

# Australia's engagement with the PRC: Universities need more, not less

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The current global political environment in the Anglophone world is becoming increasingly suspicious of involvement of any kind with the People's Republic of China (PRC). For students and staff in Australian universities the likely resultant disengagement is not simply wrong in principle, it is dangerously misleading. Not knowing about China, not being able to communicate with Chinese people, not engaging with research and development in the PRC is mortgaging Australia's future even before one starts to consider how Chinese society, culture and experience contributes and feeds into the understanding of the contemporary world.

Language skills are important, and as part of that exercise more university graduates need to develop skills in cross-cultural understanding to communicate most effectively. Learning a language is not a mechanistic process; cultural context is far more important. Every language has its own particularities: sometimes linguistically based, sometimes by usage, and of course there is regular adjustment with social and technological change. Above all in acquiring another language and cultural understanding it is necessary to learn what is appropriate (and inappropriate) behaviour; how to make and take a joke or pleasantry; how not to give or take offence. In some cultures, and through some languages, speaking one's mind, under certain circumstances is seen as a virtue. But across the world those circumstances are inherently variable. In the PRC in particular, open (and especially public) confrontation is most usually considered impolite. Disagreements and debates including on matters of principle occur but they are managed in other ways. Confrontation, and megaphone diplomacy in particular, is most likely to prove counterproductive, though of course in the context of international relations such hairy-chested rank expressivism may well appeal to specific constituencies in the speaker's own domestic environment.

Australian university staff are now also hamstrung by the federal government's attempts in the last three or so years to combat what is described as general 'foreign influence' and 'foreign interference' though these seem to concentrate on the PRC. There are two invidious aspects of these federal government actions. The most obvious is the scale of documentation and bureaucracy that must be put in place to manage the potential of dangerous foreigners, and as with all such efforts, the new structures will simply develop and grow to justify their own existence. The more important is that this is a form of protectionism which will not protect. It is an opportunistic domestic political act that will not achieve its goals. Foreign influences through lobbying of politicians and government officials, access to technology, and propaganda existed long before there was a Communist Party of China, a PRC, or the establishment of Confucius Institutes, and will exist regardless of these kinds of bureaucratised government attempts to regulate university interactions with undesirable aliens. Instead, as protectionism demonstrated when it applied to the Australian economy, it results in low efficiency, slow adoption of technical developments elsewhere in the world, and parochialism that restricts the very best achievements.

The protest of the security and intelligence communities is no doubt that the intention of recent interventions is not to unduly prohibit engagement with the PRC. Australian Security Intelligence Organisation head Mike Burgess [told](#) a parliamentary inquiry on national security risks affecting the Australian higher education and

research sector on March 11, 'Addressing national security risks doesn't need to come at the expense of academic freedom, which forms a core pillar of our universities and research institutions.' That will though be the impact regardless, and the magnitude of the benefits has not been clearly demonstrated. Not a single case of foreign interference involving a university researcher has been brought, let alone prosecuted, and there is no evidence that this is a systemic issue.

If Australian scientists and technologists are restricted in their interactions with their colleagues in the PRC this will run the serious risk in many areas of Australian science and technology falling behind the latest developments in various fields. The PRC is already a leading technological power for telecommunications, artificial intelligence, and alternative energy technologies. To take that last as an example, as Daniel Yergin [outlined](#) in *The Wall Street Journal* on September 11 last year, the PRC already has an unassailable lead for the conceivable future in the development of a significant range of alternative energy technologies: solar and wind power production and efficiency; battery storage capacity, efficiency, cost; ultra-long-haul energy transmission; autonomous vehicles, testing and specially designed road networks; and the cost and scale of production of electric vehicles.

The preservation of Australian values and ways of doing things is best achieved through trusting the robustness of those cultural institutions and structures and the intelligence of Australians, not by protectionism and the suggestion that foreign ideas and values will spread like wildfire through influence and propaganda. To suggest as much not only insults the intelligence of the electorate it unfortunately reflects poorly on the mindset of politicians and leaders who make such arguments, reflecting it seems their attitudes to the population at large. The courage of confidence in our own institutions is an important principle. Governments are already well-placed to take action against inappropriate foreign government intervention should any result from cooperation between Australian universities and their colleagues in the PRC. In the case of science and technology, the burden of proof should be focussed on hostile use, not on hypothetical danger.

The impact of restrictions on the involvement of Australian humanities and social sciences academics with their colleagues in the PRC are seemingly less dramatic. The need for the humanities and social sciences to engage with the PRC are though in some ways even more fundamental not only for Australia to understand the PRC, but also the development of the various disciplines on that side of the university. For largely self-evident reasons, most of the disciplines in the humanities and social sciences started out by trying to explain the European and later the American experience. The humanities and social sciences have not been slow in the last few decades in trying to incorporate the experiences of societies and cultures from beyond those boundaries into their theories and conceptual frameworks. Universal explanations after all need to incorporate the experience of non-European cultures and societies even if it is at the level of identifying differences and similarities. This necessarily includes the PRC, not just because it contains a sizeable proportion of the world's population, but also because its society and culture has long historical roots which developed almost completely independently of the European tradition. There may well be limits to the level at which explanations in the humanities and social sciences can be brought together across cultures, but as the European nation-states discovered in the aftermath of World War II, bringing people together through state-sponsored programmes develops understanding and respect, and lowers the potential for destructive conflict.

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Professor Goodman undertakes research on social and political change in China, especially at the local level. His most recent publications include *Class and the Chinese Communist Party: A hundred years of social change*, with Marc Blecher, Yingjie Guo, Jean-Louis Rocca, Tony Saich, and Beibei Tang (2021); *China Impact: Threat Perception in the Asia-Pacific Region* with Shigeto Sonoda (2018); *Handbook of the Politics of China* (2015); and *Class in Contemporary China* (2014).

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