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The PRC's engagement with Australian society: how should Australia respond?

Eva O'Dea

The Olympic torch relay in 2008 was an eye-opener to many Australians because it revealed the extent of engagement by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) with Chinese student and community groups in Australia. People were taken aback at the sudden appearance of busloads of well organised, pro-PRC Chinese student groups in an attempt by the PRC embassy to out-number pro-Tibetan protest groups during the torch relay in Canberra.

The PRC government engages directly and indirectly with the Chinese community in Australia, including both Australian citizens of Chinese descent and temporary residents such as students. These engagement activities, run in part in collaboration with the PRC embassy and consulates as well as PRC provincial officials, include support for Chinese business, student and community groups, as well as involvement in Chinese language media in Australia. Many of these activities are in the realm of standard public diplomacy conducted by most countries and intended to promote favourable views of the PRC. However, the exact nature of this outreach and the intentions behind it are often opaque. In particular, uncertainty remains as to the extent to which community engagement via associations solely targeting the Chinese communities is used as a means of monitoring the activities of the Chinese diaspora and stifling discussion about issues deemed sensitive by the PRC government.

There exists a plethora – reportedly hundreds – of student, business and community associations serving the Chinese diaspora in Australia. They have differing objectives, affiliations, sources of funding and levels of activity. Many promote links with Chinese culture among Chinese Australians, raise money for charity work and disaster relief efforts in China and provide support for newer arrivals in Australia. They provide business and social networks, which are often utilised by community leaders to ensure enthusiastic welcomes for visiting Chinese dignitaries, such as the visit by President Xi Jinping in November 2014.

Some of the larger, better funded and more active organisations include the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China (ACPPRC) and the Australia-China Economic, Trade and Cultural Association (ACETCA). The ACPPRC has recently established a youth organisation, while other student groups such as the Chinese Students and Scholars Association and the Australian Chinese International Students Club also serve the Chinese student community. These associations are reported to receive assistance, including financial support for events, from the Chinese consulates. Many organisations have a negligible or non-existent online presence. Non-Chinese are notable for their absence (beyond an honorary capacity) in nearly all of these associations.

The role of the PRC government in Confucius Institutes (CIs) has also attracted controversy. There are currently 13 CIs and 35 Confucius Classrooms in Australia. While they provide teaching in Chinese language and culture, their association with the PRC Ministry of Education, which provides significant funding to the CIs, could be a potential threat to academic independence. The focuses and nature of operation of CIs in Australia vary depending on the terms agreed between the host university and the PRC Ministry of Education and the ability of the CI director to ensure the institute is run according to



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Australian governance standards. Within Australia, there are anecdotal reports of CIs providing a platform for the PRC authorities to monitor academics, particularly those of Chinese background. In effect, however, the outreach ability of CIs in the broader Australian society may well be fairly marginal.

The PRC government's ability to influence the Chinese community in Australia is perhaps at its most effective through its involvement in Chinese language media. The dominant players in Australia's Chinese language media landscape are the Sydney-based Chinese Newspaper Group, which owns nine newspapers across the country, and Melbourne-based Austar International Media Group, which owns eight newspapers and a number of Chinese language radio stations. Journalistic standards are arguably lacking at the smaller, commercially-driven Chinese language publications, and cross promotion with the business interests of owners is common.

Austar International has a sourcing agreement with China Radio International, an affiliate of the PRC Central Propaganda Department. In addition to providing a platform for content from Chinese state media, this arrangement means that content from sources disliked by the PRC government, such as the BBC World Service, is not broadcast. The influence of journalists from mainland China in SBS's mandarin radio service has also increased in recent years. Consequently, stories are increasingly covered in ways that are sympathetic to the PRC government and topics deemed sensitive or controversial are often ignored. Among those familiar with the Chinese language media there is a view that minority community media should receive more resources from the Australian government and that this would decrease the need for external sourcing deals.

Migrants and students from mainland China are now dominant in Australia's Chinese community. As the Chinese community grows, it is all the more important to understand the ways in which the PRC government engages directly with community members, monitors potential sources of dissent, and fosters patriotism towards the mainland, including among Australian citizens of Chinese descent. As John Fitzgerald notes, the outreach activities of the PRC government with Australia's Chinese community are afforded greater significance because they are being conducted in the absence of an Australian government strategy to sufficiently engage the Chinese Australian community as Australians. This is compounded by the lack of a clear strategy to engage with Chinese students while they are in Australia. The majority of Chinese international students graduate with little or no understanding of Australian social and political systems and values. While these students are regarded as an important source of income for Australian universities, they should also be valued as people who upon graduation could be friends of Australia and everything Australia stands for.

Questions for the session to consider:

- What should the Australian government do to address the monitoring activities of the PRC government in Australia and its attempts to influence Chinese Australians?
- How should the Australian government reach out to Chinese students and the broader Chinese-Australian community to counter the influence of the PRC government? Should it be more involved as a regulator and funder in Chinese language media?
- What would a constructive role by the Australian government in the Chinese Australian community entail? Should it more actively seek to cultivate a sense of Australian identity among Australia's Chinese diaspora?

- Should administrators and faculty at Australian universities be made more aware that organisations representing the interests of the PRC attempt to influence their Chinese students? What measures should universities take to address this?
- How should Australian governments and universities seek greater transparency among Chinese associations?