



The God-zillas of Modern Politics

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Abstract

Chapter 2

Can Australian Cartoonists Monster the Gods of Asian Politics?

Through satirical visual depictions, key political figures from the Asia-Pacific region, including Indonesia's President Suharto and Malaysia's President Mahathir, became subjects of humorous mockery in the Australian media. In the ensuing controversy, questions arose about cross-cultural sensitivity, the boundaries of a free press, and the influence of race and colonial history on the actions of Australian cartoonists. Grounded in a keen understanding of humour theory and the role of stereotyping, the analysis raises a fundamental question: Can comic stereotyping navigate the complexities of the present day amidst the evolving landscapes of political correctness and the ongoing debate around cancel culture? It invites readers to contemplate the intersection of humour, power, and societal dynamics, while societies grapple with the evolving landscapes of political correctness and the ongoing debate around cancel culture. All of this means delving deeper into the intricate dance between satire and sensitivity, urging readers to consider how comic stereotyping can both illuminate and obscure the nuances of political discourse. Exploring the tension between the power of humour to challenge authority and the imperative to foster inclusive dialogue, studies like this encourage a nuanced examination of the delicate balance between the freedom of expression and the responsibility to cultivate a culturally aware public sphere.

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Can Australian Cartoonists Monster the Gods of Asian Politics?

Robert Phiddian & Ron Stewart

Cartooning Politics Down Under

Australian political cartoonists face a clear ethical conflict when it comes to depicting international leaders, particularly those from neighbouring Asian countries. On one hand, there is the satirical commitment to a robust caricature of foreign leaders, which is broadly good, and certainly licit, in the context of a freeish press. On the other hand, there lies the inherited stereotypical representations of Asia and Asians, which are broadly bad by any moral compass, and one of the many ill consequences of the abolished but not forgotten White Australia policy. Australia's Europe-derived caricature tradition turns its own political gods into monsters, in an attack on the powerful colloquially described as 'kicking up' and in more sophisticated terms as *parrhesia* by Mark Rolfe, following Foucault.¹ This robust tradition of open critique clashes with the more deferential public cultures of our neighbours (and massively important trading partners) in East and South-East Asia, with their more indirect political cartooning traditions.² Political cartoons gain their power from the intense

¹ Rolfe, "The Populist Elements"; Foucault, "The Word Parrhesia".

² John A Lent and Xu Ying, "Chinese Cartoons and Humour"; Stewart, "Post 3-11 Japanese Political Cartooning".

way they concentrate image, word, and message, and thus also increase the risk that they may offend.³

This chapter will describe how these tensions have been worked through in several instances since Australia “turned to Asia” in the 1990s, up until the present frictions in the relationship with the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PRC). The cartooning provides a bumpy story with several missteps, but that seems appropriate given the general bumpiness of the nation’s attempts to recalibrate its cultural and economic place in a new century where Europe and the Americas seem increasingly distant politically and economically. The legacy of being a British settler colony in postcolonial Asia has been a complicated one for cartoonists to negotiate. Since the official demise of the White Australia policy and the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 70s, there has been a gradual disappearance of old orientalist stereotypes. No longer does one see Japanese people as bespectacled and buck-toothed characters (not too far from wartime propaganda but more comical than evil) wearing suits, kimonos, or cameras; or slant-eyed, pig-tailed Chinese people in pre-modern Mandarin clothing or communist boiler suits. In the new millennium, sensitivity to any whiff of racist caricature has become extremely high. Often this seems to have encouraged Australian cartoonists to avoid international topics, to focus instead on scouring domestic leaders and events for their satire and comic commentary.

The Australian situation is almost the reverse of that for Japanese cartoonists who, overall, are comparatively restrained and cautious with domestic politicians and events. However, they feel much freer to lay the boot in satirically with foreign politicians. Attacks on former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison in the *China Daily*⁴ as well as the work of cartoonist Fonda Lapod (discussed below) suggest something similar in the cases of China and Indonesia. The postcolonial cringe operates differently in “white” and “Asian” cultures for intelligible reasons. Despite the post-1960s increase in the size of the Asian demographic in Australia (over 12% by 2020), comparatively few are involved in domestic politics. Consequently, Australian cartoonists have had limited opportunity to figure out how to caricature people of Asian descent. Lack of opportunity/practice at doing this is probably a complementary reason for excessive caution, going along with the sense of historical guilt.

Moreover, when Australian cartoonists have dipped into regional foreign affairs, there has been trouble, as we will see in a pair of controversies about the depiction of Indonesian leaders. At the time of the G20 Leaders’ Summit in Brisbane in 2014, the standard response from Australian cartoonists was to depict visiting Asian leaders such as Xi Jinping of the PRC and Narendra Modi of India with the sort of respect that may have pleased them. Both men were relatively fresh on the world stage in 2014. As their reputations have tarnished somewhat in subsequent years, representations of them changed accordingly. The increasingly authoritarian turn in the PRC encouraged greater critical rigour in representations of President Xi, both in East Asian countries

³ El Refaie, “Multiliteracies”; Chu, “On the Hypoiconic Structure of Cartoons”.

⁴ Flanagan, “Chinese Newspaper Runs Cartoon Mocking Australia”.

like Japan and then in Anglophone Australia, led (we argue) by the spectacular work of Shanghai-born but Australia-based Badiucao (巴丢草, his penname). Even in the day of the internet, cartoons in the mass media are a stable dissenting tradition and retain a predominantly domestic focus. Furthermore, this study argues that cartoons are finally getting better at the hostile but non-racist depiction of one of the most consequential world leaders of the early twenty-first century.

This story can only be told as a cultural narrative, not demonstrated quantitatively – even if resources were available to code the thousands of cartoons one would need to consider to be exhaustive. A single truly controversial image, such as Peter Nicholson’s representation of President Suharto (discussed below) can have a far greater impact on many levels than a dozen bland representations of leaders in exotic shirts at ASEAN, so numbers often give a false impression. Consequently, we will build on Milner Davis’ chapter, which conceptualizes stereotype as a pervasive and potentially benign humour technique. Following her lead, we argue that it is necessary to avoid the assumption that stereotyping is necessarily bad. Indeed, we question whether it is avoidable at all, even in appropriately virtuous satirical caricatures. The present study examines and contextualises two instances in which Australian cartoonists depicted Indonesian politicians through culturally insensitive animal imagery. The effect of this imagery is that the cartoonists enraged and alienated Indonesian audiences, even while the politicians in question were otherwise legitimate targets for critique.

