

A historical timeline

Mapping the emergence and transitions of anti-Asian racism in Australia

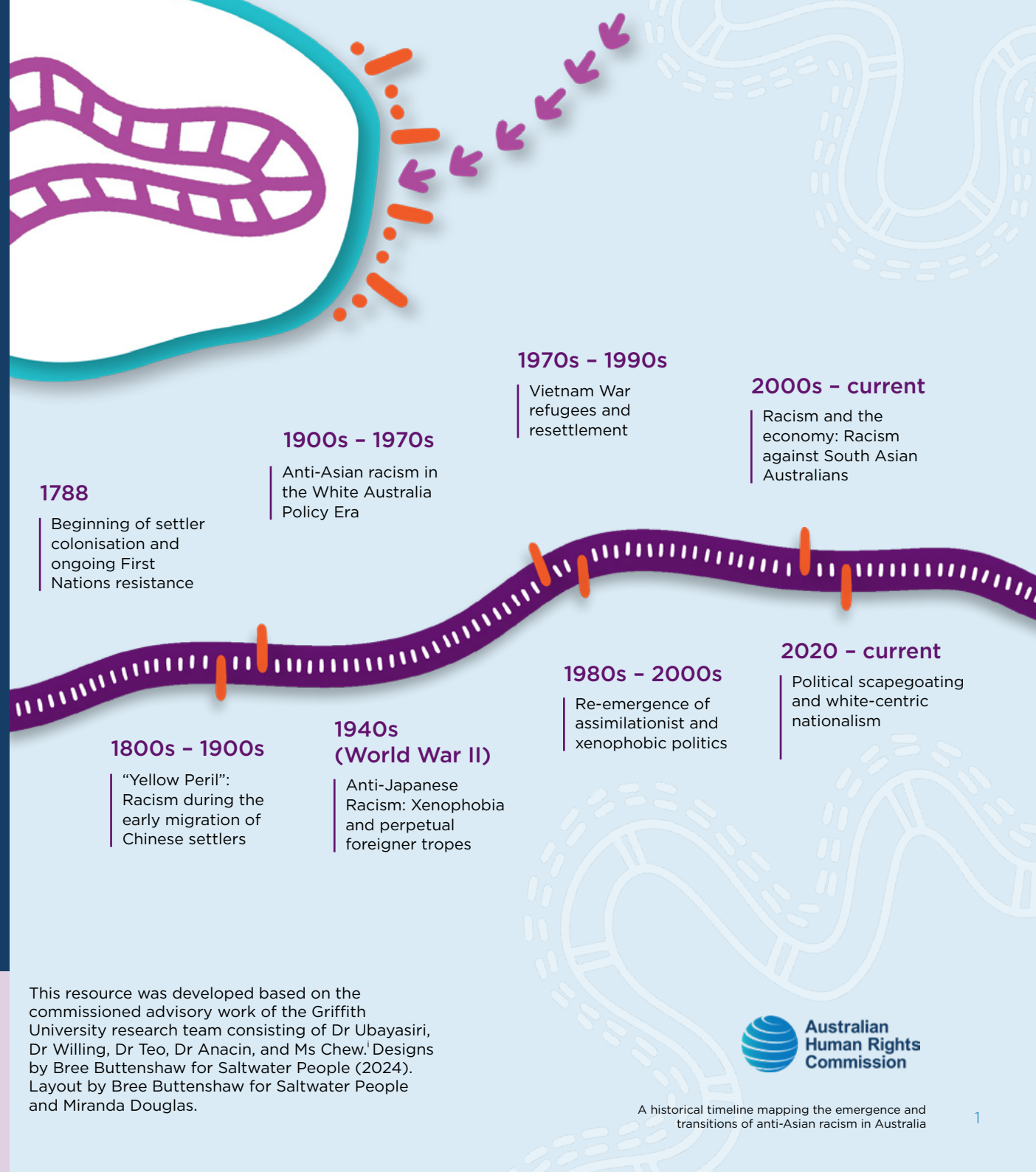
Communities with lived experiences of racism have a long history of leading anti-racism advocacy in Australia. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in particular, have been leading anti-colonialism and anti-racism action on this continent since colonisation. Throughout the National Anti-Racism Framework project, communities have stressed the importance of education about Australia's settler colonial and migration histories, as well as the ongoing impacts of discriminatory policies, for effective anti-racism action. To support understandings of how systemic racism operates in connection to ongoing settler colonialism in Australia, the Commission sought the expert advice of Asian Australian Studies researchers from Griffith University. This expert advice allows the Commission to promote better understanding about the historical foundations and continuing influences of anti-Asian racism as one of the many forms of systemic racism in Australia, while also amplifying community resistance and solutions against racism.

