

**Speech by Dr Richard Grant  
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Good afternoon.

I'd like to begin by thanking the Teacher Education Forum of Aotearoa New Zealand for giving me this opportunity to talk a little bit about the Asia New Zealand Foundation and the aims of our education programme.

A couple of months ago, you might have seen an article by our education director Vanessa Lee in the Education Review. In it she pointed out that teachers and schoolmates at the school her children attend had assumed her adopted six year old son is ethnic Chinese.

She reported that he would come home and ask "Mum, why does everyone at my school think that I am Chinese? I'm not Chinese, I'm Vietnamese."

Vanessa's solution was to suggest to his teacher that she put up a world map in the classroom to show that the country Joe came from was quite a different country to the one everyone assumed he came from.

Now this is a pretty inconsequential anecdote that is symptomatic of what I feel is a bigger issue – educating young New Zealanders about Asia.

Asia isn't some part of the world that we have picked out at random that should compete in school time for teaching alongside Africa, South America, Europe and other continents of the globe.

Asia is 60% of the world's population - four billion individual people comprising of hundreds of ethnic groups and embracing many languages and belief systems. Of the world's 10 most populous countries, six are in Asia – China (1.3); India (1.2b); Indonesia (232m); Pakistan (164m); Bangladesh (159m); Japan (128m) and China alone has 10 cities with populations of over 4 million each!

In New Zealand, we host many Asian communities, including people of Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Sri Lankan, Japanese, Korean, Cambodian and Vietnamese descent.

Our research shows that the number of Asian peoples in New Zealand has grown from 173,000 in 1996 to more than 350,000 in 2006 and predictions indicate that by 2026, there will be a 16% increase to 790,000.

Asia is becoming increasingly vital to this country in so many ways and we believe that future generations of New Zealanders will need to be equipped to understand the region much, much better than they currently do.

Children growing up today and in the future are likely to live, study and work alongside people of Asian ethnicity. Increasingly, such peoples will become our friends, neighbours, classmates and workmates.

As one of our publications says:

“From centuries of relative obscurity in world affairs, Asia is re-emerging as a powerhouse of global economic growth, political influence and technological prowess. It is no accident that earlier this year, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, broke with tradition by visiting countries in Asia, including China, South Korea and Indonesia, rather than Europe, on her first official overseas trip.”

I want to stress that what we are witnessing in our lifetimes is a shift in wealth and influence to Asia that could be compared to the shift in global power from Europe to the United States in the early part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This is something that was clearly evident to me in my time as the High Commissioner in Singapore.

The evidence is all around us in the products that we buy, most of it as Asian brands by Asian manufacturers. And if the brand isn't Asian then chances are the product was made in Asia.

Think about yourselves. Where does your car come from, your appliances, your computer, your clothes? What about the products at the \$2 shops, the Warehouse. And the foods we eat, the festivals we celebrate. There is no doubt about the increasing influence Asia has on us.

We also have thousands of Asian students coming to New Zealand to study at English language educational institutions and increasing numbers of tourists from China, India, South Korea and Southeast Asia.

More and more of our long term migrants and inbound tourists are also Asian.

In 2007, more than 91,000 foreign fee-paying students were enrolled in New Zealand schools, polytechnics, colleges of education, universities and private training establishments.

And the reason this is happening is because Asia is becoming more influential and affluent. The middle and upper income classes are growing rapidly and the increased spending power comes with bigger ambitions to provide a better education for their children.

Conveniently for New Zealand, this is happening on our side of world, on the Western rim of the Pacific Ocean that is our geopolitical neighbourhood.

So the challenge for New Zealand is how do we maximise our opportunities in a changing world? How do we become more prosperous? How do we become effective and closer partners to our Asian neighbours? Not just for economic benefits, but also for cultural enrichment and international partnerships to address world issues such as climate change and to enhance our security.

As one analyst put it:

“The challenge we face as a country is to ensure New Zealanders have the chance to gain sufficient knowledge of Asia to take up the opportunities the region offers, and to enable New Zealand to remain competitive in a global economy.”

And it is blindingly obvious that the Asian region is becoming a larger and larger component of the global economy.