We will then show how cartoonists seemed unwilling to submit Asian leaders who came to the G20 Conference in Brisbane in 2014 to the same level of monstering they lavished on other international leaders, especially those of Anglophone countries. It is as if cartoonists were so conscious of the legacy of White Australia that they accepted (or, at least, did not attack) the god-among-men images that Xi and Modi were happy to project. Likely adding to this caution is the difficulty for any cartoonist to settle on how to draw a new political actor, particularly one of a different ethnic or cultural group. This issue was especially apparent in US cartoonists’ early attempts to caricature Obama.⁵ The study then focuses on the treatment of Xi, first in Japan, and then in Australia. Japanese caricature provides a valuable counterpoint to the Australian style, though it does not appear to have been directly influential in Australia. The direct path of influence, we argue, comes from Badiucao, who has in the second decade of the new century, and from outside traditional print media, become one of the sternest caricature critics of Xi’s increasingly authoritarian rule. Whether or not established Australian cartoonists were consciously influenced by Badiucao (something of a mystery figure and *cause célèbre*, given control of political expression in the PRC), in recent years, the cartoon depiction of Xi in Australia has become increasingly monstrous without relying on old-fashioned orientalist tropes.

⁵ Washington, “Cartoonists Tread Lightly When Drawing Obama”.

Caricature and Stereotype

Cartoons operate through caricature and often deploy stereotypes. Caricature and stereotype are distinct conceptual and cartooning techniques, but they often overlap. Caricaturing a human individual by exaggerating individual features to make them instantly recognizable does not necessarily invoke a stereotype. Stereotyping involves attaching someone to a type or group and may make use of caricature to do so. The key issue relevant to the present study is the use of an image that invokes not only the individual portrayed but a group or type which is instantly recognizable for the audience, and which usually possesses derogatory connotations. Thus, stereotypes used in cartooning will be forms of caricature, but the reverse is not always true.

Milner Davis' account of stereotype has noted how frequently in commenting on the human, caricature resorts to animal imagery and stereotype. This is especially the case when remote figures of leaders and notables are to be dealt with and cultural divisions simply add to the likely reach for rapid summaries and equations that ignore nuance and qualification. Drawing on a deeply rooted tradition in caricature that claims affinity (even temperamental alignment) between certain groups of people and specific animals, is one of the most effective weapons in the cartoonist's armoury.⁶ The fusion allows the condensation of meaning utilizing metaphor and the transfer or combination of traits/characteristics.⁷

It is important to note that, as Milner Davis concludes in the first essay of the collection this essay also forms part of, stereotypes "may not be entirely fair to the human beings portrayed, who are undoubtedly more complex than the caricatures that represent them. However, they are nevertheless a powerful shorthand that works for a wide audience because they are based on perceived truths that are recognisable and economical". Since many such "perceived truths" are outdated or have accrued excess pejorative baggage over time, it follows that they need to be used with caution. The topic of comment, the imagery selected, and the identity of the stereotyped subject may all evoke high emotional investment by the audience in the image published. Furthermore, its significance will vary, depending on different points of view or opinions. A national audience may be eager consumers of a stereotypical image, while international ones may miss or misconstrue what was a valid critical point in the context being made by the cartoonist. Cartoon stereotypes can easily divide audiences, as our study will show through several examples.

⁶ Lucie-Smith, *The Art of Caricature*, 16-17.

⁷ Gombrich, "The Cartoonist's Armoury".

Animals and orientalism: the distorted lens of Australian cartoonists depicting Indonesian leaders

We turn now to a critical assessment of the use of stereotyping in some controversial Australian cartoons depicting individual Asian leaders. Although we have argued that the cartoons' use of stereotypes cannot on its own be a valid criticism, it is also true that their uses of stereotypes are just as open to criticism as any other contribution to public debate. Satirical license does not make every instance of satire convincing, even if at some basic level it is licit.

The "New Order" regime in Indonesia was established by then President Suharto on his violent accession to power in 1967 and survived his resignation in 1998, but only by a little more than a year.⁸ The regime oversaw a period of enormous economic growth for the country that is Australia's closest neighbour, but it also exhibited elements of authoritarian rule and corruption. It began collapsing in the wake of 1997's Asian financial crisis, and Suharto's political plight after three decades of dominance was certainly newsworthy in Australian media.⁹ In this context, there can be no question that cartoonist Peter Nicholson in *The Australian* might legitimately depict Suharto in a critical manner. Whether he chose the most culturally sensitive of stereotypes to underpin his point is another matter.



Figure 1: Peter Nicholson, "Corrupt Economics", *The Australian*, October 20, 1997. © All rights reserved

The cartoon (Figure 1) drawn in a painterly manner depicts an orangutan-bodied caricature of Suharto swinging by a vine as a fire, corrupt politics, rages through the

⁸ Lindsey, "Soeharto".

⁹ Johnson, Ahluwalia, and McCarthy, "Australia's Ambivalent Re-Imagining of Asia".

forest below. Moderately well-informed Australians at the time knew from reading the newspaper that the Suharto government was collapsing after decades of rule. They also knew that Indonesian rainforests were routinely being burned to clear the land for intensive agriculture, leading to seasonal smog blankets over much of the region. Lastly, they knew that orangutans were particularly threatened in this process. Nicholson put all this together in a pungent cartoon metaphor. However, his stereotype of Suharto also carries the racist legacy of depicting non-Europeans as monkeys. Nicholson explains that he himself was unaware of his cartoon's implications:

The story of this cartoon shows you the type of random accident that can determine the content of a newspaper, however reputable! I had quite a prolific day and sent up a few ideas to our Sydney office – I work in Melbourne! The orangutan idea was among them. At their editorial meeting in Sydney, our Chief-of-Staff, who had spent a lot of time in Indonesia, made the comment that we shouldn't use the orangutan idea as it would be deeply offensive to many Indonesians because the Dutch used to call the Javanese "monkeys". The word obviously had strong racist overtones to the Javanese. The editorial meeting suggested I use one of the other ideas, which I did, but no one relayed to me the comment about the racist overtones. I was blissfully unaware of this – I draw politicians as monkeys all the time, and in the context of drawing Suharto, the possible racist overtone simply didn't occur to me. Anyway, some days later I revisited the topic and thought I would use the idea. On that day the Editor went overseas, and the Editor-in-Chief came back from overseas. He hadn't been at the original meeting. He saw my "rough" on his desk and approved it. I went ahead and drew it up, and in the paper it went.¹⁰

While it is true that Australian cartoonists draw their politicians as monkeys quite often, to deploy that stereotype as a white Australian against an Indonesian leader was enough to give Mr Wiryono (then Indonesian Ambassador to Australia) valid cause to wax outraged without needing to address any of the political critique attempted, as his letter to the Editor of *The Australian* shows:

LETTERS – Culturally insensitive.

