz and the Centre for Advanced Studies, National University of Singapore at different times during the past decade have enabled me to concentrate on reflecting and writing. I thank all those involved for making this possible. I also thank all those who have over the years invited me to numerous conferences, seminars, workshops, etc., where I had the opportunity to present early versions of the essays collected in this book.

Over the years, many friends and colleagues, old and new, have been around for conversation, discussion, camaraderie, guidance, the sharing of work, fun and frustration, discovery of new horizons, or simply getting my act together. I cannot mention them all, but here I wish to especially thank (for reasons I hope they know): Jody Berland, Michael Bérubé, Charlotte Brunsdon, Rey Chow, Chua Beng-huat, James Clifford, Jane Desmond, Virginia Dominguez, Rita Felski, Simryn Gill, Mitzi Goldman, Helen Grace, Ghassan Hage, Koichi Iwabuchi, Elaine Lally, Lisa Law, Jeannie Martin, Iain McCalman, Dave Morley, Meaghan Morris, Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Bruce Robinson, Mandy Thomas, Zoë Sofoulis, Yao Souchou and Anna Yeatman. I also thank Rebecca Barden from Routledge – now Taylor and Francis – for her always reliable support. The University of Western Sydney, especially through my colleagues at the Research Centre in Intercommunal Studies – now the Institute for Cultural Research – has been a wonderful place for pursuing new intellectual avenues in a time of rampant restructuring and diminishing resources. Last but not least, I thank Ian Johnson for distracting me from finishing this book, if only by taking me in entirely different directions . . .

Earlier versions of some chapters were published in the following places. I remain grateful to the editors who first included my work in their publications:

Chapter 1 was first published as ‘To Be or Not to Be Chinese: Diaspora, Culture and Postmodern Ethnicity’, in *South-East Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 21,

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

no. 1, 1993, pp. 1–17 and subsequently as ‘On not speaking Chinese’ in *New Formations*, no. 24, December 1994, pp. 1–18; Chapter 2 was first published in *boundary 2: International Journal of Literature and Culture*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1998, pp. 223–242 (guest-edited by Rey Chow); Chapter 5 in *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 22–41; Chapter 6 in John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (eds), *Race, Colour, Identity: Constructing the Multicultural Subject in Australia and New Zealand*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg Verlag and Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000, pp. 115–130; Chapter 7 in Ghassan Hage and Rowanne Couch (eds), *The Future of Australian Multiculturalism*. Sydney: Research Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Sydney, 1999, pp. 189–204; Chapter 8 in *Feminist Review*, no. 52, Spring 1996, pp. 36–49; Chapter 9 in Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg and Angela McRobbie (eds), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*. London: Verso, 2000, pp. 1–13; Chapter 10 in *European Journal for Cultural Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1998, pp. 13–32; and Chapter 11 in Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle (eds), *Transitions: New Australian Feminisms*. St. Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1995, pp. 57–73. Chapters 3, 4 and 12 appear in this volume for the first time. All chapters have been updated or revised, and freshly copy-edited for this book. The connections between the chapters are clarified for the first time in the Introduction.

Ien Ang
Sydney
March 2001

CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix

Introduction: between Asia and the West (in complicated entanglement)	1
---	---

PART I	
Beyond Asia: deconstructing diaspora	19

1 On not speaking Chinese: diasporic identifications and postmodern ethnicity	21
2 Can one say no to Chineseness?: Pushing the limits of the diasporic paradigm	37
3 Indonesia on my mind: diaspora, the Internet and the struggle for hybridity	52
4 Undoing diaspora: questioning global Chineseness in the era of globalization	75

PART II	
Beyond the West: negotiating multiculturalism	93

5 Multiculturalism in crisis: the new politics of race and national identity in Australia <i>With Jon Stratton</i>	95
6 Asians in Australia: a contradiction in terms?	112
7 Racial/spatial anxiety: 'Asia' in the psycho-geography of Australian whiteness	126



CONTENTS

8	The curse of the smile: ambivalence and the 'Asian' woman in Australian multiculturalism	138
9	Identity blues: rescuing cosmopolitanism in the era of globalization	150
PART III		
	Beyond identity: living hybridities	161
10	Local/global negotiations: doing cultural studies at the crossroads	163
11	I'm a feminist but . . . : 'other' women and postnational identities	177
12	Conclusion: together-in-difference (the uses and abuses of hybridity)	193
	<i>Notes</i>	202
	<i>Bibliography</i>	211
	<i>Index</i>	226

