Different Histories, Shared Futures

Dialogues on Australia-China

Edited by
Mobo Gao · Justin O'Connor · Baohui Xie · Jack Butcher

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"A timely, wide ranging and well informed contribution to the currently vexed and turbulent relationship between Australia and China. This collection presents the balanced but forcefully argued views of some of the best qualified scholars on this issue at a moment when such a book is crucial. An essential primer."

—Kerry Brown, *Professor, King's College*

"If you just want fast food off the China threat production assembly line, this is not the book for you. What this book delivers is that extremely rare commodity: a patient, dispassionate, cool-headed analysis drawing on insights from the authors' life-long, dedicated research on China. If you want to see Australia-China relations improve, and if Australia's public debate is to have any hope of going beyond media headlines and think-tank reports, this book is essential reading."

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"This book is a timely stocktake of the spectacular collapse of Australia-China relations, and a strong riposte to the narrative that this was all China's doing. With informed perspectives on questions of Australian security and identity, and the nature of today's PRC, the authors pick apart simplistic depictions of an ideological stand-off and offer more compelling explanations for today's rivalries and antagonisms. Anyone looking for an alternative to rising tensions and the reckless contemplation of war will find much to draw on in this volume."

—David Brophy, *Senior Lecturer, University of Sydney*

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Editors

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CHAPTER 1

Different Pasts: The Panda and the Kangaroo

Mobo Gao, Baohui Xie, Justin O'Connor, and Jack Butcher

Different Histories

This book is the direct outcome of an online conference held jointly by the University of Adelaide and the University of South Australia in

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September 2021. Amid the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 was the year when the diplomatic relationship between Australia and China was at its worst since 1972. We, Mobo Gao, Justin O'Connor, Baohui Xie and Jack Butcher from the two universities mentioned above, thought that we should perhaps do something to lift our spirits during the gloomiest of times. We wanted to examine whether there was a possibility of a way forward in which Australia and China could have a shared future, even if the histories between the two countries were profoundly different.

Australia and China could not be any more different. Australia is a country of a little more than 25 million people, a continent scarcely populated in its middle and northwest but with abundant natural resources. It has developed excellent health care, education, agriculture, mining and service industries but hardly any industrial capacity. On the other end of the spectrum, China is a country of 1.4 billion people with minimal natural resources, a country that is nicknamed the "world's factory" due to its extensive manufacturing capabilities. The population of Shanghai, or any one of the half a dozen megacities in China, is more than all the people in Australia combined. Just imagine if all of Australia's residents, from Darwin to Perth, across the outback and towards the eastern states, moved to Tasmania to live. That is what an average Chinese province is like in terms of land size but double or even triple the number of people living there.

But these are only the visible physical and material differences between the two countries. There are many more. Politically, Australia is a multi-party, one-person, one-vote democracy. China is a one-party state ruled by the Communist Party of China (CCP), which has been there not because of the ballot, but due to what is more broadly known as a communist revolution. Although both countries are geographically located in the Asia–Pacific, Australia's cultural values and ways of life are largely shaped by European traditions that were planted by white settlers at the expense of the first nations peoples. On the other hand, Chinese cultural values and ways of life, whatever they are, a matter discussed in this book, have been shaped by the indigenous peoples themselves.

Geopolitically, Australia and China have one commonality: that is insecurity. Although Australia is a continental country at ease with itself in terms of territorial integrity, it feels insecure as a European outpost in the Asia–Pacific region and, therefore, canonically seeks alliances with "great and powerful" Western powers for protection, formerly the United

Kingdom (UK) and now the United States (US). On the other hand, China has had territorial disputes with most of its neighbours. Although settling land disputes with 13 of its 14 neighbours, except for India, China still has maritime disputes with several countries. Furthermore, the Taiwan issue, in particular, unsettles China.