I WAS shocked and amazed by the caricature of President Suharto in yesterday's edition of *The Australian*, which I perceive as in bad taste, highly irresponsible and therefore unacceptable.

In a world globalised through rapid advances in communication technology, critically scrutinising other societies has become a part of life and to be

¹⁰ Letter dated April 8, 1999, quoted in Ostrom, "Risky Business".

critical is normal, but to insult Indonesia's head of State in such a gleeful manner only shows insensitivity to the culture and values of a neighbouring country.

The depiction ignores the feelings of a people of a different culture and therefore is in violation of the most elementary of decent behaviour and clearly unethical.

I am aware that some Australian journalists have little affection for Indonesia, nevertheless the caricature, I believe, is not only regrettable but degrading to The Australian's own standard of fairness.

S. WIRYONO Ambassador of Indonesia.¹¹

Nicholson's attempt to monster President Suharto misfired in pragmatic as well as ethical terms if it gave the Ambassador cause for valid dudgeon to distract from more apposite criticism of his master. An Australian cartoonist cannot (or should not) draw Asian leaders (or other Asian subjects) insensitive to a long and shameful history of racist caricature. It held continuous sway in Australia, broadly between the efforts to exclude Chinese immigrants during the 1850s Gold Rush and the post-Vietnam War era; it had at its heart the official legislated existence of the infamous White Australia policy between Federation in 1901 and the 1960s. To depict President Suharto as corrupt – and likely to escape the consequences of that – seven months before his actual demise is surely a fair comment in a robust media. To depict him as less than fully human is to choose a stereotype whose offence-giving distracts from the point at issue. It invokes a history of racist representation that has nothing to do with the satirical point and provides a valid occasion for outrage that can also be used tactically to distract from the more valid element of the critique.

A more reciprocal provocation concerning President Yudhoyono

In March 2006, the Australian government was engaged in a public disagreement with the Indonesian government over self-determination for the province of West Papua. Fonda Lapod attacked Prime Minister John Howard and his Foreign Minister Alexander Downer as humanoid dingoes (Australian native dogs) in the following cartoon (Figure 2). Excited over the prospect of taking Papua, Howard asks Downer to play as he attempts to mount him from behind. A small Australian flag hanging on his tail makes their identities clear:

¹¹ Sastrohandoyo, "LETTER TO THE EDITOR".

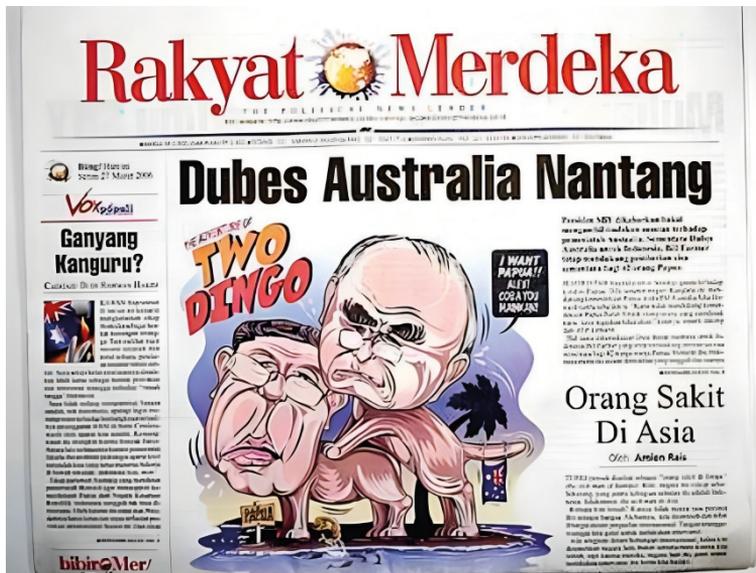


Figure 2: Fonda Lapod, “The Adventure of Two Dingo”, Rakyat Merdeka, October 2, 2016. © All rights reserved

This cartoon appears to be a deliberate provocation of Indonesian rage towards Australian leaders.¹² It was published on the front page, making it widely visible on newsstands. *Anjing* (dog) is a swearword in Indonesian which carries more pejorative weight than “dog” in English. Furthermore, the subject of sexuality is contentious, with sodomy particularly frowned upon by the conservative Muslim majority.¹³ Neither Howard nor Downer took the bait of complaining about the original cartoon. Howard played the straighter bat by simply saying he was not offended, while Downer reacted more feyly: “I think a lot of Australians would regard these kinds of publications as very offensive, but they are free to be offensive in a magazine in Indonesia if they wish to be”.¹⁴ This invoked the Australian standard of robust free speech, which holds that public figures should be comfortable on the receiving end of a joke.

Cartoonist Bill Leak picked up the thread here. As a cartoonist, he loudly proclaimed his commitment to the much-celebrated larrikin tradition in Australian public life up to his untimely death in 2017.¹⁵ He wrote shortly before his death:

As a cartoonist, I run the risk of “offending” someone, somewhere, every day. For example, a cartoon I drew in response to the Charlie Hebdo massacre in January, 2015, that featured an image of Mohammed, so “offended” the delicate sensitivities of certain terrorists fighting for Islamic State in Syria

¹² Seven years later, Lapod came out of retirement to offend again, depicting then Prime Minister Tony Abbott, in shorts and Australian flag underpants, masturbating. Hale and Bachelard, “Abbott Cartoonist Recalled to Ridicule PM”.

¹³ Platt, Graham Davies and Rae Bennett, “Contestations of Gender”.

¹⁴ ABC News Online, “Dingo Cartoon Fails to Faze Howard”.

¹⁵ Leak, *Trigger Warning*.

that they issued a fatwa against me, calling on “fellow mujahideen” in Australia to hunt me down and kill me. As a result, I had to move house and start getting used to living within the constraints of extreme security in order to ensure the safety of not only myself but also my family.¹⁶

Either in defence of the national honour or out of a desire to return serve and thereby throw petrol on an existing fire, Leak penned the following cartoon (Figure 3) which visually echoes Lapod’s two dogs cartoon to comment on Indonesia’s denial of self-determination for comparatively underdeveloped West Papua. It happened to be published on April 1, 2006, raising the possibility that Leak offered it as an April Fool’s joke focused scabrously on then-Indonesian President, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono:



Figure 3: Bill Leak, “No Offence Intended”, *The Australian*, April 1, 2006. © All rights reserved

Where does one start with the racially sourced (and homophobic) stereotyping in this relentless but funny cartoon? Is Yudhoyono’s excitedly erect tail wag the worst element? Or the exaggeratedly clichéd bone through the West Papuan’s nose? Or the impossibility of defining for either hybrid figure where the canine ends and the human starts? Or is it the schoolyard disclaimer in the caption box, “No offence intended?”. The cartoon fights fire with petrol.