This historical timeline identifies some key spikes in anti-Asian racism throughout the centuries and traces its various manifestations. This mapping work aims to show the logic of anti-Asian racism, including its connections to settler colonialism and white supremacy in Australia.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Australian Human Rights Commission acknowledges all First Nations peoples across the continent and their continuing connection to land, waters, culture, and communities. We recognise the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which these resources are compiled, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, and pay our respects to Elders past and present. We recognise the long history and ongoing leadership of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in anti-racism and anti-colonialism advocacy on this continent.

This resource contains descriptions of experiences of racism that could be distressing and traumatic for some people, particularly people with lived experience of racism. If needed, you may want to seek support from formal support services [here](#). Please note that we have occasionally reproduced language from research sources that describe people in derogatory and offensive ways that are recognised as unacceptable today. We included such terms to demonstrate and dissect the language and thinking of the time, and we apologise for any offence or distress that reading such language might cause.



This resource was developed based on the commissioned advisory work of the Griffith University research team consisting of Dr Ubayasiri, Dr Willing, Dr Teo, Dr Anacin, and Ms Chew. Designs by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People (2024). Layout by Bree Buttenshaw for Saltwater People and Miranda Douglas.



| PERIOD | EVENTS | KEY INSIGHTS |
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| <p>1788</p> <p>Beginning of settler colonisation and ongoing First Nations resistance</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Settler colonisation began with the arrival of British settler colonisers on this continent and continues with the subsequent arrival of other migrant settlers. This includes both groups that are now racialised as white and other groups who are negatively racialised. > Structures of white supremacy and racial violence were established through settler colonisation and were rooted in the dispossession, displacement, and genocide of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Structures of white supremacy and racial violence continue as the foundation of systemic racism today and are constantly challenged by the ongoing resistance and the solidarity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities. > Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people maintain ongoing and unceded sovereignty over the continent. Their strength, leadership, and ongoing resistance against settler colonialism and racism continue to guide anti-racism action by all communities who experience racism, including Asian and Asian Australian communities. |
| <p>1800s – 1900s</p> <p>“Yellow Peril”: Racism during the early migration of Chinese settlersⁱⁱ</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Some of the first waves of Asian settler migrants to Australia were Chinese men who arrived in Australia as indentured labourers and worked for the Australian Agricultural Company, and then later during the Gold Rush. Chinese settlers became targets of racism as they were first seen as oddities, and then as rivals and threats to white Australia. Anti-Chinese riots and violence during this period, such as the Lambing Flat riots, paved the way for the White Australia Policy in the 1900s.ⁱⁱⁱ > Anti-Asian and anti-Chinese racism during this time took the forms of yellow peril and other Orientalist stereotypes. These stereotypes portrayed Chinese settlers through lenses of fear and fetish. Chinese people were portrayed as an inherently inferior people who pose existential threats to a white Australia, and at different points in time, as inherently submissive and sexualised, or as moral threats who are cunning, menacing, distrustful, and ruthless. > Yellow peril narratives became embedded in racist laws and immigration policies, including laws that restricted marriages between Aboriginal people and Asians,^{iv} as well as the White Australia Policy. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Yellow peril narratives that emerged in the 1800s continue to be evoked politically today, including in the forms of distrust and denigration of Chinese and other Asian Australians in media and political discourses for being a threat economically, socially, and culturally to white Australia. These narratives are also seen in the characterisation of Asian migrants or refugees and people seeking asylum as “queue jumpers” and “job-stealers.” |



| PERIOD | EVENTS | KEY INSIGHTS |
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| <p>1900s – 1970s</p> <p>Anti-Asian racism in the White Australia Policy Era</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The White Australia Policy first came into effect in 1901 with the introduction of <i>The Immigration Restriction Act</i>. This prevented the migration of Asians, as well as other people who were racialised as non-white, under the racist idea that people who are not white are undesirable. > <i>The Immigration Restriction Act</i> and its key features, like the dictation test in English and a European language, ended in 1958. But other parts of the White Australia Policy, such as the registration of non-British migrants as “aliens”, continued well into the early 1970s. > The passing of <i>The Racial Discrimination Act 1975</i> formally ended the White Australia Policy, but the effects of the Policy continue to be felt today. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The White Australia Policy years are examples of how racism is systemic and can be upheld through labelling, suggestions of unbelonging, and discriminatory policies. It is an early example of ongoing xenophobia that is used to justify discriminatory migration policies and fears about border security today. > This era also provides a window to examine how the notion of “Australianness”, as well as the standards for determining which migrants are “acceptable”, is rooted in white supremacy. The narratives of belonging and acceptability privilege whiteness and characterise people who are racialised as non-white as inferior “others”, “aliens”, and outsiders. |
| <p>1940s</p> <p>(World War II)</p> <p>Anti-Japanese Racism: Xenophobia and perpetual foreigner tropes</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > During WWII, Japanese civilians were transferred into internment camps. Unlike Italian and German civilians, Japanese civilians were interned under a more blanket approach that included both young children and elderly residents.^v After the war, most Japanese civilians were deported to Japan, and it is estimated that only 141 Japanese Australians and their children were allowed to remain in Australia.^{vi} While the White Australia Policy was still formally in effect in the post-war years, the Australian Government granted permission for over 650 Japanese war brides of Australian servicemen to enter Australia, though under migration restrictions that were more stringent than white war brides.^{vii} | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The experience of Japanese people during this period is an early example of how overseas conflicts can intensify existing sentiments of xenophobia. These xenophobic sentiments were shown in moral panics about border security, and the characterisation of Japanese civilians as perpetual foreigners who were inherently disloyal and an internal threat. The more lenient attitudes towards Japanese war brides also demonstrated how racism has gendered dimensions. For instance, Asian women were not seen as an immediate threat if partnered with white men, but the same leniency was not given to Japanese men in Australia.^{viii} > Such xenophobia still underlies political and media discourses today, particularly in the cases of restricted mobility and mandatory detention of people seeking asylum, as well as suspicions of politicians who are of Chinese, Indian, or other Asian heritage. |