Traditionally, China was not a nation-state in the sense that originated in the West. The China that was between and around the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins has been fluid in size, bigger or smaller both in population and land, depending on outcomes of brutal and constant tribal warfare, with different ethnic groups intermingling while fighting against each other. While the Confucian-influenced Chinese were later called the Han Chinese (because of the name of the Han Dynasty), Han was never meant to be ethnic or national. The two biggest empires in Chinese history were the so-called Yuan Dynasty and Qing Dynasty, the former established by the Mongolians from the north and the latter by the Manchus from the northeast, who invaded and conquered China proper. Whether those two empires can be categorised as Chinese dynasties might be debatable, but the fact that they became Chinese, even though the Mongolians were not as thoroughly as the Manchus, is less under dispute. When the Qing Dynasty collapsed in 1911, the Republic of China, established in 1912, inherited its territories. And when the Kuomintang (KMT), headed by Chiang Kai-shek, took the Republic of China government to Taiwan after his defeat at the hands of the communists led by Mao Zedong, the CCP established the People's Republic of China (PRC) and took over the Republic of China's territories, without much of an internationally recognised and legalised demarcation of its borders. After years of give-and-take negotiations, the PRC has settled its disputes with most of its land-based neighbours and has accepted a territorial size smaller than what the Republic of China in Taiwan would entertain.

Nevertheless, China does not feel secure. Memories of colonial occupation by Western powers and Japanese invasions and occupations linger vividly, particularly images of war-time atrocities, such as the Nanking Massacre and the Japanese 731 Unit Chemical warfare experiment. Furthermore, looking at the map to locate how many US military bases surround China in its periphery, it is not hard to imagine that a Chinese leader would always have sleepless nights. It may surprise many Australians that the Chinese, like them, do not feel secure. China's fear is even worse because China does not have anyone to fall back on for protection.

It is not just the fear of war and violence but there is also the fear of hunger and starvation. Although China has improved greatly in terms of feeding its people, the food/land and water resources versus people ratio is still precarious, even after such brutal and inhumane population control imposed by the Chinese on themselves for a couple of decades. The two most recent famines occurred in 1942 under the Republic of China regime during the Japanese occupation and 1958 upon the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward. On the other hand, though much of the land in Australia is barren desert, there is enough arable land to feed not only a smaller population in Australia but with surplus to export, to China for instance.

So far, we have only presented an outline of some of the differences and one commonality between China and Australia. There are more, of course, stereotypical differences, perhaps as a result of their different histories. Australians are laid back and fun-loving, keen and good at sports, who would like to indulge in the myths of larrikinism and mateship, while the Chinese are much more reserved and serious in worldly pursuit, perhaps precisely because of the scarcity of it. Let us repeat the scenario of all the Australians multiplied by two or three living on the small island of Tasmania: it would be hard to imagine then that if you took your children to a park, there would be a swing available for them to jump on. It would also be hard to imagine there would be ovals here and there with large expanses of green grass for sports.

Australians love animals and probably have more pet animals per capita than anywhere else in the world. Some would like to proudly claim that it is because we Australians are humane and civilised towards animals, unlike the cruel Chinese. But imagine how difficult it would be even to walk your dog if you had to live in a flat on the fiftieth floor among what seems like a forest of high-rise apartment blocks.

Common Interests

Despite all the differences, Australians and Chinese have been living together quite nicely since 1972 and until recently, let's say before the US elected Donald Trump as its president in 2016. In fact, the very differences between the two countries meant that one could complement the other. For example, China could supply Australia with manufactured goods at throwaway prices while Australia could supply China with its excellent agricultural goods such as fruit, wheat, barley, beef, wine and,

of course, mineral dirt, plus world-class education. It is a proven fact that since the 1990s, whatever China supplies, the prices tend to decrease, and whatever China demands from Australia, the prices most likely increase. China, for decades, has imported pollution by producing commodities at the lower end of the value chain and exports deflation by depressing the prices in the market. In the process, China has made a leap in its GDP and wealth among its people, albeit at the cost of the environment and the welfare of the millions and millions of migrant workers. It was a win–win relationship, as the Chinese would like to say.

What is the Problem?

Spectacularly and apparently suddenly, the bilateral relationship between the two countries started to deteriorate until 2022, when Australians voted out the Liberal-National Coalition government led by Scott Morrison. The newly installed labour government seems to have put a brake on any further slide. However, it may not be totally fair to blame the Morrison-led government for the deterioration. To start with, it is not just Australia that has problems with China. So have Japan, South Korea, and many European countries, not to speak of the US under Trump or not. Secondly, surveys in these countries seem to suggest that negative opinions of China form a popular majority.

So, the fault must be with China. In the words of the newly elected Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese: "Australia has not changed, but China has". There had been tit-for-tat exchanges between Australia and China on trade issues, official rhetoric and media reporting. The details of these exchanges have been dealt with in this book. But the broad issue to be noted in this introduction is this: What has China under Xi Jinping done to arouse such hostility from the US and its allies? The ban of the Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei and, the arrest of one of Huawei's top executives Meng Wanzhou, the imposition of tariffs on Chinese imports valued at billions and billions of dollars by the Trump administration, just to name a couple of examples, are the West's reaction to China's aggression and its behaviour of not observing "the rules-based international order", as the consistent and frequent news headlines in the mainstream media claim in Anglo-Saxon societies. So what exactly is it that Xi has done?