INTRODUCTION

Between Asia and the West (In complicated entanglement)

The figure of the postcolonial diasporic intellectual – born in the Third World and educated and living and working in the West – has become the subject of much controversy in recent years. This is especially the case as some diasporic intellectuals – one thinks of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Stuart Hall, to name but a few – have gained international celebrity status in the halls of the Western academy. As Caren Kaplan (1996: 123) has observed, ‘the cosmopolitan intellectual as migrant figure signals for many either the liberatory or negative effects of an increasingly transnational world’. As such, the figure of the diasporic intellectual operates as a metaphor that condenses the current intellectual discomfort and sense of crisis thrown up by the new world (dis)order created by the end of the Cold War, the accelerated globalization of capitalism, and the increasingly assertive presence of ‘the Rest’ in ‘the West’. What is it then about the distinctive voice of the diasporic intellectual that generates so much contention?

Rey Chow, who grew up in Hong Kong and now lives and works in the United States, has this to say about her own work:

If there is something from my childhood and adolescent years that remains a chief concern in my writing, it is the tactics of dealing with and dealing in dominant cultures that are so characteristic of living in Hong Kong. These are the tactics of those who do not have claims to territorial propriety or cultural centrality.

(1993: 25)

For Chow, ‘Hong Kong’ operates as a kind of interstitial location which impels her to engage in what she calls ‘tactics of intervention’. According to Chow:

The history of Hong Kong predisposes one to a kind of ‘border’ or ‘parasite’ practice – an identification with ‘Chinese culture’ but a distantiation from the Chinese Communist regime; a resistance against colonialism but an unwillingness to see the community’s prosperity disrupted.

(ibid.: 22)

Hong Kong's unsettled and unsettling location between China and the West produces the multiple ambivalences Chow sums up, in which a desire to have it both ways is continually undercut by the refusal or inability to identify with either. Chow wishes to hold on to this unstable, ambivalent, doubly marginalized positionality as the very place from where she can enact 'a specific kind of social power' (ibid.), the power to interrupt, to trouble, to intervene tactically rather than strategically in the interrogation of dominant discourses. Tactical interventions never make counter-hegemonic claims to alternative truths but are limited to bringing out the contradictions and the violence inherent in all posited truths. The tactical interventionist forever remains on the border: her agency is not in anticipation of or in preparation for the occupation of a new field by destroying and replacing existing ones. It is 'para-sitical' in that it never takes over a field in its entirety, but erodes it slowly and insidiously, making space for itself surreptitiously. Chow's position here echoes Homi Bhabha's (1990b) enunciation of a 'third space', the in-between space of hybridity from where cultural change can be brought about quietly, without revolutionary zeal, by 'contaminating' established narratives and dominant points of view.

To be sure, it is the diasporic intellectual's affirmation of this essentially 'negative' agency of hybridity, as exemplified by Chow, that is so disturbing to their critics. Aijaz Ahmad (1992), for example, in a scathing critique, argues that the politics of hybridity never moves beyond the ephemeral and the contingent, failing to produce stable commitment to a political cause, a sustained politics of radical structural change. In a different context, Ella Shohat (1992) has similarly criticized postcolonial theory – a body of work mostly elaborated by diasporic intellectuals – for its theoretical and political ambivalence because it 'posits no clear domination and calls for no clear opposition'. Such critiques relate to a call for conscious partisanship and unflinching commitment (to one's class, gender, race or nation) as a prerequisite to radical politics and knowledge. The diasporic intellectual acts as a perpetual party-pooper here because her impulse is to point to ambiguities, complexities and contradictions, to complicate matters rather than provide formulae for solutions, to blur distinctions between colonizer and colonized, dominant and subordinate, oppressor and oppressed. In short, the diasporic intellectual is declared suspect because her emphasis on undecidability and ambivalence leads arguably to a valuation of hybridity, which does not lend itself to the development of revolutionary strategies of structural progressive change and systematic radical resistance.