| PERIOD | EVENTS | KEY INSIGHTS |
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| <p>1970s – 1990s</p> <p>Vietnam War refugees and resettlement</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Migration of Vietnamese people to Australia surged in the 1970s, mostly as refugees, war brides, and war orphans during the Vietnam War, and then as political refugees in the post-Vietnam War era. Most Vietnamese refugees arrived by plane after selection by Australian officials in refugee camps, while others also arrived on boats.^{ix} > Vietnamese refugees faced racism upon arrival, while also having to deal with the ongoing trauma and impacts of war, displacement, family separation, and the perilous journey to seek asylum.^x > Vietnamese children adopted into white families also faced racism, and often in more compounded ways. This is because of the lack of parental or peer support in challenging racism, disconnection from community, the lack of appropriate support services, and prevalent narratives that promote assimilation and whiteness.^{xi} | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The racism that Vietnamese refugees faced was multifaceted. On one hand, they were affected by yellow peril fears and framed as queue jumpers or as people who are inherently criminal, violent, and immoral. These labels and moral panics were particularly overt in sensationalised media narratives about youth gangs, which were racist narratives that misrepresented behaviours that are results of complex social realities as inherent traits.^{xii} > On the other hand, Vietnamese Australians were also stereotyped as a “model minority”, rather than a diverse community that faces both successes and challenges like any other community.^{xiii} While stories of economic and educational achievements are positive portrayals, when used to create a model minority myth, they are used to sanitise the everyday reality of systemic racism that Vietnamese migrants face. This myth also reinforces racism by attributing broader social inequalities to individual failure, or even racist notions of inherent inferiority, rather than systemic inequity.^{xiv} > When viewed through the model minority stereotype, Vietnamese Australians are only conditionally accepted by society based on them being exceptional, rather than being everyday people with a range of occupational, academic, and economic outcomes. At the same time, the model minority myth also sustains yellow peril fears of Asians posing threats to white people’s access to opportunities.^{xv} > Conceptually, yellow peril fears and the model minority myth are two sides of the same coin.^{xvi} While abolition of the White Australia Policy and Vietnamese migration in this era shifted political narratives from one about exclusion to multiculturalism, the acceptance of Asian and other negatively racialised migrants is conditional on not threatening the dominance of white culture and systems (yellow peril fears), and being a crime-free community, which is an unrealistic expectation for any community (model minority myths and media panics). |



| PERIOD | EVENTS | KEY INSIGHTS |
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| <p>1980s – 2000s</p> <p>Reemergence of assimilationist and xenophobic politics</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > The end of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s and the arrival of refugees during and after the Vietnam War marked the early beginnings of the multiculturalism policy that is largely continued today.^{xvii} A few decades onwards, xenophobia and assimilationist narratives spiked in public debate. Politicians exploited sentiments of anti-Indigenous racism, as well as fears about the post-White Australia Policy increase in Asian migration, for political and electoral support. This included characterising Asian migrants as “swamping” Australia and pushing for assimilationist policies.^{xviii} Xenophobia and racism were also evident in “stop the boats” discourses that demonised people seeking asylum who arrived by sea.^{xix} This was translated into policies like stricter border control and mandatory offshore detention of people seeking asylum, including people from various Asian backgrounds. > Soon after September 11, anti-Muslim racism became increasingly prominent in political discourse. Islamophobia is prevalent in political speech that falsely connects Islam to terrorism, as well as demonising narratives that frame young Muslim men as inherently violent and sexually threatening.^{xx} Such discourse fuels increased racism against people who are perceived as Muslim or of Middle Eastern background, including many Asian Australians. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > These racist narratives persist today, including in beliefs that Asians, as well as Muslims and refugees, threaten white Australia’s way of life, safety, and economic and political dominance. These beliefs are ultimately rooted in the settler colonial, assimilationist desire for a white-dominant Australia.^{xxi} > Xenophobia and anti-Asian racism have not been adequately challenged by political leadership and the mainstream media. Instead, they are often invoked as a tactic to gain votes and political support. This is seen in the resurgences of “stop the boats” narratives during election cycles.^{xxii} > While this period is marked by the introduction of the multiculturalism policy, it has also been criticised for its inadequacy in addressing racism. Multiculturalism policy’s emphasis on inclusion and diversity alone does not challenge structures that uphold the dominance of whiteness in culture, politics, and other aspects of society, which must be dismantled to achieve genuine equity.^{xxiii} |