China Prior Xi as a Comparison

First, let us take a step back to look at China before Xi actually came to power in 2013. The two events that should have assaulted the sense of justice and keenly felt values seemingly held by Western countries happened in China under the firm grip of Deng Xiaoping. The first was the army crackdown with tanks in the streets of Beijing in 1989. The second was the brief invasion of Vietnam in 1979 to, in the words of Deng Xiaoping, "teach the Vietnamese a lesson". Both of those would not have taken place without the explicit instruction of Deng Xiaoping. Deng was one of the most ruthless and autocratic leaders, if not the most, of the CCP. Deng dismissed almost single-handedly two General Secretaries of the CCP, Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang, the two most "liberal" CCP leaders, still worshipped by the liberal Chinese intelligentsia. The General Secretary of the CCP in post-Mao China was and still is officially and formally supposed to be the number one boss in the Chinese political and bureaucratic hierarchy, but Deng could lecture the two General Secretaries as if they were his children.

Nevertheless, Deng has not been feared or demonised as much as Xi Jinping as a dictator. When Hong Kong was in the middle of turmoil in 2019, many predicted, and some actually anticipated, that China would send tanks into the street, like in 1989. But Xi did not order such a crackdown and the Chinese PLA troops remained in their barracks, except when they came out to clean up the rubbish left behind in the street by the protesters and rioters.

Regarding the South China Sea issue, Xi Jinping did not do anything out of the ordinary of what China had been doing under his predecessors. The first armed exchange between China and Vietnam over the South China Sea dispute took place in 1974 and then the second in 1988. The first Chinese armed exchange with the Philippine naval forces in the South China Sea took place in 1995 and the last one in 2012 before Xi came to power one year later. It is possible to attribute the artificial build-up of islands by dredging sand to Xi as his initiative since these projects began in 2013. But quite possibly, these projects were planned some years ahead of Xi assuming the leadership. It has to be pointed out, though, that China under Xi did push through the National Security Law in Hong Kong and that China under Xi has built up a military presence in the South China Sea after some rocks were expanded into island-like existences.

The three most prominent programmes or policies that are more or less definitely pushed by Xi Jinping are the stronger and more thorough anti-corruption campaign within the CCP and the Chinese government, the Made in China initiative to upgrade China's value chain of production and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, if one examines carefully, none of them were really Xi Jinping's original ideas. Anti-corruption was a consistent issue within the CCP for years on end. The difference, if there is any, is that Xi has had the guts to tackle corrupted officials at the very top partly because of his princeling credentials.

Upgrading the value chain of production is almost as natural as day turning into night. With the increased development of technology, coupled with heightened demand for higher salaries against the background of decreased labour supply, industries of lower technological value in China have started to move to countries that have been lately catching up, just like those industries that moved from Hong Kong, Taiwan and the West to China during the 1980s and 1990s. China has moved towards a direction of development with or without Xi Jinping, just as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan have.

The BRI looks like a signature programme by Xi Jinping to project China's power and influence. But, again, this may not be what it appears. The geographical differences and developmental gaps between the south-east coasts and inland provinces have always been an issue for modern Chinese governments, not just since the PRC was established in 1949. For the description of this regional disparity, there is a standard reference of the first-tier cities of Beijing, Shanghai, and provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang, Fujian, second-tier cities like Xi'an, Taiyuan, Zhengzhou, Nanchang or Chengdu and provinces like Anhui and Jiangxi and Sichuan and third tier provinces further to the west, and northwest of China. During the era of Mao, when China felt threatened by the US/Taiwan from the south and the former USSR from the north, Mao designed a strategy called the "Third Front", in which a massive amount of investment and human resources were mobilised to set up industries in the second and third tier areas to avoid military attacks.

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, regional gaps were even more keenly felt. As a result of this perception and necessity, there emerged a programme of developing the "west" before Xi came to power. For the Chinese leadership under Hu Jintao, there was already a focus on Tibet and Xinjiang. China could not leave the "west" underdeveloped for geopolitical reasons. Moreover, Chinese policymakers felt increasingly

more intensely that ethnic or political unrest in conjunction with religious extremism could be dealt with more effectively if and when there is economic development in these areas. Finally, Chinese policymakers also believed that China relies too much on maritime routes for imports and exports, a risk to be anticipated given the unsettled South China Sea and Taiwan issues and encirclement by the increasingly less friendly US and its allies. Therefore, a road network for trade and development inspired by the Ancient Silk Road was on the agenda before Xi came to power.

