

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Michael Spence

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I would like to begin by thanking and congratulating China Matters on their work preparing 'A new China narrative for Australia'. This is a timely vision that can only serve to assist future Federal Governments in their interactions with China. As with any aspirational policy document, I hope that this serves to structure rather than constrain the forthcoming debates on Australia-China relations in the near future.

I want to begin by noting that the current draft does not clearly define Australia's modern identity or explain what is meant by 'our way of life'. In the face of local, regional and international pressures, it would be worthwhile to better articulate the details of what Australians themselves stand for and might assess as non-negotiable. The reason for this is prompted by Australia's own internal demarcations – along geographic, ethnic, cultural and socio-economic lines – that in some ways make our community one of parallel monocultures with a complicated relationship to one another and in relation to broad values, beliefs and lived experiences. A complex identification of what we ourselves bring to the Australia-China relationship would provide clearer guidance on the eventual decisions that will need to be made about how we defend our values and/or promote our interests.

Secondly, as the Vice-Chancellor of Australia's oldest institution for higher education, I would suggest that an additional section or paragraph confirming a firm intention to increase our own cultural competence – with respect to China and otherwise – would be invaluable. Culture impacts relationships, including those that are interpersonal, organisational and diplomatic, and true linguistic literacy is only possible with deliberate interaction with different cultures and developing those skills that lift cross-cultural barriers. Teaching and learning language proficiencies (listening, speaking, reading and writing) to even a functional level also requires a firmer appreciation for the cultural, historical and political phenomena that explain why certain sounds are pronounced the way they are. That appreciation, if taught well, can provide Australians with the wider ability to participate ethically and effectively in personal and professional intercultural settings. Given the present sensitivity towards China as a political entity and cultural identity, a commitment to this kind of more comprehensive understanding would have immeasurable benefit to one of our most important international relationships. As an instructive example, a better appreciation for Chinese history (especially one that goes beyond the tumultuous 20th century) would provide a context for such sensitive contemporary issues as Hong Kong's sovereignty or Sino-Japanese competition, which has significant implications for Australia as a nation-state.

Third: from a research perspective, China is about to transform from a net recipient of intellectual capital and innovation to a net producer of intellectual capital and output, at a scale possibly not seen since the post-war American boom of the 1950s and 60s. As a so-called 'Middle Power' with a uniquely strong historical relationship to the current Chinese government, there is actually an opportunity here for Australia beyond naked self-interest: we may be able to constructively influence Chinese behaviour as they grow further through the very process of innovation. As new spheres such as artificial intelligence, climate science and advanced manufacturing begin to flourish, deeper engagement and academic exchange can allow Australia to substantively alter the terms on which those fields are discussed, traded and particularly regulated. For so many nascent or rapidly evolving technologies, especially those with no direct relations to defence or military-security, there is an opening for the relatively underfunded Australian research sector to work with Chinese counterparts and actively guide and develop the norms and standards – the so-called 'rules of the game' – that will impact the economy and society of the future. In acknowledging that "China will have a larger role in setting standards", we should not discount our own ability to also set standards through non-state-level initiatives and partnerships. Given Australia's legacy of world-changing inventions like wi-fi and the black box, we are an enticing research partner that provides Australians more leverage than might be expected of a country our size.

Finally, with our own experience as an institution on which there is both a United States Study Centre and a China Studies Centre, Australia should embrace its conspicuous position as one of the few states best placed to serve as an honest broker for peace and cooperation between the world's current superpowers. If we are capable of breaking from our current mundane, or even timid, approach to international relations, Australia could reassert that leadership role as a mediating force within the Pacific region, ready to reduce misunderstandings and preventing economic, legal and hopefully military conflict. For example, there is no reason why Australia could not engage with both the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, as well as the still-aspired-to Trans-Pacific Partnership: these are not mutually exclusive, zero-sum initiatives nor should be necessarily framed as such. With greater appreciation for nuance in our international relations, Australian activity might lead us to the enviable position of influencing both as they change our world.

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