To his credit, President Yudhoyono remained as unprovoked as the Australian Prime Minister by Leak’s retaliation. There was some controversy in Indonesian media, but nothing like the full-throated repudiation of the Suharto cartoon, perhaps in part because an Indonesian artist had clearly started the dispute. According to Leak’s biographer, “Yudhoyono thought it was funny. ‘Now there’s a statesman for you,’ Bill said”.¹⁷ It also seems possible that his sense of his own status was never as god-like as Suharto’s. Instead of a controversy about the persistence of white Australian

¹⁶ Leak, “Bill Leak on ISIS”.

¹⁷ Pawle, *Die Laughing*, 255.

stereotypes in twenty-first century cartoons, there was little reaction in Australia beyond Nicholson's wry cartoon comment (Figure 4) in the same paper three days later, which gave credit to the Indonesian leader for his forbearance:



Figure 4: Peter Nicholson, "A Bucket of Cold Water". © All rights reserved

Here, the obvious offensiveness of the copulating canines as a stereotype is depicted in a more straightforwardly realistic manner and the cartoon implies that all parties treat it not as monstrously offensive but as legitimate *parrhesia* in international affairs. The distinctive songkok cap is retained to signify South-East Asia, but otherwise Yudhoyono is represented as a powerful man in a suit, with no undue focus on racial features. In fact, apart from the exceptions just canvassed, this is largely how Australian cartooning of the early twenty-first century depicted the gods of Asian politics on the rare occasions when their prominence in the news cycle made drawing them unavoidable. It is a reasonable ethical response, considering the historical burden of "yellow peril" caricature in the cartooning tradition. But it did lead to some relatively pious imagery, as some examples from cartoons drawn for Australian papers during the Group of Twenty (G20, the international cooperation forum for the world's major economies) 2014 conference in Brisbane will show.

Cartoonists as civil hosts at the G20

As the new century wore on, Australian cartoonists usually preferred to let sleeping dogs lie when it came to caricatures of Indonesian and other Asian leaders. Public sensitivity to racist language and iconography rose to its present fever pitch, so they tended to avoid caricaturing Asian leaders harshly, or even much at all.¹⁸ This is hardly unreasonable as it remains their core business to draw domestic politics and figures. Besides, as we have noted above, the substantial increase in immigration from Asian countries has not yet been enough to fill the political and business roles that are typically the subjects of cartoons. When international figures entered the frame for cartoons, they were far more often presidents and prime ministers of the US and the UK than of China or Japan. Some of this may have been just a kind of mental and linguistic inertia in the Anglosphere, the last vestiges of an Australian cultural fealty to British and American empires and failure to internalise the major economic and regional realignment of the nation's interests. All this seems to be reflected in a paradoxical bi-valent treatment, as the following cartoons will illustrate.

In November 2014, Australia hosted an unusually large assembly of world leaders. The presence of leaders from large and influential nations made foreign affairs caricature inevitable, especially as India's Narendra Modi and China's Xi Jinping travelled to Brisbane via Canberra, where each addressed the Federal Parliament on consecutive days. David Pope cartooned them politely while surrounding them with harshly stereotyped local politicians. In the following examples, Modi and Xi are presented more as gods than as monsters, while the Australians are rendered grotesque. Prime Minister Tony Abbott and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten become koalas and culturally insensitive flatterers with an eye on the main (money) game in the first cartoon (Figure 5). Both cling to the Chinese leader as he has photos taken to commemorate his visit. Prominent members of the Cabinet then posture around the Indian PM in the second (Figure 6), on their yoga mats, performing contortions that expose domestic policy obsessions and display a sort of reverse orientalism that leaves Modi looking much the more dignified one:

¹⁸ The authors monitored cartoons on these subjects through the period and conducted focussed searches in the preparation of this study. The risks of arguing from the absence of evidence should nevertheless be noted.



Figure 5: David Pope, “Cuddling the Koalas”, The Canberra Times, November 18, 2014. © All rights reserved

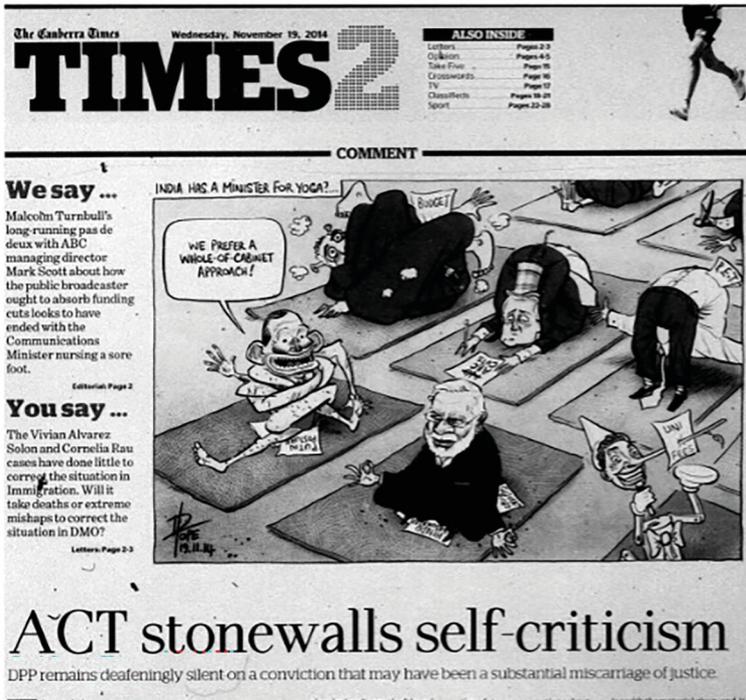


Figure 6: David Pope, “ACT Stonewalls Self-Criticism”, The Canberra Times, November 19, 2014. © All rights reserved

While no one gets out of a Rowe caricature with their dignity fully intact, Xi and Abe are relatively unscathed, the most dignified figures of all shown. President Modi, while he appears somewhat dishevelled and dark-eyed, is less distorted in the direction of any obvious stereotype than are Obama, the only other figure of colour, and the Europeans, let alone the wholly monstrous Australian Abbott. Modi is caricatured, but not stereotyped in a clearly pejorative sense.