I must warn the reader that the spirit of the diasporic intellectual's tactical interventionism runs throughout this book: the space from which these chapters were written was precisely the space of hybridity, between Asia and the West. At the same time, I hope to contribute to a reappraisal of the politics of hybridity – and its emphasis on multiplicity, uncertainty and ambivalence – which always seems to be at the heart of criticisms of the diasporic intellectual's discourse. In a riposte to these criticisms, Stuart Hall (1996f: 244) has remarked that 'a certain nostalgia runs through some of these arguments for a return to a clear-cut politics

of binary oppositions'. Hall notes that the current crisis of the left can be understood precisely as a sign that there are no longer, if there ever were, simple lines to be drawn between goodies and baddies. This doesn't mean that there are no hard political choices to be made, but, he asks, 'isn't the ubiquitous, the soul-searing, lesson of our times the fact that political binaries do not (do not any longer? did they ever?) either stabilise the field of political antagonism in any permanent way or render it transparently intelligible?' And, so Hall continues, 'Are we not all, in different ways, . . . desperately trying to understand what making an ethical political choice and taking a political position in a necessarily contingent political field is like, what sort of "politics" it adds up to?' (1996f: 244).

'Hybridity' captures in a shorthand fashion the complexities and ambiguities of any politics in an increasingly globalized, postcolonial and multicultural world, a world in which heroic, utopian ideas of revolutionary transformation seem seriously out of touch even as sites of social struggle and political conflict have multiplied. In this light, Chow's emphasis on 'tactics' rather than 'strategies' signifies a realistic recognition of the *limits* to radical political intervention in the contemporary world. These tactics should be taken more rather than less seriously as the very concrete instances in which people work out specific, situationally determined modes of 'hybrid accommodation with national and transnational forces' (Clifford 1998: 367). Hybridity, here, should not be dismissed pejoratively as the merely contingent and ephemeral, equated with lack of commitment and political resoluteness, but should be valued, in James Clifford's (ibid.: 366) words, as 'a pragmatic response, making the best of given (often bad) situations . . . in limited historical conjunctures'.

In the course of this book, I will argue for the importance of hybridity as a basis for cultural politics in a world in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between us and them, between the different and the same, here and there, and indeed, between Asia and the West. We now live in a world of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1988: 148) has characterized as 'a gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences'. This is a globalized world in which 'people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth, and power' are 'contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is increasingly difficult to get out of each other's way' (ibid.: 147). Hybridity is a necessary concept to hold onto in this condition, because unlike other key concepts in the contemporary politics of difference – such as diaspora and multiculturalism – it foregrounds complicated entanglement rather than identity, togetherness-in-difference rather than virtual apartheid. The diasporic intellectual may in fact be especially well placed to analyse this complicated entanglement because it is embodied in her own life trajectory.

From Asia to the West

As an ethnic Chinese, Indonesian-born and European-educated academic who now lives and works in Australia, I sort of fit into the category of the 'diasporic

intellectual', although I prefer the more neutral term 'migrant intellectual'. This book is to a certain extent auto-biographical, in that it is in large part a reflection on my own experiences as a multiple migrant. Migrants always inevitably undergo a process of cross-cultural translation when they move from one place to another, from one regime of language and culture to another. Salman Rushdie (1991), the famous diasporic Indian writer, calls himself a 'translated man'. But the process of cultural translation is not a straightforward and teleological one: from the 'old' to the 'new'. As Clifford (1997: 182) has put it, 'One enters the translation process from a specific location, from which one only partly escapes.' Hall (1996a: 399) remarks that diasporic intellectuals are 'transitional figures', 'constantly translating between different languages, different worlds'. It is this condition of transitionality that characterizes the lives of migrant intellectuals, also aptly described as 'living in translation', to borrow a term from Tejaswini Niranjana (1992: 46).

This book draws on my own particular experiences with living in translation between Asia and the West, as it were, although more specific geo-historical coordinates will need to be elaborated below. After all, 'Asia' and 'the West' are not natural entities but historically produced, homogenizing categories. The idea of 'Asia' as a distinct, demarcatable region of the world originated in a very Eurocentric system of geographical classification. In their book *The Myth of Continents*, Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen (1997: 37) remark that 'of all the so-called continents, Asia is not only the largest but also the most fantastically diversified, a vast region whose only commonalities – whether human or physical – are so general as to be trivial'. This is true, but it does not do away with the reality that in the contemporary world, 'Asia' and 'Asians' are powerful terms of identification for many cultures, societies and peoples who are somehow subsumed under these terms. We know, commonsensically, which are Asian countries, and millions of people living in these countries – as well as in the West – would call themselves Asians (as well as Singaporeans, Chinese, Thai, Indian, and so on), even though this may not always be a strongly or unambiguously felt identification.

