

# Reading the China Tea Leaves

By **Jocelyn Chey**

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*There are still chances to engage with China in a positive and beneficial way if Canberra is so inclined. Beijing continues to make overtures. Technical and cultural exchanges continue, and the business community has its own avenues for communication. A change of government in the US in 2021 will re-invigorate multilateral platforms. All of these present opportunities for Australia to rebuild a positive relationship without prejudicing valid security concerns.*

Much has been made of trade tensions, bans and customs issues, noting that fallout will incrementally prejudice Australia's economic recovery, but commentators including [Peter Hartcher in the Sydney Morning Herald](#) fail to mention olive branches that China has extended, including [a speech by Deputy Ambassador Wang Xining in Canberra](#) and Australian Financial Review Michael [Smith's interview with senior diplomat Fu Ying](#).

Over several decades of interfacing with China, our diplomats have learned to roll with the punches and to consider carefully before responding. For instance, take Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson [Wang Wenbin's statement](#) on 6 November, "The Chinese competent authorities' measures on foreign imports are in line with Chinese laws and regulations and international customary practices and are responsible for Chinese consumers and domestic industries. They are reasonable, legitimate and thus beyond reproach. Opening up is China's basic state policy. Upholding a vision of openness, cooperation, solidarity and mutual benefit, China will stay committed to greater opening up."

It is stated in the Chinese classic *The Art of War*, "A wise general will forage from the enemy." In this case, we can forage Wang's words to our own advantage. Rather than conclude that he was making veiled threats that his government was capable of bending laws and regulations to serve political ends, a better response would be to use the same language, thus removing the possibility of disagreement and highlighting the hollowness of the argument. Let us start with an invitation to China to join us in a joint statement of commitment to shared interests in peace and prosperity and to working with others in the region to achieve these ends through an open rules-based order.

Such a move would have to be followed up with practical measures that the other side logically would have to accept. In the present cases of coal and lobsters and wine,

blanket bans by China could never be considered “legitimate and beyond reproach” (Wang’s words). Let us appeal to what he refers to as “international customary practices.” Australia strongly encouraged China to join the WTO nearly ten years ago. Although not without its faults, we can still take these cases there. We can also deepen collaboration on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and engage with each other in the context of the G20.

There will be more opportunities for multilateral cooperation under the incoming US administration. Joe Biden has already signalled a return to the Paris Accord and the World Health Organisation. Existential threats such as pandemics and climate change demand international solutions. Australia can invite China to join in dialogue and action to find regional and global solutions. APEC also provides an international environment for mutually beneficial collaboration on issues such as cyber security.

The Australian’s China correspondent Will Glasgow noted on 9 November that members of the Australia China Business Council were ready to help the government find “a circuit breaker for the current impasse.” “Our connections and networks have been built at individual and institutional levels over many decades, and carry weight and influence, but have not been properly leveraged to date.”

Australian universities also have their connections and networks. Exchanges of scientists, academics and students have been built over more than four decades. Joint Research Centres with funding from government and private sources offer grants for collaborative research projects, the last round being advertised in September. A recent study by the Australia China Relations Institute noted that around one sixth of all Australian scientific publications involve a Chinese collaborator and these connections are growing while connections with the US, UK and other countries are diminishing.

One measure of mutually advantageous university connections with China are the alumni networks of students who have spent time in either country. There are now an estimated 26 thousand Australian alumni scattered across China. [Their website](#) notes several events scheduled for later this month in Adelaide, Guangzhou and Beijing. Although Covid-19 has prevented new students coming here for study, universities continue to offer courses online and report continuing interest from Chinese students in returning to local campuses in 2021.

Cultural connections helped to break the ice of the Cold War in the form of “ping pong diplomacy.” Cultural connections with China remain valid and strong. The official Chinese Writers Association recently proposed a virtual dialogue between Chinese and Australian writers. This is highly significant. Such a proposal would have to be approved at a senior level in Beijing. The Writers In Dialogue event will go ahead early next month, hosted by Western Sydney University through the Australia China Institute for Arts and Culture, and with support from the Australia Council.

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