It appears that both Pope and Rowe were inclined to be polite hosts for the leaders from Asian nations, and certainly did not stress any of the “yellow peril” stereotypes that were so common in Australia for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Politically, the country was coming to recognise the significance of the rising economic powers of eastern and central Asia, and Pope and Rowe pulled their punches accordingly. Significantly, however, the resistance to stereotype shown here also risks being a resistance to criticizing possible negatives about leaders of authoritarian regimes. While this was true in 2014 when both Modi and Xi had fairly recently appeared on the international stage, it has begun recently to change, reflecting world caution about developments in Asia, the impact of COVID-19, we suggest another important consideration. This is the significant influence of cartooning “from within by cultural insiders” and the growing controversy about the suppression of dissenting voices in the Sinosphere particularly. In the next two sections, we will outline a source for the monsterisation of Xi not explored by cartoonists in the Japanese tradition, and then we will argue for the positive influence of the work of the Shanghai-born and Australian-based artist and caricaturist, Badiuca.

Who may stereotype whom in a twenty-first century cartoon?

Following Milner Davis’s account in her chapter in this volume, we suggest that a major complication for the practice of stereotyping in Western cultures during the first decades of the twenty-first century has been the dispute over the right to represent the other, especially the racial other. Internationally, this struggle was reflected in the Danish cartoons of Mohammed and the murderous response to their reproduction in *Charlie Hebdo*.¹⁹ Besides the relatively innocuous Indonesian incidents noted above, Australian cartooning has experienced its own stereotype controversies on topics including Indigenous Australian parenting, Israel-Palestine relations, and the American tennis star, Serena Williams.²⁰ In non-western cultures, things can play out differently.

¹⁹ Klausen, *The Cartoons That Shook the World*; Kowsar, “The Impact of a Post – Charlie Hebdo World”; Navasky, “Introduction: On Enacting the Fear of Art”.

²⁰ Thompson, “What Is Racism”; Manning and Phiddian, “The Political Cartoonist and the Editor”; Scully, “Mark Knight vs Serena Williams”.

Japan and China have a complicatedly intertwined history that goes far beyond the inception of the PRC, and is particularly intense in the early twenty-first century, as China seeks to assert economic and political primacy in East Asia. It is, nevertheless, the case that joint “Asian” ethnicity permits a robust use of stereotypes in the representation of the other’s leaders, even in the relatively deferential tradition of Japanese political cartooning. For example, Satō Masa’aki feels free to represent Xi as a threatening weather event, and Yamada Shin can bluntly present him as a brutal giant clubbing minorities in his own country.



Figure 8: Satō Masa’aki, “And The Countermeasure Is . . .?”, Tokyo Shinbun, May 19, 2019. © All rights reserved

Here (Figure 8) Xi is depicted as gigantic, ominous, and concerning. In the top image, a map of East Asia, a yellow cloud front makes its way from the Chinese mainland towards Japan. The “yellow dust”, or *kōsa*, is dust from the deserts of China and Mongolia that blows across the Korean Peninsula and Japan. Kosa turns the sky a dirty yellow colour and carries pollution including the particularly harmful PM2.5 particles from China. The movements of these dust clouds, most common in spring, are forecast like other fronts on TV weather report maps like those in this cartoon. In the top tier of this cartoon, Japan exclaims, “Yellow dust, it’s horrible isn’t it”. In the lower tier, “Red dust is even more horrible!” The red (CCP) cloud in the shape of Xi moves towards the Japanese-controlled Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. With the enactment of a controversial new law allowing China to use weapons against foreign

ships in the area, Xi's government is seen as transgressing upon Japan's sovereignty of the islands.²¹



Figure 9: Yamada Shin, “Quiz: Which is the Most Upstanding, ‘a Country Which Condemns Suppression’ or ‘a Country Which Invites an Oppressive Regime on an Official State Visit?’” Sankei Shinbun, December 6, 2019. © All rights reserved

This cartoon (Figure 9) by veteran Japanese cartoonist Yamada Shin depicts Xi as a monstrous and powerful brute. In it, the towering Xi wields a knotted wooden club (“suppression of human rights”) threateningly over the cowering elfin figures representing the “Uyghurs”, “Tibet”, and “Hong Kong”. Two flimsy string-like lassos (US laws) attempt to restrain Xi. One around his wrist is the new Hong Kong Human Rights and Democracy Act, and about to snare his weapon is the proposed Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act (passed into law in June 2020). The small figure behind Xi with his feet in a swamp and averting his gaze from the problem before him is Japan’s Prime Minister Abe Shinzō who holds out an official state visit invitation to Xi. This visit

²¹ This kind of depiction as a dark menacing storm or dust cloud threatening a smaller vulnerable Japan is employed by other Japanese cartoonists too.

scheduled for April 2020 never eventuated, but this cartoon related to the invitation captures the contrast between a physically, politically, and morally weak Abe and the neighbourhood bully whose actions he dares not confront.

Xi's intensely authoritarian and sometimes opportunist response to the worldwide COVID-19 crisis caused a string of harsh caricatures that Australian cartoonists might be hesitant to replicate if they knew of them. These cartoons from Satō Masa'aki, Yamada Shin, and Matsuzawa Hidekazu present the leader of the PRC as a gargantuan bully in a suit, a flame-breathing giant, and a part-serpentine grotesque.



Figure 10: Satō Masa'aki, "Suppression of Domestic Affairs by Mask", Tokyo Shinbun, October 1, 2020. © All rights reserved

With the passing of security laws, the Chinese government effectively banned anti-government and anti-China movements and demonstrations in Hong Kong. At the same time as carrying out "mask diplomacy", that is, providing masks to other nations to increase their influence abroad, the Chinese government could also be said to have applied a mask to the mouths of democratic groups in Hong Kong, hence

gagging them. In this cartoon (Figure 10), a mammoth Xi with a “National Security Law” armband looms overhead casting a shadow over Hong Kong demonstrators. He is poised to smother their speech and democratic movements with a gigantic mask.



証拠がな—んにも残ってない頃、
やっとな「新型コロナ調査隊」が…

山田 紳

Figure 11: Yamada Shin, “At a Time When Absolutely No Evidence Remains, Finally the COVID Study Team...”. Asahi Shinbun, April 16, 2021. © All rights reserved

The WHO’s COVID study team arrived in China in January to ascertain the origins of the outbreak. In this cartoon (Figure 11) the team appear as firemen atop a fire truck’s bucket lift trying to get to the source of a building blaze. Their PPE doubles as protective fireproof suits and instead of hoses, they hold long nasal and throat swabs for a PCR test. The skyscraper-scale Xi, a representative of China and its government, exhales swirling flames from his mouth and nose. Dwarfed in size by Xi and enveloped by this fiery breath, the team calls out, “Don’t get in our way!” “Don’t blow flames on us!”



