



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, January 2021

Race and mobility: Asia, Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during COVID-19

*Vidya Ramachandran*¹

Themes

Mobility Events

Abstract

COVID-19 has propelled vital conversations about race and racism to the forefront of many societies. In Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, violence and discrimination against peoples of Asian descent has escalated during the pandemic. These increasing hostilities, alongside travel restrictions, will likely affect future mobilities between the regions.

Keywords

Race, China, Asia, Australia, New Zealand, pandemic

To be quoted as:

Ramachandran, Vidya. 2021. Race and mobility: Asia, Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand during COVID-19. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department 'Anthropology of Economic Experimentation'. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. <https://doi.org/10.48509/molab.9920>

This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

¹Vidya Ramachandran is a graduate of the MSc Migration Studies programme at the University of Oxford. vidya.ramachandran93@gmail.com

Medicalising China

Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand have long received significant migrations from Asia.² However, this relationship has not always been easy. ‘Asians in Australia’³ are heavily politicised,⁴ and their perceived threat to the country’s social and racial cohesion has been often used to justify anti-immigration platforms.⁵ In Aotearoa-New Zealand, anti-immigration sentiment has similarly centred on racialised discourse around Asian migration.⁶ These have often been exacerbated by political tensions with China, which have again recently escalated following China’s passage of the National Security Law, and suspension of civil liberties in Hong Kong.⁷

This historical context is important when considering racial hostilities during COVID-19. The pandemic has not created anti-Chinese sentiment anew – it has simply given such sentiment a perceived sense of legitimisation. Globally, the fact that the pandemic broke out in China has led to widespread condemnation of Beijing. Chinese institutions are accused of intentionally manufacturing, or “covering up”,⁸ the pandemic; and Chinese people condemned for the practice of ‘wet-markets’, and for eating wild animals, or any animals at all – even while similar practices exist in many other parts of the world.⁹ But this discourse is neither novel, nor surprising. Ari Larissa Heinrich highlights that the West has “historically characterised China as a place rife with sickness, and Chinese people as inherently vulnerable to disease”.¹⁰ Anti-Chinese xenophobia is also rife in other contexts, including other Asian countries such as Japan and South Korea.¹¹ This hostility is often attributed to challenging political and economic relationships, and heightened xenophobic sentiment following the outbreak of COVID-19.¹² More broadly, anti-immigrant sentiment in many parts has often been justified by fears of disease.¹³

²Ongley, Patrick and David Pearson. 1995. Post-1945 International Migration: New Zealand, Australia and Canada Compared. *International Migration Review* 29(3): 765-793.

Tavan, Gwenda. 2004. The dismantling of the White Australia policy: elite conspiracy or will of the Australian people?. *The Australian Journal of Political Science* 39(1): 109-125

³Persons of Asian descent – in Australia and New Zealand, ‘Asian’ most commonly refers to a person of East or South-East Asian descent.

⁴Ang, Ien. 2000. Asians in Australia: A Contradiction in Terms? in John Docker and Gerhard Fischer (eds) *Race, Colour and Identity in Australia and New Zealand*. Sydney: UNSW Press: 115-130.

⁵Zang, Xiaowei. 2000. Ecological Succession and Asian Immigrants in Australia. *International Migration* 38(1): 109-125.

⁶Bartley, Allen and Paul Spoonley. 2008. Intergenerational Transnationalism: 1.5 Generation Asian Migrants in New Zealand. *International Migration* 46(4): 63-84.

⁷The Guardian. 2020. *Australian judge steps down from Hong Kong court over new national security law*. 18 September 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/australian-judge-steps-down-from-hong-kong-court-over-new-national-security-law>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁸BBC News. 2020. *Coronavirus: Trump stands by China lab origin theory for virus*. 1 May. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-52496098>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁹Dutkiewicz, Jan, Astra Taylor and Troy Vettese. 2020. *The Covid-19 pandemic shows we must transform the global food system*. The Guardian. 16 April 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/16/coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-food-animals>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹⁰Heinrich, Ari Larissa. 2020. Before coronavirus, China was falsely blamed for spreading smallpox. Racism played a role then, too. *The Conversation*. 7 May 2020. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/before-coronavirus-china-was-falsely-blamed-for-spreading-smallpox-racism-played-a-role-then-too-137884>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹¹Rich, Motoko. 2020. As Coronavirus Spreads, So Does Anti-Chinese Sentiment. *The New York Times*, 30 January 2020. Available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/30/world/asia/coronavirus-chinese-racism.html>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹²Ibid.

¹³The World. 2020. *For centuries, migrants have been said to pose public health risks. They don’t*. 23 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-05-23/centuries-migrants-have-been-said-pose-public-health-risks-they-don-t>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

These tropes have again emerged during COVID-19, and for some, have legitimated anti-immigrant, anti-mobility, and anti-Chinese sentiment.