Just look at these indicators of our current dependence on the region:

- Ten of our top 20 export markets are in Asia. New Zealand has free trade agreements with China, Thailand, Singapore and ASEAN and is pursuing others with Malaysia and South Korea (and India).
- Tourism from Asia is a significant driver for our economy. In the year to March, more than 400,000 visitors came from Asian countries.
- Our school system depends on students from Asia. In 2008, there were over 8,000 international students from Asian countries enrolled in our schools.

- The majority of the fee-paying students in our schools come from Asia. In 2008, that figure was 86 percent, of which 45 percent come from South Korea, 12 percent come from Japan and nearly 14 percent came from China.
- Asians make up about ten percent of our population and this proportion is reflected in the increasing ethnic diversity in our schools.
- And as I have already mentioned Asia is the region that has been identified by government, academics, policy makers and business leaders as the single most important region to New Zealand's future prosperity.

So how are we doing in getting this message across in our schools?

You could say there was plenty of room for improvement.

In 2007 the Asia New Zealand Foundation and the Ministry of Education worked together to stock take New Zealand's knowledge of the Asian region. The working group was entitled the Asia Knowledge Working Group and it consulted widely with different sectors including media, business and education.

The resulting report - Preparing for a Future with Asia – found that in education – and I quote - there was “very little ongoing commitment to the study of Asia within most schools, that most New Zealanders only speak English, only a very small proportion speak any Asian languages and that only a small proportion of teachers have specialist knowledge or understanding about Asia. In addition, there is little commitment to Asia in teacher education”.

Now two years later, it is dispiriting to say that the overall picture hasn't changed a great deal. Although the continuing presence of Asian international students has helped to create an awareness of Asia in our schools, so much more could be done by schools to make our children more 'Asia literate'.

By the way, the term 'Asia literate' isn't specific to mean the ability to read and write an Asian language. We at the Asia New Zealand Foundation use it to describe a general awareness of the region's importance as well as some direct knowledge and experience of the region. We work in partnership with many organisations including the Ministry of Education and in alignment with the New Zealand Curriculum. We encourage schools to become Asia Aware to develop Asia Aware students who will be confident, connected, actively involved and lifelong learners.

To promote this concept, we have a number of programmes in place but a key initiative has been our Principals' forums – to raise awareness of the importance of Asia to New Zealand and the role Principals play in equipping young New Zealanders to face and succeed in a world that will be quite different to the Eurocentric one that I grew up in.

Asia:NZ acknowledges that there are a number of key groups to target to support the development of Asia Aware schools – teacher education being one – but our priority at this stage lies with Principals as change leaders within their communities.

To date, over 200 school principals around New Zealand have attended our Asia Aware Principals' fora that have been held in New Plymouth, Tauranga, Christchurch, Dunedin, Auckland and Wellington since April last year.

In these Asia Aware Principals Fora, we ask school leaders to carefully consider the knowledge and skills children growing up today will need in the world of tomorrow, a tomorrow that will be hugely influenced by Asia.

It has been encouraging to see that many school principals have realised the impact Asia has and will have this century and have been implementing many good initiatives. For example, one school created a Chinese garden while others celebrated festival days such as the Indian Diwali or Chinese Lantern festivals or used maps and flags for the countries of Asia. Others have conducted a school scan to assess where Asia can be introduced in their programmes, presented to their Board of Trustees and agreed to include Asia in their strategic plan or encouraged their staff to participate in study trips to Asia or other professional development opportunities. Bridges are also being built with many international students and parents of Asian ethnicity encouraged to share their expertise and connections.

Asia:NZ realises there may be challenges to developing Asia Aware schools.

There were many identified in our research and by the Principals at our forums. A lack of confidence or skills among teachers who have little knowledge themselves of Asia, a shortage of resources and funding, and competing demands were just some of the obstacles mentioned.

But we don't expect things to happen overnight – although we'd love it to, nor do we expect everyone to learn about ALL of Asia, but to be aware of its diversity, history, culture, language etc. A conscious realisation that Asia is important in preparing our students for the future is a step in the right direction. Each school will be at a different stage of Asia awareness so initiatives put in place will vary. We do not expect Asia to be taught as a separate subject but for it to be considered as a context of study integrated across all learning areas and across all levels. Schools have the autonomy to do this.

Our education director Vanessa Lee uses the example of one young teacher who converses in Japanese for ten minutes every day to her intermediate level students, which is not part of a Japanese lesson.

