

The value pack relationship with China

By **Jocelyn Chey**

John Menadue's Public Policy Journal, Pearls and Irritations, 11 June 2021

Link: <https://johnmenadue.com/the-value-pack-relationship-with-china/>

Relations with China are increasingly discussed in terms of values. "Liberal values" featured in [the Prime Minister's speech](#) in Perth this week. I propose the need to define the term and to rectify the name, as Confucius said, and to consider how and where it is applied. Then, and only then, can we bring such dialogue back on track.

"There are a set of basic principles and democratic values that underpin our responses in our national interests which this government will never trade away," [according to Foreign Minister Marise Payne](#).

Australia's range of concerns about China's values is evident in DFAT's [Country Brief](#). The focus is on human rights issues, including freedom of expression and of religion, treatment of political prisoners and ethnic minorities, torture and the use of the death penalty. These do not accord with Australian official values, as set out in the [Australian Values Statement](#) that applicants for Australian visas must sign. These values comprise respect for individual freedoms, freedom of religion, the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, equality of opportunity and a "fair go" for all. Payne's remarks quoted above imply that they do not exist in China, but this is not so.

When Australian leaders refer to our values, they imply they are uniquely Australian, but this is not the case. Canada, Argentina, Singapore, for instance, all have lists of national values. "Democratic values" do not belong exclusively to the European or Judaeo-Christian tradition. Australia has a history of using value talk to marginalise others. At the time of Federation, white Australians claimed that ethnic Chinese did not belong in the country because they lacked democratic values. This was demonstrably untrue, as John Fitzgerald showed in *The Big White Lie* (UNSW Press 2007).

The People's Republic of China has its own set of official values, expressed in 24 characters that translate as prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendship. The Communist Party of China, this year celebrating its hundredth anniversary, officially upholds these values, although President Xi Jinping [admits](#) that it still falls short and

“the situation remains challenging and complex.” Corruption is a core concern for the Party, human rights abuses of Uighurs and Muslim minorities in China’s western Xinjiang Region are alarming, and the judicial system lacks independence and transparency.

David Brophy has been studying the history and culture of China and particularly the far western region of Xinjiang over decades. He has been an activist in Australia in support of the Uighur cause and has supported Hong Kong pro-democracy protests. In a search for a new approach to the understanding of present political differences between Australia and China and, hopefully, their resolution, his new book *China Panic* (Black Inc 2021) provides valuable insights. It also makes for uncomfortable reading.

Brophy highlights Canberra’s hypocrisy of first demonizing Muslims and demanding that they denounce extremism, then, just a few years later, condemning Beijing for its campaign to re-program its own Muslim population. There is hypocrisy also in calling China’s regulation of religion for the Uighurs abhorrent, forbidding beards and head coverings and enforcing birth control practices, while failing to mention our own social controls imposed on the Indigenous people of the Northern Territory since the Intervention of 2007 or the forced indefinite detention of asylum seekers.

The number and variety of issues in the present uncomfortable relationship with China continue to expand. They could now well be described as a “value pack.” In November 2020, a spokesperson in the Chinese Embassy in Canberra outlined the succession of unfriendly steps taken by Australia up to that point in [a statement](#) provided to a selected group of journalists. The list started with the blocking of numerous Chinese investment proposals on security grounds from as early as 2018 and ended with “racist” attacks on the Chinese Communist Party and Chinese Australians by Members of Parliament.

This point followed on [Eric Abetz’s questioning](#) the loyalty of three witnesses at a parliamentary inquiry in October 2020 into foreign interference laws. The common thread linking these irritants was that to the Chinese side they all appeared to be specifically targeting China.

Consistency surely should be the hallmark of our foreign policy and of the application of our national values. Let us have some rectification of names. If we condemn Beijing’s policies towards its ethnic minorities, we should also condemn the suppression of the Rohingya in Myanmar and the occupation of the West Bank by Israel. How can we speak of “shared values” with “like-minded” countries like

India, where the BJP tolerates or even encourages violence against Muslims? If opposition to the death penalty is one of our national values, why do we not condemn its continued use in the United States?

If our support for human rights were evident at home and voiced equally in multilateral and bilateral forums, we would be taken more seriously. Beijing would not be able to claim that it was being unfairly targeted.

Three and a half centuries ago, Immanuel Kant wrote, "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law."

Jocelyn Chey is Visiting Professor at the University of Sydney and Adjunct Professor at Western Sydney University and UTS. She formerly held diplomatic posts in China and Hong Kong. She is a member of the Order of Australia (AM) and a Fellow of the Australian Institute of International Affairs. She is also an Associate at China Matters.