In early February, China became the first country subject to incoming travel bans by Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand: all foreign nationals who had recently been in mainland China were barred from entry to both countries. Similar bans followed in other parts of the world. In the United States, Trump's early imposition of a travel ban on China has been condemned as a racist act; commentators have highlighted that similar bans were not extended to European countries, including those that were severely hit by the virus for quite some time, raising suspicions that the Chinese ban was racially motivated.¹⁴ The Oceanic context is slightly different: in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, bans against other countries quickly followed the early bans on China, and by March, both countries had categorically banned travel by all non-citizens and non-residents, arriving from any country in the world. Even so, both states' early bans on China have been suspected of being racially motivated. In Sydney, a rally at the Department of Immigration in February protested the ban as racist and unjust.¹⁵ Meanwhile, Isabella Lenihan-Ikin, the president of Aotearoa-New Zealand's Union of Students' Association, suggests that the country's travel ban against China has "fuelled the 'hysteria and misinformation that COVID-19 is a 'Chinese' disease.'"¹⁶

Racialised violence

Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand have long had close yet complicated relationships with their neighbours in the Asia-Pacific. As white-settler states, non-Europeans were mostly barred from entry and stay in both countries from their colonisation until the latter half of the 20th century.¹⁷ Still, both countries have long received some Asian migrants, including Chinese miners seeking fortune in the 19th century Gold Rush period. Migration from Asia, however, greatly accelerated in the late 20th century, following changes to both states' racialised immigration policies. The 'White Australia' policy, a series of policies which explicitly favoured immigration by Europeans, was officially abolished in 1973.¹⁸ Aotearoa-New Zealand's immigration policy was also racialised, though less explicitly so: for most of the 20th century, the country favoured migration from certain 'source' countries, including the UK, Ireland, and other countries in Europe and North America, which drew predominantly white migrants.¹⁹ In 1987, Aotearoa-New Zealand opened further immigration from non-European countries, a move that marked its "re-orientation...away from Britain, and towards Asia"²⁰

Anti-China sentiment during COVID-19 has, however, further raised questions about the future of the country's relationship with Oceania, and particularly, Australia. A tragic consequence of increasing anti-

¹⁴Penney, Joe. 2020. Racism, Rather than Facts, Drove U.S. Coronavirus Travel Bans. *The Intercept*. 16 May 2020. Available online at: <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/16/racism-coronavirus-china-europe/>.

¹⁵McNab, Heather. 2020. Rally calls for end to China travel ban. *The Canberra Times*, 7 February 2020. Available online at: <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6620353/rally-calls-for-end-to-china-travel-ban/?cs=14231>.

¹⁶Lenihan-Ikin, Isabella. 2020. The Covid-19 travel ban is racist and disastrous for international students. *The Spinoff*, 27 February 2020. Available online at: <https://thespinoff.co.nz/politics/27-02-2020/the-covid-19-travel-ban-is-racist-and-disastrous-for-international-students/>.

¹⁷Ongley et al. 1995: 771-775.

¹⁸Ibid: 772.

¹⁹Ibid: 767-769, 773, 782.

²⁰Ibid: 769-770; Trlin et al. 2005 in Bartley et al. 2008: 65.

Chinese sentiment is the increasing incidence of racial discrimination and violence against peoples of Chinese descent around the world. In the West, this has often translated into discrimination against peoples of Asian descent more broadly.²¹ In January, Aotearoa-New Zealand's media documented several incidents of racially-motivated violence against Asian-Kiwis.²²

This coverage continued over the following months, highlighting incidents such as the violent assault of a 60-year-old photographer in Christchurch, and a young student's withdrawal from a Whangarei school after experiencing racist abuse.²³ In May, Aotearoa-New Zealand's Race Relations Commissioner, Meng Foon, announced that 34% of the 250 COVID-19-related complaints so far received by the New Zealand Human Rights Commission had been race-related.²⁴

The situation across the Tasman is no better. In February, the Australian Human Rights Commission ('AHRC') recorded more complaints under the country's Racial Discrimination Act than at any time in the preceding year.²⁵ And between April and June, an online survey by the Asian Australian Alliance and a think tank, Per Capita, recorded 377 reports of having experienced racial slurs, name-calling, jokes, verbal threats, being shunned or excluded, being barred from establishments or transportation, being spat, sneezed or coughed on, or being physically intimidated.²⁶ The Australian Hate Crime Network (AHCN) further records incidents of racialised graffiti, and vandalism of Asian-Australian homes.²⁷ The actual numbers of incidents are likely to be even higher than those reported: the AHRC recognises that its complaints only relate to breaches of racial discrimination legislation, and that their figures likely constitute a relatively small proportion of the total number of incidents of racial abuse.²⁸ Meanwhile, the Asian Australian Alliance notes that 90 percent of its respondents have not reported the incidents to the police or a statutory body, due to their scepticism towards authorities.²⁹

²¹See Rich 2020.