Regarding the Taiwan issue, again, Xi Jinping has not so far said anything that has not been repeated many times before: that Taiwan is a province of China, that the current split between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait was a result of a civil war between the KMT and the CCP that has not finished, that China will try every means possible to unite Taiwan peacefully, but will resort to military force if the red line of independence is about to be crossed. Just as we are writing now, the army, the navy and air forces of the PLA have been carrying out what they call "military drills" surrounding Taiwan in reaction to US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan. This can easily be seen as evidence of the aggressive nature of Xi Jinping. However, again, it is not that simple. China, under Xi's predecessor Jiang Zemin, also ordered missile drills over Taiwan in 1995. The only difference is that China's willingness to take risks has increased, and its willingness to deal with provocations has gone down.

The Problem with China Under Xi

Basically, Xi Jinping's sin is that he is leading a China that is wealthier, more confident and more assertive in defending what it considers its interests. In a nutshell, the issue is this: The Western-dominated world has to deal with a rising China that is not only racially different but also politically different from the West headed by the US. The US wants to maintain its dominance, and China seems not only able to but also aims to challenge this dominance.

In today's "progressive" world, we cannot openly articulate racist sentiments that occasionally occur when the rise of China is a topic along the lines of "the first non-Caucasian rising power". It is better to talk down to China regarding values and ways of life because it is politically correct and we can hold the moral high ground. The most popular and often

cited argument is that it is not the Chinese people we are up against but the Chinese government that is ruled by a communist party.

What is referred to as Chinese in what is called China consists of 20% of humanity. The Chinese might argue that they have the right to develop, including cutting-edge technology and the right to have a higher standard of living. The Chinese might also argue that based on their own experience, the development of infrastructure through the BRI would lead to economic growth that is good for everyone, even though the BRI is not without China's self-interest in supplying manufactured commodities and demanding raw materials. At least China provides a suitable alternative for the formerly colonised countries. Surely, if Fox News, the BBC, the VOA, the Murdoch press, Reuters and all the dominating Western media could spread the soft power of the West, China can also do some of its own, the Chinese would think.

Yes, but no. To start with the media, Western media cannot get into China because it blocks them. There is no freedom of speech in China. There is no level field for competition with China regarding tech development because the Chinese state directs its big companies. There is no transparency in how Chinese enterprises operate, and they are not rule-based commercial operations. The US could vote Trump out by an election, and so did Australians with Scott Morrison, but you could not do that in China. What is worst of all, China practices forced labour and even "genocide" against the Uighurs in Xinjiang. So the story goes.

It was hoped, as often touted, that with the opening up of China to Western values and ways of life, which are universally accepted as the best in any possible world, China would change. But China has not. Worse still, Xi came along who completely ruined any hope for change in China because Xi is less hesitant, more assertive, more articulate and more in control. To the outrage of those who wished for China to change, Xi even abolished limitations on presidential terms, meaning that Xi wants to rule for life.

Is a Shared Future Possible?

This book aims to tackle these issues to see whether there can be a shared future between Australia and China, and by extension a shared future between China and the West. To explore this possibility, we will ask the following questions:

- Is China a national security threat to Australia?
- Are the Chinese different from Australians in terms of values and ways of life?
- How do the Chinese see democracy?
- Does people-to-people exchange in cultural activities make a difference?
- How do the Chinese perceive Australia on social media?
- How does the literacy of each country measure up?
- Are Australia and China destined to compete in the South Pacific?
- Is a pattern of economic partnership but geopolitical rivalry sustainable?
- Is Australia securitising Australia–China relationship?
- Is there a common good in education across the two countries?
- Is good-will between China and Australia possible?
- Is it possible to understand China?
- Is Australia's narrative on Beijing's economic coercion too simplistic?
- What are the domestic dynamics for the West's hostility towards China?