| PERIOD | EVENTS | KEY INSIGHTS |
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| <p>2000s – current</p> <p>Racism and the economy: Racism against South Asian Australians</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > South Asians began migrating to Australia in the 1800s as indentured labourers and workers in several sectors. Following the end of the White Australia Policy, more South Asians migrated from nations such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka. Many of these migrants also came to Australia as workers and international students on temporary visas.^{xxiv} > South Asian migrants continue to face various xenophobic suspicions, racial hostility, and hate crimes ranging from racial verbal abuse to physical violence.^{xxv} In the 2000s, increasing incidents of violence against Indian students attracted international media attention, but Australian government responses initially refused to acknowledge the racist motivations behind these attacks. South Asian international students and migrants, as well as media outlets in India, called for governments to better protect South Asians from racism.^{xxvi} This prompted Australian governments to later acknowledge the racist elements of the attacks more openly. > Researchers noted there were likely economic considerations behind whether racism was acknowledged. Both the initial downplaying of incidents against international students and the subsequent acknowledgement of racism as a problem were tied to an assessment of the associated economic costs of ignoring the issue and its impacts on bilateral relationships.^{xxvii} | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Given the great diversity among South Asian communities, including in cultures, languages, and faiths, South Asian people can face intersecting forms of racism. This includes Islamophobia, discrimination based on skin colour, and xenophobia. Researchers and practitioners have cautioned that grouping South Asian communities into a monolithic group is inaccurate and can conflate distinct experiences and needs.^{xxviii} > For instance, experiences of racism manifest differently for earlier generations of South Asian migrants who came through “skilled migrant” pathways in the late 1980s and 1990s, compared to those who subsequently came on student and other temporary visas. > Today, restrictive visa status often pushes South Asian international students and temporary workers into much more difficult and precarious employment, such as in the gig economy. Precarious visa statuses also expose them to both everyday racism on the streets, and workplace racism, including exploitative pay and conditions and the lack of redress for discrimination experienced.^{xxix} |
| <p>2020 – current</p> <p>Political scapegoating and white-centric nationalism</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Anti-Asian racism continues to be invoked for political scapegoating and reinforcing white-centric nationalist sentiments in public discourses today. A recent example is medicalised racism during the COVID-19 pandemic, where, for example, Indian Australians were targeted under the Indian travel ban.^{xxx} Broader political and media narratives also framed Chinese, Indian, and other Asian communities as inherent public health threats, and as the cause and not the casualty of the pandemic.^{xxxi} > Another example is the ongoing weaponisation of yellow peril fears in the media and political discourse about Chinese, South Asian, and other Asian people, as well as migrants, refugees, and international students more broadly, taking up available homes for Australians.^{xxxii} These fears lead to increased incidents of racism for people of Asian heritage seeking to rent or buy a home, particularly amidst a rising housing crisis that also affects Asian and Asian Australian communities.^{xxxiii} | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Communities, advocates, and some politicians have called out the racist dog whistling and scapegoating in the proposals to address the housing crisis by cutting refugee and migrant intakes, making asylum harder to obtain, and shifting the blame onto international students.^{xxxiv} They have further called on political leaders to dismiss unfounded claims and address the underlying racism in narratives that cast Asians and Asian Australians as perpetual foreigners responsible for the current housing crisis.^{xxxv} > Researchers noted that these racist beliefs intensify during crises. For instance, racism against Asians and Asian Australians is often reinvigorated to shift blame for urgent social problems onto communities.^{xxxvi} These crises reveal that racism, including anti-Asian racism, still pervades national thinking today, and that it is rooted in the racist and settler colonial belief that Australia should be a white-centred society. |

References

- ⁱ For the purpose of this project, the scope of 'Asia' discussed is limited to the regions of East, Southeast, and South Asia, and did not substantively cover other regions of Asia that are conventionally studied in fields including Middle Eastern Studies and Central Asian Studies.
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