²²Leahy, Ben. 2020. Coronavirus outbreak: Calm urged as anti-Chinese sentiment felt in New Zealand. *New Zealand Herald*. 31 January 2020. Available online at: https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12304816. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²³Peters, Tom. 2020. New Zealand Sees Increase In Racist Anti-Chinese Attacks. *Scoop*. 12 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/HL2005/S00092/new-zealand-sees-increase-in-racist-anti-chinese-attacks.htm>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²⁴Foon, Meng. 2020. Meng Foon: Covid 19 coronavirus fear no excuse for racism. *New Zealand Herald*. 1 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/meng-foon-covid-19-coronavirus-fear-no-excuse-for-racism/BBSDTKL3IQ7RWSADZDBOQANEL4/>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²⁵Tan, Chin. 2020. Where's all the data on COVID-19 racism?. Australian Human Rights Commission. 9 May 2020. Available online at: <https://humanrights.gov.au/about/news/opinions/wheres-all-data-covid-19-racism>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²⁶Chiu, O. and P. Chuang. 2020. *COVID-19 Coronavirus Racism Incident Report: Reporting Racism Against Asians in Australia Arising due to the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*. Penrith: Asian Australian Alliance.

²⁷University of Sydney. 2020. COVID-19 and hate crime in Australia. 7 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sydney.edu.au/law/news-and-events/news/2020/05/07/covid-19-and-hate-crime-in-australia.html>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

²⁸Tan. 2020.

²⁹SBS News. 2020. *Victoria urged to toughen hate crime laws as anti-Asian attacks rise*. 12 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/victoria-urged-to-toughen-hate-crime-laws-as-anti-asian-attacks-rise>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

Future mobilities

These racialised hostilities have already impacted mobility between the regions. In June, Beijing warned students and tourists against travelling to Australia due to the risk of racialised violence,³⁰ raising concerns regarding the mobility of international students, on whom the Australian higher education industry is heavily reliant.³¹ 15% of the Asian Australian Alliance's respondents were international students, 80% from mainland China.³² A report by the Migrant Worker Justice Initiative (MWJI) finds that even under normal circumstances, Chinese students experience heavy discrimination in the Australian labour market. Chinese students are more likely than other international students to experience severe underpayment.³³ The report further recognises that international students' circumstances have likely worsened during COVID-19, as many have lost their jobs, or have been forced into even more precarious working conditions to support themselves.³⁴

Meanwhile, a survey conducted by Melbourne's Swinburne University of Technology in June reveals that "40% of students in China who previously intended to study overseas still plan to, while just under 50% of those who had studied overseas plan to return to their study after the borders reopen".³⁵ Both the Chinese government warnings, and fear of violence or discrimination, were commonly cited as reasons to avoid studying overseas. However, some Chinese students and academics have advanced alternative views in the media; acknowledging the increasing risk of violence and discrimination, while simultaneously recommending Australia as a generally safe country.³⁶ Australia's success with suppressing the virus has further bolstered its appeal as a study destination for study, compared to its competitors, including the US and the UK.³⁷ While Aotearoa-New Zealand's response to international students during COVID-19 has generally been viewed more favourably, the Swinburne survey also included respondents who had studied in, or planned to study in Aotearoa-New Zealand.³⁸ Ongoing travel bans also continue to complicate international students' plans to study in both countries. While Australia has plans to allow some students to re-enter from September, Aotearoa-New Zealand does not intend to open its borders to students until 2021.

In the preceding decades, both Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand had taken strides towards strengthening ties with Asia. This has necessitated some introspection into their white-settler roots. Ang

³⁰ABC News. 2020. *China warns citizens not to travel to Australia amid 'increased' racism since coronavirus*. 6 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-06/do-not-travel-to-australia-china-warns-citizens-of-racism/12328488>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

³¹Morris, Alan, Catherine Hastings, Shaun Wilson, Emma Mitchell, Gaby Ramia and Charlotte Overgaard. 2020. *The experiences of international students before and during COVID-19: Housing, work, study and wellbeing*. Sydney: University of Technology, Sydney: 6.

³²Chiu, O. and P. Chuang. 2020.

³³Farbenblum, Bassina and Laurie Berg. 2020. *International Students and Wage Theft in Australia*. Sydney: Migrant Worker Justice Initiative: 9.

³⁴Ibid: 13.

³⁵Zhang, Marina Yue. 2020. Students in China heed their government's warnings against studying in Australia. *The Conversation*, 6 July 2020. Available online at: <https://theconversation.com/students-in-china-heed-their-governments-warnings-against-studying-in-australia-141871>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

³⁶Xiao, Bang and Samuel Yang. 2020. Chinese international students defend Australia as a 'safe' educational destination. *ABC News*. 10 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-06-10/chinese-international-students-defend-australia/12340820>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Zhang 2020.

notes that Australia “has attempted... to erase its legacy as an explicitly and self-consciously racist nation-state.”³⁹ Meanwhile, since the late 1980s, Aotearoa-New Zealand has witnessed a comprehensive “re-orientation...away from Britain and towards Asia”, marked by an influx of migrants from the latter.⁴⁰ Despite these efforts, the COVID-19 pandemic has arguably drawn attention to both states’ continuing unease with Asia and Asians, in spite of their political and economic necessity. While the pandemic’s long-term impacts for the relationship between the regions remains to be seen, a genuinely ‘Asian century’ may yet be a while away.

³⁹Ang 2000: 117.

⁴⁰Trlin et al. 2005 in Bartley et al. 2008: 65.