Contents of the Chapters

To answer these questions, this book is divided into two parts—Chapters 1–8 examine the Australia–China relationship in general, while Chapters 9–15 focus on more specific topics. The first and foremost question following the introductory chapter, of course, is whether China poses any threat to Australia given that the dominance of the China Threat discourse in Australia's public affairs suggests poor prospects for any continued Australia–China relations, let alone positive interactions of mutual benefit. To address this question, David Goodman explores, in Chapter 2, alternative ways to approach Australia's relationship with China and argues that the recognition of differences and the development of ways to mediate differences through building on complementarities can be beneficial for both Australia and China, not just through economic but also through social interactions. He believes that the development of mutual understanding of other peoples, their cultures, and their social and economic systems is a precursor not simply to respect and the avoidance of unwarranted prejudice but to cooperation for a wider public good.

Colin Mackerras, in Chapter 3, examines the role of national security in Australia–China relations, arguing it as particularly being a factor in the decline of the relationship after 2015. Focusing non-exclusively on the prime ministership of Scott Morrison (2018–2022), Mackerras analyses national security concerns and responses of both the Australian and Chinese sides and points out that neither side has shown any sympathy for the national security concerns of the other. While criticising the Morrison government for making China an enemy by treating it as such, the author also discusses the potential impact of a more diplomatic approach on Australia–China relations in the post-Morrison years.

In Chapter 4, Yingjie Guo debunks the logic of equivalence in the China discourse of the so-called China threat industry, which gives rise to three notable consequences. One is the discursive dichotomisation of the international community and the resultant erosion of global sociability. Another is the hardening of the Australian Self vis-à-vis the Chinese Other. The third is the simplification and homogenisation of China. Each of these has a ripple effect that combines to perpetuate and escalate negative perceptions of and hawkish reactions to China. The logic of difference, however, provides an alternative perspective on Australia and China and is likely to lead to a better understanding and improvement of bilateral relations.

In Chapter 5, James Laurenceson provides a detailed analysis on an emerging narrative of economic coercion surrounding the Australia-China trade tensions in the early 2020s. The narrative attributes China's campaign of disruption targeting Australian exports to China's authoritarian political system and presents the local predicament as unsurprising given past attempts by Beijing at economic coercion affecting other countries. This fiction of economic coercion also suggests that Australia should join its allies to seek economic decoupling from China. Laurenceson contends that this narrative is substantially incomplete, misses relevant context and fails to acknowledge evidence that challenges its key claims. To substantiate his argument, the author provides a more comprehensive account of context and evidence for an assessment of Australia's predicament.

In light of the deterioration of China–Australia relations in recent years, with distrust and threat narratives concerning the South Pacific region contributing to Western discourse on the risks of the Belt and Road Initiative, David Morris analyses the geopolitical narratives in Chapter 6, to comprehend whether Australia and China are destined

to compete for power, or whether the geopolitical imperatives of both could be satisfied—as well as risks reduced and opportunities for regional sustainable development realised—through mutually beneficial cooperation.

Yujia Shen and Rujie Chen discuss Australia's securitisation of China in Chapter 7. They have observed that the "national security" framing of economic investment from China in Australia has increasingly permeated the fields of economy, politics, science, technology, and even cultural exchanges and shaped Australia's foreign policy towards China since the mid-2010s. The change of government, the interest-interaction game of its actors, massive mobilisation of the media as well as regional geopolitical influences have all contributed to Australia's increasing securitisation of China.

In Chapter 8, Lei Yu and Sophia Sui provide an empirical review of the Australia-China strategic partnership and identify an ambivalent pattern of economic interdependence and political and security mistrust. The authors argue that some factors at the systemic and unit levels advance their economic interdependence whereas others alienate the two states and lead to an ambivalent pattern of relations. The authors hold that this ambivalent pattern can remain in the foreseeable future given the growing clash of interests driven by systemic and unit-level constraints.

Part II of this book moves from discussion of challenges to opportunities in more specific terms, looking at how Australia and China can better understand, communicate and work with each other for a better future.

In Chapter 9, Diane Hu and Ying Li highlight misconceptions on the part of both Australia and China when formulating and implementing their foreign policy regarding each other: both assume that they know perfectly well about the other. The authors examine key indicators of literacy and further illustrate the low level with a case study of Turnbull's "stand up" speech. The authors argue that misconceptions on both sides could drive and keep the current low of bilateral relations since the mid-2010s and need to be corrected if the two countries are to navigate through major power rivalry and ideological differences.