'The West', for its part, may be an internally diverse category but it is evidently, as Naoki Sakai (1989: 95) remarks, 'a name always associating itself with those regions, communities, and peoples that appear politically and economically superior to other regions, communities and peoples'. Indeed, it is the very entrenched hegemony of this asymmetrical relationship between the West and the Rest which reinforces the potency of 'Asia' and 'Asians' as categories which represent a *difference* from the West, whether imposed or self-declared. Being Asian means being non-Western, at least from the dominant point of view, and this in itself has strong implications for one's sense of self, especially if one is (positioned as) Asian in the West. The fact that identification with being Asian – sometimes in hyphenated form such as 'Asian-American' – is so ubiquitous across Western nation-states reveals much about the tension that exists between the two categories. Paul Gilroy (1993: 1) once remarked that 'striving to be both European and black requires some specific forms of double consciousness', pointing to the presumably unnatural quality of such an identity. The same can be said about being both Western and

Asian, even though no *a priori* similarity in the forms of double consciousness can be assumed between blacks of the African diaspora (of which Gilroy speaks) and Asians in the West, given the vastly different historical conditions under which Africans and Asians have entered Western space, in Europe, the Americas, and in Australasia (Chun 2001).

The themes I focus on in this book are not merely personal, but coincide with some major cultural and historical developments which have taken place in the past thirty to forty years or so, a period in which the configuration of the world has changed dramatically. Specifically, what we have experienced in the past few decades is a transition from a world of nation-states who organize themselves more or less effectively as socially distinct, culturally homogeneous and politically sovereign (and in which there is no real place for migrants who are considered too different), to an interconnected, intermingled world in which virtually all nation-states have become territories where various economies, cultures and peoples intersect and interact. In the latter part of the twentieth century, in other words, nation-states have become spaces of global flows, in which the confluence of cultural difference and diversity has become increasingly routinized. At the same time, the process of globalization has also routinized the transnational interconnections and interdependencies which erode and transcend the separateness of nation-states. In short, the world is now a space of complicated entanglement, of togetherness-in-difference.

My own personal history as a migrant and as a migrant intellectual has been marked in quite interesting ways by this enormous world-historical transformation. As an Asian migrant in the West, my positioning in the world has changed dramatically in the past thirty years or so, not least because the global meaning of 'Asia' has undergone major shifts in the postcolonial period. In the 1960s, when I migrated from Asia to Europe as a child, Asianness – in whatever national embodiment: Chinese, Japanese, Indian, Malay, Filipino, and so on – was still firmly associated with Third World backwardness in the Western imagination. China had become communist and was totally out of bounds. Japanese economic progress, actively supported by the United States, was routinely dismissed as the result of the dumb Japanese skill at imitating and copying the West, not the reward of their own creativity, innovativeness and hard work. South-East Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were still in the throws of the decolonization process. The Vietnam War, which more than any event brought Asia into the everyday lifeworld of people living in the West, produced TV images of violence, cruelty and sheer human despair. When thousands of 'boat people' from Indochina were allowed to settle in Western countries after 1975, their refugee status did not exactly enhance the standing of the category 'Asian' in Western minds.

By the 1990s, however, Asianness is no longer linked exclusively to lamentable Third World connotations. One important reason for this has been the highly contested, spectacular rise of East and South-East Asian 'dragons' and 'tigers' in the global economy in the 1980s and 1990s, a development which managed to make the advanced, Western world extremely nervous and jittery. For the first time

in modern world history the West, 'symbolically at the heart of global power' (Keith and Pile 1993: 22), faced the prospect of being outperformed by the East. The spectre of a coming Asian Century – which would supplant the previous, American Century – loomed large, symbolized most traumatically by the high-profile Japanese take-overs of companies that represent the 'soul of America', Hollywood, in the late 1980s (see e.g. Morley and Robins 1995, Chapter 8). In the transnational corporate world, there was a flurry of interest in the success formulae of Japanese management style, Chinese business culture and, more generally, in the principles behind the dynamism of 'confucian capitalism'.¹ At the same time, leaders of previously 'unimportant' – due to their smallness and lack of visibility on the world stage – Asian nations such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad had begun to boast about the superiority of so-called 'Asian values': their societies were supposedly more harmonious, more morally upright, and more efficient and disciplined than those of the West, which they painted as increasingly violent, decadent and disorderly. In this discourse, 'Asia' – Asian capitalism, Asian modernity, Asian culture – is touted as the model for an affluent, hypermodern future, not the residue of a traditional and backward past, as classic Orientalism would have it. Some even entertained the – distinctly postcolonial – fantasy that Asia, imagined as a fictive, civilizational historical subject, would finally turn the tables on the West, as reflected in book titles by high profile Asian leaders such as *The Japan that Can Say No* (Ishihara 1991), *The Voice of Asia* (Mahathir and Ishihara 1995), *The Asian Renaissance* (Anwar 1996), the provocative *Can Asians Think?* (Mahbubani 1998) and *A New Deal for Asia* (Mahathir 1999). These Asians were telling the world that they were no longer the deferential followers of the West, but have created alternative (and arguably, for some, superior) *Asian* styles of modernity. In the West, the mood was mirrored in the publication of Harvard Professor Samuel Huntington's famous article 'The Clash of Civilizations' in 1993, in which he projects a decline of Western power and a 'resurgence of non-Western cultures', with Asia, in Huntington's view, likely to pose the most formidable challenge to the West in the first decades of the twenty-first century (Huntington 1993; 1997).

