

**Session I Discussion Paper**

**How can Australia build a realistic and credible China narrative in the public debate?**Dirk van der Kley

The Communist Party of China (CPC) has long been active in its efforts to wield influence in Australia. But until recently, this was rarely noted in mainstream Australian discourse on China. The focus was instead either on the economic opportunity offered by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) or the regional security challenge posed by an assertive PRC. That has changed in the past 18 months. Communist Party influence in Australia now occupies the lion’s share of the debate.

A credible and realistic China narrative needs to more accurately represent the diversity and complexity of the modern PRC. CPC attempts to wield power in Australia constitute just one small slice of the PRC’s policy makeup.

The focus on CPC attempts to influence has both positive and negative elements. On the positive side, the intense scrutiny of Communist Party influence has prompted necessary, but difficult discussions about Australia’s PRC policy. There are ongoing debates around political donations, academic freedom and the implications of economic reliance on a single-party state, which have been sparked, at least in part, by questions over CPC influence.

Scrutiny of the CPC’s activities has also brought many more voices from the Chinese diaspora into the discussion. Journalists such as Philip Wen, Maree Ma, Su-Lin Tan, Alex Joske and Feiyan Xia have all reported on various elements of the CPC influence debate. Academics too have added their voice. For example, Sun Wanning argues the effectiveness of CPC influence is overstated, while Chongyi Feng says exposing CPC activities publicly is necessary to counter them. These diverse views are important for a realistic Australian narrative on China

On the negative side, there are three areas of particular concern. Firstly, the PRC is shaping (and will continue to shape) Australia in many ways that are under-covered. PRC technological, industrial, economic and social policies could well have a greater influence on Australian society than CPC propaganda efforts. Moreover, decisions by PRC individuals and businesses outside the government have an immense impact on Australia (for example where PRC citizens choose to educate their kids and take their holidays). The Australian public understands that the PRC is important – the CPC influence debate shows this – but perhaps it is still not understood how transformational the PRC will be across many spheres of Australian life.

Secondly, there is not enough clarity on what parts of CPC efforts to influence are normal for a foreign government and what parts are not. Some argue there is very little difference between US and PRC government influence activities. For example, David Brophy of Sydney University writes, “Beijing has its lobbyists, its front groups, its propaganda; but to depict China’s activities as in any way unique [compared to other foreign governments] in this respect strains credulity.” Others, such as Peter Jennings argue: “China’s clumsy interference in our political processes was trashing the integrity of the system.” In my opinion, the reality sits in between these two poles. Public efforts to promote PRC government views are quite similar to say America’s public diplomacy. But CPC attempts to censor opposing views in Australia through intimidation and inducements are something quite different indeed. Some balance in this area would be welcome.

Australia needs to ensure that any narrative on the PRC provides the space for all people of Chinese heritage to express their views freely. While the debate involves more people of Chinese background than before, the current tone of the debate makes some in the Chinese diaspora uncomfortable expressing their views. A study by Fran Martin of 50 female PRC students at eight Melbourne universities found the overwhelming majority of respondents feel their motives are in question when they express views on China. Others too have noted a change in tone. Journalist Su-Lin Tan writes in the *Australian Financial Review*, “I now have to arm myself with a fresh set of retorts to deal with the inevitable inquiries: ‘Are you a spy?’”.

Finally, the current discourse lacks a critical evaluation over whether CPC influence is actually successful. We should ask under what circumstances do the undesirable elements of CPC influence actually work? So far it seems the harder the CPC pushes, the less influence it wields in Australian society. Australian journalists and academics have consistently and fiercely pursued the CPC over its coercive efforts. Australian government policy and rhetoric have also become more anti-China in recent years.

A discussion on how much influence the PRC government actually wields will help inform how much space CPC influence should take up in the overall Australian narrative on the PRC.

**Questions**

* Has Australia’s China narrative contributed to the alleged souring of Australia-China relations?
* Should the Australian government be responsible for addressing the China narrative when the bilateral relationship is tense?
* Do politicians need to reconsider the way they communicate Australia’s China policy? If so, what mechanisms can aid this?
* Should Australia promote a diversification of media reporting on China?