Figure 12: Matsuzawa Hidekazu, “Allow Yourself to Be Wrapped Up In Something Long”, Kyodo News Cartoons, May 17, 2021. © All rights reserved

In this cartoon (Figure 12) Xi has become part man and part serpentine-armed monster. At the WHO General Assembly, his double-headed snake arm envelops General Director Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus to form a Caduceus, a staff entwined by two serpents that is a commonly used symbol of medicine. The snake head on the right keeps Trump at bay, while the one on the left prevents Taiwan’s participation in the assembly. In Xi’s right hand are two billion dollars to help fight the coronavirus that he pledged at the assembly meeting. At the same meeting, unlike other countries critical of the organisation, Xi praised WHO under Tedros’ leadership as being an “immense help”. In the cartoon, Tedros sweats in discomfort but offers no resistance to Xi’s boa-like grip. The Japanese caption, “*Nagaimono mono ni ...?*” is the beginning of a saying that translates to “allow yourself to be wrapped up in something long”, but means “it is more beneficial to bend to the power of something too large for you to handle”. It evokes images of people becoming prey to snakes and is often used in relation to people bending to conform to those politically more powerful. However, the question mark added to the saying here appears to ask if Tedros is just meekly bowing to Xi as an act of political expediency. In monsterring Xi, the cartoonist has given him a smirk of pleasure as he gets his own way. Xi is also given exaggerated narrow slanted eyes making him at the same time a more comical and less sympathetic character. This is a form of caricature that would be impossible for a European-descent Australian cartoonist to attempt without being branded racist.

A new direction in Australian political caricature?

Turning to the depiction of Asian leaders in Australia, it would be an exaggeration to claim an absolute change in approach in recent years. Caricatures are scarce and often remain politely neutral. Nevertheless, the ground does seem to have moved, at least as far as President Xi is concerned. From an iconographical and stylistic point of view, the work of Badiucao seems to have influenced the work of other more mainstream Australian cartoonists. The respect afforded him by the Australian cartooning community is evident in his invitation as a guest to the 2019 Australian Cartoonists Association's annual awards night, where he was given the Cartoonists Rights Network International's Robert Russell Courage in Cartooning Award for 2019.²² His work is widely distributed online and he tends to present Xi in monstrous and highly political caricatures, yet without specifically orientalist framing. To follow this lead represents a step beyond the colonial hangover that was evident in the Nicholson and Leak cartoons.

In an early interview from 2013 (well before the PRC-Australia relationship became vexed and before political critique was so openly frowned on by Chinese authorities), Badiucao explained how he came to be a political cartoonist once he moved to Australia:

I started drawing political cartoons after I came to Australia. My first drawing was about the 2011 Wenzhou high-speed train crash. Before I started drawing cartoons, I had no formal art training.

When I was in China, I never drew political cartoons, and very seldom drew at all. My main artistic activity was taking photographs, and I was a lomography [analog photography] hobbyist.²³

The impetus for his cartooning career is thus clearly trans-cultural rather than "purely" Chinese in cultural origin, licensed by his relocation to a country with an active tradition of explicit graphic critique of political leaders. Badiucao's chosen models are all oppositional, including Germany's Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945) and Spain's Francisco Goya (1746-1828), but he talks of China's prominent and controversial artist Ai Weiwei (1957) as the main shaping influence on "my perspective on courage and on observing China", a man whose international acclaim accrues at least in part from his adopted role as political dissident.²⁴

²² ACA, "2022 Stanley Awards Weekend".

²³ Beach, "Ten Questions for Cartoonist Badiucao". China Digital Times has subsequently published an E-book, *Watching Big Brother: Political Cartoons by Badiucao* (China Digital Times, 2016) that expands the number of questions from Beach to twelve, as an introduction to 50 of his cartoons.

²⁴ Ibid.

The artist's striking red and black style is novel to Australian eyes and undoubtedly stems more from his sense of origin rather than his current location. It particularly recalls the style of many woodblock propaganda prints of the Mao era, and is coloured, he says, by his sense of his homeland's realities and history:

In my view, if you open the dazzling neon jacket, China's complexion is nothing more than black and red. Red is blood, fear and violence. Black is iron, freezing nights, depression, despair, and the silent corners. It's the cloth gag covering the screams. The country is like a giant meat grinder, a layer of fresh blood covering a layer of despair, new despair covering the layer of fresh blood, over and over again.²⁵

A prime example of this forceful style used by Badiucao is his depiction (Figure 13) of President Xi Jinping with an enlarged head and claw-like hands at the time of his ascendancy to dominance in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It is replete with bestial images of hybrid apes and serpents for attendant high-ranking Chinese officials. These might well be decried as racist, had they been drawn by a cartoonist of European ethnicity:²⁶



Figure 13: Badiucao, "Party Animals", Quartz (qz.com), December 22, 2016. © Badiucao

²⁵ Beach 2013/2016.

²⁶ Badiucao's official website <https://www.badiucao.com/>, linked from the Wikipedia article on him, was available early in the period of research for this article, then disappeared for a time, and now seems to have returned. According to the "Wayback Machine", his website disappeared sometime in the year 2021 between May 4 and June 29 (and cartoons archived could be accessed by going back to the January 25 snapshot). Hostility from PRC-aligned forces is likely to blame. Efforts to silence him were evident in the cancellation of his planned Hong Kong exhibition early 2019 and again for his exhibition in Italy in November 2021. In February 2021, his Twitter account was, according to him, hacked leaving him unable to log in. He has given fear of reprisals against himself and his family in China as the reason for keeping his identity and (until mid-2019) his face hidden in a number of articles printed about him.

However, Badiuca's monkeys seem to be monstrous yes-men or back-room manipulators rather than playing into colonialist tropes. Ape and serpent imagery can play out in diverse ways in different Asian cultures, as examples from Japan and South Korea illustrate. The first is a January 1, 1987, *Kyodo News* cartoon (Figure 14) by Kawarasaki Kōji, titled "It's Appeared! King Kong". It shows a traditional Japanese busker with his trained monkey greeting and entertaining people making their traditional New Year Shrine visit. The busker is then Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro, and the threatening oversized monkey is a caricature of then Minister for Finance Miyasawa Kiichi, who holds out a cup demanding, "Tax, tax". The ordinary people are taken aback by this and complain that the busking duo are asking for money without performing. This imagery brings together the topical themes of New Year and the recent release of a King Kong movie into a cartoon criticizing the government's plan to introduce a consumption tax while offering little in return.



