Images of Asia-Pacific nations among Hong Kong students

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This article examines the images of five Asia-Pacific nations and their people among Hong Kong university students. It was found that Australia has the "best image" followed by Singapore and Malaysia. The results from the Bogardus Social Distance Scale indicated that Hong Kong university students felt closer to Australians and Singaporeans, while less close to Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos. The respondents advise Australians to learn Cantonese, watch Hong Kong movies and television and visit non-tourist areas in order to understand Hong Kong better.

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Political and social changes brought about by the forces of regional economic integration have made contacts between peoples in Asia-Pacific countries unavoidable. However, much of what the people know of each other are based on interpretations of "images" from the mass media or other second-hand sources. According to Merrill (1962), an image is synonymous with a "stereotype" or "generalised picture". It is a composite of impressions that form a dominant "representation" and a consolidated characterisation of a people and government. Boulding (1956) observed that an image could attract friendly or hostile actions, and it does not matter whether the image is true or not as long as the nation is mindful of the images held by others.

The objective of this study is to examine the images of five nations in the region, namely, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Philippines, among university students in Hong Kong. We are also interested in knowing what suggestions they would make to foreigners who want to know about Hong Kong. Hong Kong people's self-image is reflected to some extent through these suggestions because they tend to highlight what is considered to be important and unique in Hong Kong.

There have been many studies on the cultural identity of Australia, Japan, China and Southeast Asian nations. (See Irwin,
1996: 138-149 for a comprehensive introduction of relevant bibliography). But studies on Hong Kong people's images of other nations are few. One was done from the vantage point of Hong Kong on the image about Australians (Wang, 1994). He found that Australia in Asia was conceived as a migrant state, with English heritage, "medium power", relative economic decline and great potential. Australia is thought of by Asians to be like the United States and Canada. It has an image of having a high standard of living, a liberal and democratic political system, an admirable set of laws, quality education, excellent infrastructure and a tolerant and caring people. (Wang 1994, cited in Irwin 1996:89).

This study selected two classes of journalism and communication final year students at the Chinese University of Hong Kong as the sample. The reason for not having a larger and representative sample is a lack of resources. Although it cannot represent the Hong Kong population, this sample reflects to some extent the educated and relatively informed citizens' picture about the countries under study. The two classes were Communication Theories and International Communication. Students in these two classes are assumed to know more about the outside world and the ramifications of cultural stereotypes. If they do not have a favourable image about a particular country and its people, the rest in Hong Kong will probably not have a better one.

A questionnaire was distributed to each of the students by their lecturer during the class in the absence of the researcher. They were asked to fill out the questions anonymously and return to the lecturer. All students present in class returned their questionnaires.

The study was done in late April 1996. Most of the questions were open-ended. The respondents were asked to briefly describe their impressions about the countries under study. They were also asked about their impressions of the people in the five countries. In other words, we separated the images of the country from the images of the people, because these two images need not be the same.

In addition, they were asked if they have friends or relatives in those countries as it may make a difference in their impressions about the countries. For the multi-ethnic societies of Australia, Singapore and Malaysia, the respondents were asked to indicate which race(s) they were referring to when they described the people. For example, when they gave their impressions of Australians, they were asked to indicate whether they referred to the "Whites", "Aborigines", or "Others". They could check more than one answer.
Then they were asked to rate different people along a modified Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Sarantakos, 1994:85). The Bogardus scale has been used widely by social scientists. It has been shown to have a very high split-half reliability (r is equal to or greater than .90), a high content validity and a satisfactory overall validity (Kimmon, 1990).

Respondents were asked if they would accept people from different countries as their relatives by marriage, good friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, visitors or someone to be expelled from Hong Kong. They only need to pick one choice as an item on this scale, which implies the person's position in relation to the rest. For example, if someone picks the last item of expelling a foreigner from his/her place, he/she would not logically pick the choice above it, i.e., accepting that foreigner as a visitor or good friend.

A total of 89 questionnaires were returned. The mean age of the sample was 20.2 with a median family income in the range of HK$10,001 - 20,000. A t-test was run to see if there was any significant difference between genders in the acceptance of foreigners on the Bogardus Social Distance Scale. The result showed that there was no significant difference. About 79% were females.

