

Session III Discussion Paper

How does Australia respond to growing PRC influence and activity in Australia, without creating prejudice against Chinese-Australians?

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Who knows what the true impetus was behind the ABC/Fairfax report on Chinese influence in Australian politics? We do know that it contributed to a general sense of unease and suspicion about anything and anyone associated with the People's Republic of China (PRC) or, at least, the PRC government (to the extent that people distinguish between the two).

My principal issue with the report is that it was populist. It drew upon prejudice and stoked fear. That there was no united response from Chinese-Australian communities speaks to their profound lack of influence in Australia. The increase in the scale and audacity of PRC government activity to monitor and control, in particular, PRC citizens in Australia and Australian citizens born in the PRC, should be investigated in earnest by our intelligence agencies. However, it is dangerous to assert that a Chinese person, who happens to be a big political donor or who is politically active, is likely therefore to be a foreign agent. This risks disenfranchising and delegitimising one million Australians of Chinese heritage.

The deeper problem with the entire discourse around the existence of 'China' within Australia is the lack of nuance. We fail to distinguish what is Chinese, what is the PRC and what is the Communist Party of China. In seeking to defend Australia's democracy and to protect those Chinese who choose to live in Australia, how do we not demonise them?

Immediately, we become alive to the complexity of this issue. This is not racism *prima facie*, as it is not the Chinese race that is being targeted. At its heart are three things. First is the nature of the PRC state as adhering to a profoundly different set of values compared to those in Australia. Second is the number, ever increasing, of people from the PRC who live among us. Third is the growing wealth and influence of the PRC and its ability and willingness to prosecute national interests economically.

This complexity arises from the nature of human identity. A ban on foreign political donations fails to address this. When does a migrant stop being Chinese and start being Australian? Is bestowing Australian citizenship enough – noting that one of the gentlemen named in the ABC/Fairfax report was an Australian citizen? If not, what is?

China is at once a nation-state, a civilisation, and a race of people. Personally, I am not Chinese in the sense that I have never been a citizen of the PRC and have no connection with the PRC government. I don't even get invited to functions at the Consulate. But I am Chinese in that I share a civilisational sense of belonging with millions of other Chinese globally that encompasses language, culture, heritage, and a myriad of small traits and beliefs. These civilisational ties should be completely consistent with me being 100 per cent Australian.

As such, the issue is not merely one of Australia's relationship with the PRC. It also goes to questions of national identity, citizenship, civic rights, and social cohesion.

Similarly, as PRC investment becomes increasingly global, there will likely be a PRC element in multi-national ownership structures. Should we be concerned about Australian government employees staying at Hilton Hotels given Hilton is now 25 per cent owned by the Hainan-based HNA Group?

If we accept the proposition that Australia's economic future is hitched in large part to the PRC, our current approach to these issues does not provide us with a productive foundation on which to build a mutually trusting and beneficial relationship.

We need to move beyond the basic China 101 questions of whether the People's Republic shares our values, or whether it is our friend or our enemy.

Like any nation, the PRC fervently pursues its own national interests. However, unlike many other countries, the PRC has an authoritarian government that does not tolerate dissent nor upholds freedoms of speech or the press. The PRC's embrace of the rule of law is nascent, and concepts of individual human rights are subservient to collective or national interests. As indeed, the PRC government, if it chooses to do so, can exert a significant degree of pressure on PRC nationals and companies to do its bidding.

Given we know all of this about the PRC, how do we work with that? What might be a new strategic framework for our relationship with the PRC that recognizes and acknowledges what the PRC is, manages risks robustly whilst maximizing Australia's opportunities and benefits? Assuming that people of Chinese heritage living in Australia (and particularly those PRC nationals who have recently come to live among us as Australians) have a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the PRC than most, how do we draw on this capability rather than look upon these people as foreign agents? Because the prevailing wisdom is that we need to do so for our own overriding strategic and commercial interests. We cannot afford to turn our backs on the PRC, or to have the PRC turn its back on us.

The strongest protection against undue PRC government influence in Australia is not to further discourage Chinese-Australians from political involvement. Rather, it is to foster a confident and politically engaged Chinese-Australian community grounded in Australian values and independent of the PRC. It is to better embrace Chinese-Australians so that they feel valued, trusted and importantly, that they can genuinely belong as Australians.

Questions:

How does Australia respond to growing PRC influence and activity in Australia, without creating prejudice against Chinese-Australians?

Is there something the government should do, other than just encourage a more nuanced understanding of Chinese-Australian communities?

How can Chinese-Australians be spurred to engage with mainstream discussions about the PRC?

What advice to give those accused of 'racism' when defending Australian values?