Of course this whole scenario was dealt a severe blow when the successful Asian economies were thrown into crisis in 1997, causing widespread chaos and hardship across the region as the value of local currencies tumbled, unemployment rose and, in the wake of economic downturn, long-standing political powers-that-be were destabilized – the most dramatic of which was the forced resignation of President Suharto in Indonesia in May 1998 after months of student protests and mass rioting. The 'Asian meltdown' led many Western observers to claim that the very basis of Asian economic success – represented by the dubious phenomenon of 'crony capitalism' – was unsound and that Western (read: US-style neoliberal) economic policies were still superior after all. There is a triumphalist subtext to such Western responses to the crisis: 'Asian values' could now be declared a myth and the West has emerged, once again, on top (Fukuyama 1998; see also Sheridan 1999).

Nevertheless, Asia's standing has not been completely wiped out by the loss of its economic face. Too many decades have passed in which Westerners have had to deal with Asians – from Japanese corporate managers to Chinese Communist Party leaders, from Hong Kong entrepreneurs to Singaporean and Malaysian diplomats – on the basis of presumed equality, that is, on the basis of the assumed *modernity* of Asia.² While there may be differences among moderns, moderns cannot relegate one another to the realm of absolute Otherness. Whatever their differences, moderns share the same world, the *modern* world, and therefore are expected to treat each other, at least in principle, as equals. Thus, modern Asians can generally no longer be represented unproblematically as primitives or exotics – two versions of the absolute Other – by their Western counterparts. They may perhaps be called ‘recalcitrant’ (indicating at most the irritation felt by the older brother in a quarrel among siblings),³ but they cannot be dismissed as ‘backward’. Modern Asia, in other words, unlike, say, Africa – too afflicted by endless poverty and disaster – or the Arabs – too insistent on their fundamental difference – has acquired a position of symbolic equipoise with the West.⁴ Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad expresses the sentiments best when he exclaims: ‘Asians will certainly not dominate the world. But Asians or the mixed people living in Asia will take their rightful place, their rightful share of the World Century’ (Mahathir 1999: 151).

In Australia, a country geographically tucked away at the far south end of the so-called Asia-Pacific region and therefore the western nation most directly exposed to changes and developments occurring among its northern neighbours, the 1980s and 1990s were marked by an increasingly loud chorus of clamours for Australia to ‘engage’, ‘enmesh’ and ‘integrate’ with Asia. The need for an ‘Asianization’ of Australia, as perceived by government and business leaders and by influential economists, policy analysts and journalists, was based on the observation that if Australia did not, it would be hopelessly left behind in the global economy and become a parochial backwater in world society, a ‘banana republic’. I came to live and work in Australia in 1991 after having spent twenty-five years in Western Europe. I left a Europe that had just undergone massive upheaval after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and where international discussion was immersed by excitement about the prospect of a unified Europe – something worked upon assiduously by powerful European leaders such as Helmut Kohl and François Mitterand (though not Margaret Thatcher). When I arrived in Australia, however, I soon realized how geoculturally specific this ‘desire for Europe’ was (see Ang 1998). Nothing of it was evident in Australia; instead, to my amazement, the country was engrossed in a ‘desire for Asia’. Paul Keating, the flamboyant political leader who ‘pushed Australia further into Asia than any other prime minister’ (Sheridan 1995: xix), stated that by the year 2000 Australia should be a country in which ‘our national culture is shaped by, and helps to shape, the cultures around us’ (quoted in *ibid.*). For me, as a new migrant into Australia, this was a puzzling as well as exciting experience: this Australian infatuation with Asia – after more than a century-long rejection – rearticulated and recontextualized my own Asianness in unprecedented ways.