An overwhelming majority of students (over 93%) had no friends or relatives in Australia, Singapore and Indonesia. 18% of the them had friends and relatives in Malaysia, 11% had friends and relatives in the Philippines and 11% had employed Filipino household helpers in their family.

The most frequent descriptions of Australia were: Kangaroos; beautiful; sun and beach; peaceful; racial discrimination; skin cancer; and a place for migration.

The words and phrases most frequently used to describe Australian people were: Fat; white; friendly; open; warm, English difficult to understand; Europeans and Americans alike; highly educated; racial discrimination.

An overwhelming majority (91%) of the respondents referred to "the Whites" when they described Australian people.

In general, Hong Kong university students' impression of Australia and its people were good. These findings are consistent with Wang's earlier observations. Among Hong Kong students, Australia belongs to or is very similar to the West like America and Europe. The Australians are White people. They are warm, friendly, highly educated, and nicer Westerners. The place is a good place to live with small population, open space, beautiful natural environment and lovely animals. The problem with the ozone layer and skin cancer is a concern though. In recent years, lots of Hong Kong people have emigrated to Australia. Thus, it
is not surprising that many described it as a place for migration. The single negative image about Australia relates to "racial discrimination". Earlier findings about Australia's image in Asia (Roces, 1963; Kelabora, 1993) have also indicated the anti-Asian conception among Asians. It should, however, be noted that out of the 89 respondents, only one-fifth cited "racial discrimination" to describe Australia or Australians. Irwin (1996) is probably right in pointing out that memories of racism and the White Australia policy are still alive in Asia.

On the other hand, 13% and nearly half (49%) of the students were willing to accept Australians as relatives by marriage and good friends respectively (Table 1). There is no significant difference between male or female students in this attitude.

Table 1: Hong Kong University Students' Acceptance Of Foreigners By Classification (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classification As:</th>
<th>Aust</th>
<th>S'poreans</th>
<th>Malays</th>
<th>Indon</th>
<th>Filipinos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relatives</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Friends</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbours</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleagues</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking Acquaint.</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitors to HK</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Someone To Be Expelled</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total %</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>101%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Adds up to more than 100% due to rounding errors.

The most frequent descriptions for Singapore as a place were: Clean; tidy; strict; stern; and dictatorial. The descriptors used for Singaporeans were: Disciplined, obedient; arrogant, hardworking; good education; good English; similar to Hong Kong people.

As more than 70% of Singaporeans are Chinese, the respondents tend to treat it as similar to their own (Chinese constitutes 98% of Hong Kong's population). Singaporeans were conceived to be hardworking, obedient and well-disciplined.

It is interesting to note one of the respondent's conception that Singaporeans could easily be caned -- obviously a result of international media reports on the caning of an American teenager for vandalism in Singapore some years ago. Six out of 10 respondents referred to the strictness of Singapore's political
system as "fake democracy", "dictatorship in real", "no freedom", "paternalistic" and "prison without walls".

While the students' overall image of Singaporeans was positive, its political system was described as "dictatorial". Although they considered Singaporeans as arrogant, a good proportion of them would accept Singaporeans as relatives by marriage (12%), or good friends (47%). These proportions were second only to those for Australians.

Malaysia as a place was frequently described as: Coconut trees; hot; humid; sorcery; Chinese not-well treated; culturally diverse; low education; and delicious food. Frequent descriptors of Malaysians were: Warm; simple; lazy; like dancing; hardworking; and low education.

Malaysia seemed to be a mystery to Hong Kong people. Many respondents named "sorcery" as their impression of Malaysia. They had heard of stories about tourists being "charmed" in Malaysia. However, the stories were usually relayed by "friends of friends" or in gossip magazines. The respondents painted a tropical picture of the place, with lots of coconut trees, warm and humid climate and rubber plantations. Malaysia was perceived as a tourist spot with beautiful scenery and cultural diversity.

Malaysians were perceived to be "warm and simple", "dancing a lot", "lazy", and "hardworking". These contrasting impressions could be due to various personal experiences with the people or with the image portrayed by mass media.

When the respondents were asked to indicate which race they were referring to when they described Malaysians, only slightly more than 10% said they were referring to Malays whereas 17% were referring to Indonesians. The students' simplified depiction, we suspect, is due to the apparent similarities in complexion and physical features of Malaysians and Indonesians.

