

A new China narrative for Australia

Submission by Peter Manning

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As a scholar of representations, I have concentrated on Australian policy and media narratives of "the Middle East" and of one religion, Islam. While not a foreign correspondent in the traditional sense, I have travelled widely as a journalist and reported from many countries foreign to most Australians. However, China was not one of them.

I am therefore reluctant to enter the area of China policy. However, as a journalist of nearly 50 years' practice, I am well aware of the intimate connection between government policy and media narratives, and my latest book *Representing Palestine* (I.B. Taurus, London, 2018) certainly studies that connection in great detail.

I would make some obvious points which should inform any government narrative towards China:

1. An awareness of the Western colonial enterprise (of which Australia was a military party after the Boxer Rebellion) which reduced the empire to a plaything of Japan, Russia and Western powers until 1949.
2. An awareness of the way in which the US Monroe Doctrine was proclaimed and enacted to ensure a dramatic expansion of American power in the Pacific and the Caribbean.
3. An awareness of the economic distance travelled by Communist China to lift most of its citizens out of poverty and regaining respect throughout the world for its emergence as a major, if not the, major player on the world stage.
4. An awareness of how attractive trade with China – from ore to students and tourism – has become to Australia to the point of "putting all our eggs in one basket"; and finally
5. Acknowledging the decline of American interest in our region and the decline of the United States more broadly following a disastrous series of costly (in every sense) wars of occupation in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria – and Australia's "me too" attitude to involvement.

It is against this backdrop that we have quickly found ourselves at odds with the growing power of China. This is in grave contrast to the era of Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and foreign ministers like Bill Hayden and Gareth Evans who took China up as a friend from 1972 onwards.

In short time we have found ourselves in diplomatic trouble.

In my view, we should:

- Make it clear that Australia is doing its own "pivot" but this time it is not from Britain to the US, but from seeing ourselves as part of an "English-speaking 'Five Eyes' network" to a country celebrating its future in Asia;

- Treat every Chinese initiative like the Belt and Road Initiative as a potential opportunity for joint partnership unless proven otherwise in our national interest;
- Develop soft power links with China that enhance the complexity of our relationship and invite a mutual trade in creative enterprises (like translating, film festivals, ABC, scholarships, etc) much like the Goethe Institute does; and
- Encourage tourism to China, not just in reverse.

It is clear that we cannot pretend to be accepting of some of the dictatorial and un-democratic actions of the Chinese government and its various arms. We should be up-front about the abductions of citizens and the appalling treatment of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang province and elsewhere. The more we stay silent the less that will be done to curb such atrocities.

But in my view, we should act from a stable basis of friendship with China and its great culture.

Australians have long had a history of bad race relations, starting with the First Peoples. For more than a century the stories of massacres of Chinese gold miners at places like Lambing Flats held sway in the Australian imagination of the nineteenth century. Then came White Australia in the twentieth. Then the Germans, the Jews, the Italians and Greeks, the Vietnamese, the Lebanese (especially Muslims) and now we seem to be verging on a new China panic.

We need to grow up as a nation, adopt a more independent foreign policy and treat China not as part of our Western conspiracy but as our regional friend and partner in trade and diplomacy – based on our national interest as we define it.

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