Figure 14: Kawarasaki Kōji, "It's Appeared! King Kong", *Kyodo News Cartoons*, January 1, 1987. © All rights reserved

The second cartoon (Figure 15), by Banzzogi, appeared in the South Korean underground weekly magazine *Mal* around late 1987 after large-scale and bloody pro-democracy riots had forced the nation's dictatorship to move towards free elections that ensued in 1988.²⁷ In the top panel, a whip-holding government official leads the Korean police force, depicted as a monkey, in the direction of riots (written on

²⁷ Banzzogi is a pen name meaning a piece of something fractured and alludes to the split on the Korean Peninsula. The cartoon was reprinted in Rii Shūbi's *Sesō Manga de shiru Kankoku*, which translates into English as *Understanding Korea through Political Cartoons*. The publisher was Katatsumuri-sha and the book appeared in 1988.

the Molotov cocktail he dangles in front of the monkey). In the second panel, after satisfying the police demands with a banana, he then leads the monkey towards a supposed crime surge (indicated on the knife). In both this cartoon and the Japanese example above, a trained monkey is used analogically to depict and criticise Asian political actors, both an individual and a group, but it remains free from any racist overtones.

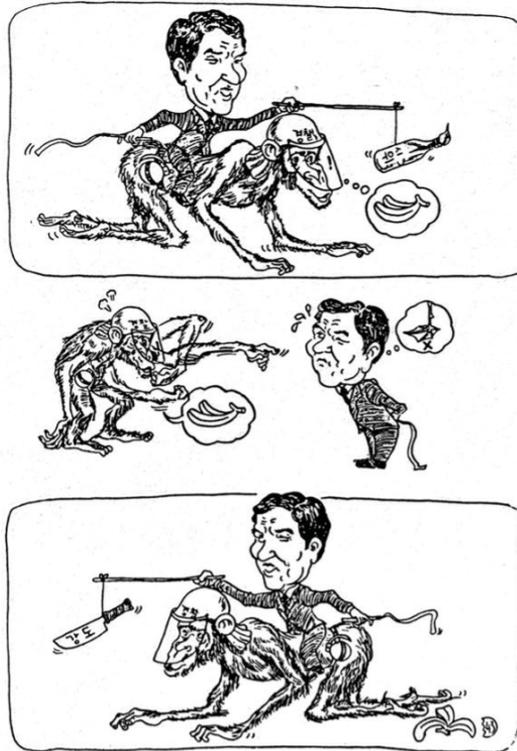


Figure 15: Banzzogi, “Riots”, Mal Magazine, 1987. © All rights reserved

Thus, cartooning traditions in particular countries can tend to be insular in their style and subject matter, but Badiucao is cosmopolitan without losing a sense of cultural origin. He may have picked up an enthusiasm for the practice of freedom of expression from his new context in Australia, but his style and point of view were shaped earlier than that. He courts an audience of internet users and creates cartoons that can circulate outside the original context of their publication, somewhere between a meme, a work of art for a gallery, and a print-age political cartoon. His artistic activism addresses Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Tank Man, and the limits on expression in the PRC, all topics that have led to his work being banned in the PRC and sometimes fugitive in its internet presence elsewhere.²⁸

²⁸ Callick, “It’s Not Hard to Become a Political Cartoonist”; Gunia, “Meet Badiucao”.

Since a central subject in Badiucao's cartoons is the rise and character of President Xi Jinping, he often appears in caricature. There are two threads to these depictions. One, borrowed from the forbidden meme that flourished briefly in the PRC and elsewhere after Xi's was photographed walking with President Barack Obama on a historic visit to the US,²⁹ is the more Horatian representation of Xi as Winnie the Pooh. This is based not on E. H. Shepherd's original drawings for A. A. Milne's books, but on the Disney image of a podgy and benign silly old bear who in this case just happens to be leading an empire with expansive ambitions. Given that this image and name have been effectively scrubbed from the internet in the PRC, merely using this is indicative of protest. The more Juvenalian image of Xi presents him as a brutal man in a suit and relies on caricatural restraint, as the artist well explained in an interview with Rowan Callick:

Xi Jinping is a far more appealing subject [than previous supreme leader [Hu Jintao] because "he likes to promote his own personality, as if we're going back to Mao Zedong's time. He likes drama. I don't need to exaggerate his features".³⁰

Both these threads come together in the following powerful cartoon (Figure 16) depicting poor old Pooh being rear-ended by a militant Xi (dated 2017 and titled "Xi's going on a bear hunt"):



Figure 16: Badiucao, "Xi's Going on a Bear Hunt", Badiucao Artshop, 2017. © Badiucao

²⁹ Haas, "China bans Winnie the Pooh film".

³⁰ Callick, "It's Not Hard to Become a Political Cartoonist".

“I don’t need to exaggerate his features” is a stylistic path that seems subsequently to have influenced a handful of Australian cartoonists in mainstream publications.³¹ As the relationship between the PRC and Australia has become more vexed, even leading in 2021 to anxiety on both sides about future military conflict, these local artists seem to have learned to caricature President Xi more rigorously. Significantly, rather than revert to bestial or other “othering” stereotypes from the old arsenal of White Australia (things validly left in the last century), they have represented the Chinese president differently from the almost deifying politeness of 2014. Arguably, they have learned this, at least in part, from Badiucao’s art, more familiar as it is with the Chinese milieu. As evidence, the following cartoons present Xi not as some insulting ape or dog (like Suharto and Yudhoyono in their day), but as a heavy and powerful world leader, a figure to be wary of. The stereotype is more resonant of historical tyrants like Stalin than of stereotypical oriental villains like Ming the Merciless from *Flash Gordon*. During 2020–21, amid debate about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic and other strains, the PRC slapped a range of trade sanctions on Australia that were widely understood as punishment for its foreign policy impertinence, rather than serious complaints within the international trade rules-based order. Australia undertook retaliatory action, including tougher reviews of investment decisions by Chinese companies and individuals and even cancellation of some contracts. Related developments were growing tensions over the rule of law in Hong Kong and treatment of Uighur Chinese citizens in Xinjiang Province, as well as military posturing by both sides in the South China Seas. With worsening relations came increased public news commentary. Three Australian cartoonists, David Rowe, Johannes Leak, and John Spooner all responded during this period with their own monstrous versions of President Xi. Significantly, the strongest cartoons have appeared in national newspapers, with their greater international and financial focus, rather than the metropolitan tabloids which remain more widely distributed in individual cities but attend more to domestic affairs.