We were curious to know if the different ethnic groups referred to have any influence on their perception of Malaysians. We re-coded the type of ethnic groups into three categories, namely, Chinese; Chinese mixed with Non-Chinese; and Non-Chinese which include Malays, Indonesians, Indians and Filipinos. We noticed that only 25% of respondents had the Chinese ethnic group in mind when they talked about their impressions of Malaysians.

We found that among the three groups, the breakdown of acceptance by Hong Kong students was very similar across the seven categories on the Bogardus Scale. The proportion of accepting them as good friends is 36% for ethnic Chinese, 39% for Chinese mixed with non-Chinese; and 35% for non-Chinese.
Similar patterns were found in accepting Malaysians as neighbours and colleagues. We may conclude that the students’ acceptance of Malaysians is not based on ethnic ties.

In general, Hong Kong students were less willing to accept Malaysians than Singaporeans as relatives by marriage (1%) although more than one third (38%) would accept them as good friends and 13% as neighbours.

As we noted earlier, some respondents have relatives and friends in Malaysia. We wondered if this link would make a difference in their acceptance of Malaysians. We ran a t-test between those who have friends and relatives and those without. We found that the mean score for the group “With Friends and Relatives” on the Bogardus Scale was 2.8 (N = 16) whereas the mean for the group “Without Friends and Relatives” was 3.8 (N = 70), t-value = 2.28 with df = 84, p < .03. The difference is statistically significant. It shows that people who have friends and relatives in Malaysia will be more likely to accept Malaysians than people without friends or relatives there.

The image of Indonesia as a place was less favourable among the Hong Kong students. The most frequently used descriptions were: Mysterious; horrific; hot; beautiful scenery; backward; rich ethnic culture; discrimination against Chinese; big gap between rich and poor; not hygienic; prawn chips.

The descriptions of Indonesian people were: Dark complexion; hardworking; warm; pure/simple; like hot & spicy food with good cooking skills; food has special character.

Hong Kong students had the impression that Chinese were discriminated against in the country and there was a wide disparity between the rich and poor. The place was, however, perceived to be beautiful with rich cultures, and the people are warm and simple. In a way, Hong Kong students had a split image about Indonesia between the place and its people. They have a better, albeit vague, impression of the people than the place.

On the acceptance level, only 2% of the respondents accepted Indonesians as their relatives by marriage. Still one-third accepted them as good friends. The level of acceptance was similar to that for Malaysians. But 1% of the university students would choose to expel Indonesians from Hong Kong. Although the percentages were small, it is quite discomforting to see this attitude among highly educated university students. Further investigation into the reasons and possibly bad experience in the interactions between the people of these places is warranted.

Hong Kong people probably have more contact with Filipinos than people from other Asia-Pacific nations because many Hong Kong families employ household helpers from the

Images Of Indonesia

Images Of The Philippines
Philippines. 11% of the respondents indicated that their family employed Filipino helpers and some had relatives in the Philippines too. The images of Filipinos were much broader and richer than those of other people in the countries under study except Australia.

The commonly used descriptions of the Philippines were: Typhoon attacks; volcanic eruptions; hot; poor; backward; chaotic/war/rebels; politically unstable.

The descriptions of Filipinos were varied: Dark complexion; warm; hardworking; lazy; emotional; poor; low education; good Catholics; English difficult to understand; noisy; good dancers; corrupt; household maids; not hygienic.

From the descriptions, we can see that the respondents seemed to have broader interactions with Filipinos. For example, the respondents very often referred to the Filipinos' Catholic religion and emotional character which were absent in the descriptions of other peoples.

Some also mentioned having known other university students from the Philippines. This suggested a better interaction between the students of these two places through their contact with the household helpers, of whom some were university graduates.

Only 1% of the student respondents would accept Filipinos as their relatives by marriage and about 3 out of 10 accepted Filipinos as good friends. The 3% response to expel Filipinos from Hong Kong was probably due to some unpleasant experience between the people of these two places.

As Hong Kong people have more contact with Filipinos than others in this study, it seems natural that they would have encountered some unpleasant experience in their interactions. But this is a mere guess, there may be other reasons apart from interpersonal interactions, for instance, media coverage of Filipinos or personal family history in the place. More studies are needed to throw light upon the factors contributing to this unfriendly, though minor, attitude toward Filipinos.