Few New Zealand teachers would be fluent in Japanese but most would be able to fairly easily incorporate examples taken from Asian countries to include in their lessons on social studies, history, geography, the arts and other subjects. Even PE where games from Asia could be included.

The teaching of Asian languages is a separate issue I would also like to address. It is encouraging that the teaching of Japanese language has remained robust in recent years with just over 18-thousand New Zealand secondary students in 2008.

However it's a different story with Mandarin. Only 18-hundred or a tenth the number learning Japanese in our secondary schools are studying Mandarin while other Asian languages are hardly taught outside the respective ethnic communities.

This is despite Mandarin being the most widely spoken language in the world.

One might argue that most Mandarin speakers live in one country but that country is poised to eventually become the world's largest economy and the diaspora of Mandarin speaking people is becoming a global phenomenon.

In general, considering the 250-thousand secondary and 400-thousand primary school students enrolled in New Zealand, the numbers learning Asian languages are deeply worrying.

I should point out that the same concern has been rumbling in Australia where the federal government is implementing a national Asia strategy in education.

Currently in Australia, only 12 percent of secondary school students study a foreign language, down from 40 percent in the 1960s. And only half of that 12 percent are learning an Asian language. This figure drops to 3 percent in Australian universities.

And it is a similar story in New Zealand.

As I wrote in a letter to the Listener last month, while "the learning of Japanese remains a relatively bright spot, the paradigm shift to learning Mandarin has yet to occur and I believe it is a matter of time before we see more parents telling their local school boards there is a demand".

So in considering which languages to provide, schools, students and parents now more so than ever need to carefully consider the growing importance of Asia as they make these decisions.

This brings me back to the economic and diplomatic currents that are leading New Zealand towards Asia. The government has made engagement with Asia one of its highest diplomatic and economic priorities.

In its 2007 Our Future with Asia strategy publication, our Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade highlighted four specific challenges for New Zealand:

- Better integrating ourselves into an integrating region

- Being a good neighbor
- Boosting New Zealand's growth by linking to the growth of Asian economies
- Becoming more Asia literate

In terms of boosting New Zealand's growth by linking to the growth of Asian economies, we now have Free Trade Agreements or Closer Economic Partnerships with many Asian countries including China, Thailand, Singapore and the Association of South East Asian Nations. New Zealand is also currently exploring similar relationships with Hong Kong, South Korea and India.

The MFAT Our Future with Asia paper also lists the following points under becoming a more "Asia literate" society:

- New Zealanders are encouraged to make themselves more familiar with the Asian region and its peoples.
- The Government and the international education sector will sustain investment in encouraging stronger education links with Asian countries and in attracting Asian students to New Zealand.
- The Government recognizes the importance of Asian languages education in New Zealand's school and tertiary systems.
- Improving our understanding of one another's cultures will enhance New Zealand's interaction with the region.
- New Zealand will continue to seek the quality skilled migrants from Asia that we need for economic growth and development.
- Efforts are ongoing to help integrate Asian New Zealanders into all this work, recognizing they have a valuable contribution to make, with many offering to utilize their connections to their countries of origin.

In conclusion, I hope I've been able to give you some insight into the urgency that we at the Asia New Zealand Foundation view our agenda to promote Asia literacy. Adopting a better understanding of the Asian region is not a luxury that can be easily dismissed. If New Zealand wants to compete effectively against other countries for Asian markets, this agenda is a strategic necessity.

We as New Zealanders really don't have a choice about the impact that growth in the Asian region will have on us. It is inevitable and ubiquitous as the products we buy.

But the trick is how to benefit most from it. New Zealand is at a critical juncture and some might say we are already running late to catch the Asia Express.

I hope my being here today will play some part in stimulating a conversation on what it means to be an Asia literate society, one whose young people are better equipped and knowledgeable. After all they are the ones that will have to compete in a rapidly changing world where increasingly the powerful forces shaping it are coming out of Asia.

To quote our education director:

“By 2025 over 20 percent of New Zealanders will be of Asian ethnic origin and the world will see the entrenchment of China and India as Asian world powers alongside Japan. In our lifetimes we will see a huge shift in wealth and influence from the West to the East but will our young New Zealanders be ready for it?”