Rowe’s cartoon (Figure 17) in the *Australian Financial Review* portrays a jowly, clearly recognisable but not particularly racially featured President Xi treating a range of world leaders as rubber stamps in the context of changes of governance in Hong Kong. Miniscule versions of them, some with animal ears and snouts, are hung feet up in an old-fashioned bureaucratic stamp holder. Australia’s prime minister, Scott Morrison, having had his bottom covered with red ink on a pad labelled “Inkuiescence” is imprinting a controversial symbol. It is the regional emblem of the “Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China” that came into use on July 1, 1997, when the “one country, two systems” Basic Law was agreed between the outgoing colonist, Great Britain, and the PRC. Morrison is depicted as hurt but “acquiescing” (“Ouch!! Ooh. OK.”). Another bag of red ink is infusing the waiting stamp-leaders. Events justified the commentary thereafter, as international

³¹ He is certainly known to them, being the winner of an Amnesty International Australia Media Award for cartooning in 2021 that was judged by noted Australian cartoonists Cathy Wilcox, Fiona Katauskas, and Jon Kudelka as per Amnesty International’s webpage presence and the organisations 2021 “Media Awards” outcomes.

protests against the direction of change in the SAR fizzled out, so Rowe's target is as much the spinelessness of the Australian leader as it is Xi.



Figure 17: David Row, “Governmental Rubber Stamp”, Australian Financial Review, November 13, 2020. © All rights reserved

Meanwhile, for the other national newspaper, Johannes Leak (son of Bill) shows (Figure 18) the Australian Federal Treasurer of the time, Josh Frydenberg, shaking timidly and gazing with alarm at a rocket-launcher-wielding Xi who demands that he stop using national security as an excuse to cancel contracts involving PRC companies. The much smaller Australian is dancing and sweating at the closeness of the weapon's tip, painted with a Chinese flag. He hides behind a piece of paper labelled “FIRB”. This is Australia's Foreign Investment Review Board which was indeed a convenient fig leaf for making decisions unpopular with the PRC; Frydenberg had at that time designated the purchase of a major building company, Probuild, by China State Construction Engineering Corporation as a possible threat to Australia's national interests. Both men are dressed in Western business suits, but Xi is positively dapper and imposing, pointing one shoe almost balletically, yet holding his weapon with practised ease. The threat and the little-man status of Australia are credibly conveyed.

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Figure 18: Johannes Leak, “National Security”, *The Australian*, January 13, 2021. © All rights reserved

Also cartooning for *The Australian* around the same time, John Spooner takes the satirical attack to the PRC itself (Figure 19), with the cowed Uighur citizens of Xinjiang shown kneeling in a row, dwarfed by the PRC flag and an image of President Xi on the wall behind them. Speaking in English (for the readership of the newspaper), one man asks what the leader is saying to them. Another replies, as they all look to the ground in submission, “Open means closed. Fairness means intimidation”. It is the truth-telling cry of the unfairly subjected which recalls Orwell’s invented Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and figures Xi as the sinister Big Brother. It has been a staple of political cartoons since 1832, when Honoré Daumier drew Louis Philippe the supposed Citizen King of France as Gargantua betraying his people with his greed and corruption. The result for Daumier was a term in jail, and a substantial number of cartoonists from around the world have followed in his footsteps.³²



Figure 19: John Spooner, “XI SPEAK”, *The Australian*, January 26, 2021. © All rights reserved

³² For Daumier, it was commuted to a spell in the “Chaillot” psychiatric hospital in Paris, as per Daumier, “New Research Results”. Others have suffered very materially, sometimes with their lives, as recently described in Cherian George and Sonny Liew, *Red Lines: Political Cartoons and the Struggle against Censorship*.

In all these representations, the true monster is indicated not by any animal iconography, but by human size and the contrast between seeming and reality: Xi is the big man in the suit who is prepared to use force and who demands respect due to a god. One does not need racial stereotypes to make this fundamental satirical point, but the relatively realistic styles used by these three artists all use a degree of caricature to underline the deceptively benign face and formal business-power suit, pointing to the hidden menace beneath.

Complex dynamics

It is tempting to read this story as a happy ending for Australian cartoonists, if not for their country: the migrant artist makes good and teaches the resident artists to caricature a tyrant, free of gratuitous offence from the racist baggage inherent in his adopted country's White Australian heritage. That interpretation would be premature and will almost certainly prove simplistic. Cartoons of Xi remain unusual in Australia, and his depiction still seems subject to the interminable culture wars that continue to distort Australian culture and politics. Badiucaio is explicitly grateful for the relative freedom offered him by life and citizenship in Australia.³³ However, he also points to residual racism and informal restraints on the full freedom of satirical expression that he, like all cartoonists, continues to hope for. One commentator reports on his recent interview with Badiucaio:

While this crisis might indeed be a wake-up call, Badiucaio is finding it increasingly difficult to make his voice heard in Australia. While the right and far-right have a strong anti-CCP (Chinese Communist Party) line, that discourse, he explains, often includes elements of xenophobia and racism. Many on the left, meanwhile, are afraid to criticize China in the name of political correctness, lest they be accused of supporting racism.³⁴

The rise of the PRC and the illiberal turn taken under President Xi's leadership have drawn Australia, its media, artists, and people into power politics in an uncomfortable way. The consequent pressures are being expressed in a manner that is by no means uniformly edifying. The experience of Australia's cartoonists, as they try to stay true to their core mission of laughing at and telling truth to power, wherever in the world it might reside, is morally and pragmatically complex. Their work requires compaction and dense meaning summarised in caricature and stereotype, but awareness of cultural differences has grown and deepened in an Australia that now firmly sees itself as linked to Asia even if more attention to cartooning traditions beyond the

³³ Griffiths, "I'm not backing down this time".

³⁴ Noubel, "Chinese-Australian Cartoonist Badiucaio Walks a Fine Line".

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Anglosphere, such as Japan's, would be a boon. Stereotypes are essential to the salutary offence, which is the cartoonist's stock-in-trade, but they can also sponsor gratuitous offences that can distract from the satirical message. This is especially true in the twenty-first century if they recall racial imagery extraneous to the argument. If the thoughtless transgressions of using old-style imagery are discarded, new types of thoughtful and pointed offence can fruitfully be risked in every cartoon of a leader from another culture.

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