The distance between Hong Kong students and other Asia-Pacific Countries' people are graphically represented in the following diagram on the next page.

From the diagram we can see that Australian "White" people and Singaporean Chinese are socially closest to the Hong Kong students, followed by Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos.

Generally, the students are friendly to the people from these five nations. The average score for Filipinos, the lowest among the five, is 4.1 which is just the middle of the 7-point Bogardus Scale. It indicates a level of acceptance up to the level of being a colleague in the workplace.
Fig. 1: Social Distance Between Hong Kong University Students and Other Asia-Pacific People

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Australia (2.8)</td>
<td>Indonesia (3.8)</td>
<td>The PIs (4.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia (3.6)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore (2.9)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: The values in brackets are mean distances from Hong Kong people based on a 7-point Bogardus Social Distance Scale.

As Australia shows great interest in becoming part of Asia, this study specifically asks the open question: "If an Australian would like to know more about Hong Kong, what advice would you give?"

We grouped the answers to this question into 7 categories: Interpersonal Skills, What to Learn, Information Seeking, People Contact, Where to Visit, What to Experience, and What Hong Kong Characters to Note.

The students advised interested Australians to first equip themselves with interpersonal communication skills in order to learn more about Hong Kong. These skills include "be friendly", "be polite", "don't take rejection so seriously", "take more initiatives", and "don't racially discriminate".

Interested Australians were also advised to learn the local dialect, Cantonese, as well as Chinese culture and values. They thought a local game of "mahjong" and "karaoke" were also important things to know in order to have a better understanding of Hong Kong.

The channels through which one can seek more information about Hong Kong include Hong Kong movies, television, newspapers and magazines. Many also suggested the Hong Kong Tourist Association. There were also suggestions that Australians should stay with Hong Kong families for a period, make Hong Kong friends, or visit Hong Kong families. On where to visit, they suggested housing estates where the majority of Hong Kong people live, poor areas, hawker districts, with particular mention of the famous "Woman's Street", central business districts as well as non-tourist areas.

Australians were further advised to experience horse-racing in Hong Kong which is one of the most popular recreations for Hong Kong people. During the Sino-British negotiations for the reversion of Hong Kong to China in the early 1980s, the Chinese had to guarantee that after the reversion three major features in Hong Kong must be retained, namely, stock speculation, ballroom-dancing and horse-racing. The students also advise interested Australians to use public transport during rush hours in order to experience the congestion on buses and the mass transit railway.
Finally, the students suggested that interested Australians should note the special characters of Hong Kong and its people. These include the people's "hard-and-fast-working" attitude as well as the selfish and arrogant side of the Hong Kong character.

Conclusion

From the study, we can see that some highly educated young people in Hong Kong feel closest to Australians and Singaporeans than to Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos. Although they were less likely to accept people from the last three places as their relatives by marriage, they were willing to accept them as working colleagues. Only a very tiny percentage would "expel" Indonesians and Filipinos from Hong Kong.

Hong Kong university students in this study generally have more positive than negative images about the five countries and their people. It may indicate an outward looking character of the metropolitan city of Hong Kong. Hong Kong people seem to have some knowledge about its region, although it may not be entirely accurate. Accuracy in the images, according to Boulding (1956:114), does not matter much, because "the images become realities and the real, however, defined, is really an image, since it is the mutual perceptions that become the 'realities' producing friendly or hostile actions".

As the cultures in Asia are diverse, more studies of this kind, on a larger scale and more intercultural level is called for. In the process of intercultural understanding, mass media are especially important in the initial stage. This study shows that most people do not have friends, relatives or other first-hand contacts in other countries. They form their impressions of other countries probably on the basis of information provided by the mass media or other second-hand interpersonal sources like colleagues at work, schoolmates or peers. The interpersonal sources, however, may in turn rely on mass media like newspapers, television series, movies, magazines and books for their impressions of foreign countries.

In a program for intercultural understanding, it will be vital to examine not only people's mutual images, but also how and why different peoples and places are represented as they are in the mass media, both international and local. An understanding of media representation of foreign cultures will help to unravel some of the problems in intercultural communication and understanding.
Notes

1. The author acknowledges the consent of Dr. Lars Willnat in conducting the study in his classes; and the assistance of Ms. Xueyi Chen and Mr. David Ng in administering the survey.

References


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