

Australia and China: which way forward?

In Beijing's Confucius temple an ancient Cyprus tree is said to have the ability to determine the character – virtuous or flawed – of those who walk under its massive boughs. As Australia grapples with our relationship, the Chinese are wondering - what is our character? From China's perspective, Australia's pivot to Asia resembles an ungainly pirouette between economic dependency and strategic alignment. As a middle power with global aspirations, we need more subtle, sustained engagement.

As time in Beijing demonstrated only too well, in China the contrasts are huge and the complexities are enormous. Over the course of an afternoon one can visit a massive, purpose-built Technology Park pushing high-end, start-up entrepreneurship while less than an hour away by train, station guards still scour for walnuts on the side of the track. President Xi Jinping used the 70th anniversary to outline its ambitions for 'national rejuvenation' after an aberrant 'century of humiliation' in the grand, millennial sweep of Chinese civilisation. For the majority Han Chinese, for many of whom Mao's catastrophic 'Great Leap Forward' and 'Cultural Revolution' are in living memory, a high degree of surveillance and control may seem an acceptable price for ongoing social and economic stability. One does not have to be an apologist for China to understand their position.

As the Communist Party asserts its power China is neither deliberately our friend, nor deliberately our enemy – and it should come as no surprise that China has a much deeper and perhaps subtler appreciation of the United States than it does of our own nation. Founded in 1911 with American backing, the oldest buildings at China's elite Tsinghua University echo the architecture of the University of Virginia while its magnificent, recently-built Schwartzman College brings together the best and brightest Chinese minds with top American and other graduates. America's 'soft power' obviously outweighs our own, but there are some concrete ways that will help to structure a relationship based on reciprocity and mutual insight.

First, more Australians (educators, ministers, students) need to spend more time in China – both better prepared and not merely in short-term 'FIFO' visits. Establishing a pattern of sustained, recurrent, and serious governmental and academic exchanges would open up much needed time and space for proper dialogue. Those bodies already engaged (such as AsiaLink, New Colombo Plan, Australian Human Rights Commission) need to grow in size and capability. Options including public-private partnerships, philanthropic funding, and additional government resources could expand their most valuable programmes. Given Australia's relatively limited size and scale, it is vital those bodies engaging with China have proper forums to think collaboratively and beyond silos, working on common themes and causes to build networks at government, university, business and school level.

Second, our universities need to engage more fundamentally with the 150,000 plus Chinese students currently living and studying in Australia. Students who

peregrinate between Chinese dominated classes and Chinese dominated accommodation blocks are unlikely to deepen their understanding of Australian social and political values. Hearing their aspirations and concerns, with an eye to cultural sensitivities and the nuances of communist China, is an obvious way to build cultural capital between our two nations. Those Chinese students I have engaged with both in China and in my own College in Australia are deeply smart, gracious, and aware of the cultural sensitivities that come with international engagement. They will, inevitably, play a part in the development of 'new China' over the coming decades. Having accepted Chinese students in such great numbers our universities need to ensure, by design, they don't end up living in clusters with limited outside contact or engagement. Rather than sponsoring yet another private-equity-funded 'international' student apartment block, Australian universities would do well to seek major philanthropic benefaction for a local, Schwartzman-style College sponsoring outstanding Chinese students to study global relations in concert with locals and other international students.

Third, we should be actively encouraging a significant cohort of Australian students to study in China, engaging with its rapidly expanding and improving educational system while growing their cultural competency. There are real and obvious challenges ranging from 'the walled garden' of *WeChat*, and constrained access to international news, to the traditional challenges of language and culture. Yet there is much that will be enormously appealing. When top Australian students consider options for tertiary study, the rapidly improving Chinese tertiary system should be front of mind for principals, teachers and parents as we equip younger generations for future success.

Australians must neither view China through a single lens of economic benefit, nor of international security. It would be naïve to think we can disengage from a rising China, even if we wanted to. To avoid responding through pragmatic and contradictory impulses towards fear or greed, we need to put in the time and effort needed to establish a mature relationship worthy of both nations. Happily, Australia has a strong history of effective multilateral engagement, and there is scope for this engagement to be significantly ramped up in both directions. Advancing the national interest in this bilateral conversation requires subtlety and skill - but above all it must be underpinned by deeper understanding. Mineral exports and university degrees offer no more than an entry point. In order to advance Australia's national interest in dialogue with 'new China', the time has come for a more nuanced, engaged approach.

11 October 2020