In Chapter 10, Jack Butcher presents a frame analysis of Chinese language "we-media" contents through four media frames to explore how Australia has been portrayed and perceived at the grassroots level in China. He finds that we-media users generally depict Australia as lacking an independent foreign policy, strategically anxious and increasingly xenophobic in the conflict frame, a laid-back immigrant society

with wide-open spaces, good quality of life and unique flora and fauna in the human-interest frame, highly dependent on China and resource-rich in the economic consequences frame and co-opted by the US to contain China in the responsibility frame. This chapter aims to inform a non-Chinese speaking audience regarding the diversity of views communicated about Australia in China at the grassroots level and promote mutual understanding for a shared future.

To debunk value narratives that have led to increasingly polarised and oversimplified perceptions about China, Baohui Xie explains, in Chapter 11, how democracy is understood and practised in China through its parliamentary system. He argues that democracy is more often taken as a conceptual aspiration for realisation of such ideas as *minquan* (sovereignty of the people), *minyi* (public opinion) and *minsheng* (people's livelihood) rather than a particular form of government. All these ideas are pre-fixed by *min*—the people, demanding much space allowing for dynamics of democracy at local levels, which in turn feeds into democratic satisfaction and popular support. While simplistic democracy-autocracy dichotomies lend space to suspicion and fear and shut down dialogues and interactions, the author believes that a healthy Australia–China relationship can benefit from mutual understanding and engagement and calls for wisdom and creativity in negotiating differences.

Greg McCarthy and Xianlin Song are particularly concerned with Australia's higher education and the future of the common good and, in Chapter 12, examine the issue of common good through the historical lens of Australian higher education, from colonial outposts of Western modernity to post-World War II nation building and then to the contemporary shift to commercialisation and national security. This chapter contests that the future of Australian higher education lies in addressing the issue of global common good by building its international engagement to global concerns facing humanity. The authors also point to the barriers to an educational common good caused by geopolitical tensions between Australia and China, which have compromised Australian university autonomy in the name of national security.

In Chapter 13, Jocelyn Chey shares her first-hand experiences to illustrate how the Australian government has sought to introduce Australian culture to China through cultural diplomacy, and how China has also engaged in similar activities in Australia over the past 40 years. As both countries' trade and political relations matured, people-to-people cultural exchanges gathered pace. The author uses particular cultural events and

programmes to shed some light on the aims and results of this half century of cultural diplomacy.

In Chapter 14, Mobo Gao asks the question whether a common destiny with Australia is possible even when the CCP still rules China. The answer is positive. Refuting assumptions that Australia and China cannot get along due to fundamental differences in values and ways of life, Gao demonstrates, by fact-checking values and ways of life in analytical categories, such as democracy, market capitalism, individualism, law and order and governance with evidence-based reality, that the differences between China and Australia as well as between the Chinese and the Australians are far from fundamental. He argues that the tension between the two countries is actually rooted in the geopolitics dictated by the US.

Lastly, Justin O'Connor presents a conclusion in Chapter 15. He further addresses the China Threat rhetoric and presents a discussion that draws out the underlying geometry of such claims as economic coercion and ideological orthodoxy beyond pure economic issues, "national interests", value narratives, and Australia's new defence stance. He argues that there is a connection between Australia's hollowed-out democracy and the lurch into a China war, with the hawks combining a deep identification with the US with a distrust of domestic democracy. He warns that a sudden suspension of constructive conversation and a swerve into mutual antagonism can come at great cost to us all.

This book, therefore, broadens the discussion on Australia–China relations and presents a core argument that the Panda and the Kangaroo can share a common future despite the differences and challenges they have to confront, understand and negotiate. Australia and China have never been enemies in history, and there are no substantial reasons why they should become adversaries now because enmity, the bad fruit of a cold war mindset, is not in the interest of either party by any means. For the bilateral relationship to move ahead so that both Australia and China can benefit from engaging each other on the basis of mutual respect and understanding, dialogues and exchanges at multiple levels are needed. This is exactly why we put our thoughts together in this book, exploring the possibility of a shared future.

CHAPTER 2

China Threat, Australian Challenge: Recognising Differences, Building Futures

David S. G. Goodman

> Oceania was at war with Eastasia: Oceania had always been at war with Eastasia. A large part of the political literature of five years was now completely obsolete. Reports and records of all kinds, newspapers, books, pamphlets, films, sound–tracks, photographs all had to be rectified at lightning speed. (Orwell, 1949, p. 87)

George Orwell's pointed satire about totalitarian regimes seems surprisingly somewhat apposite to the contemporary Australian public discourse about China. Since 2017, there has been not just a sudden about-face in Australian attitudes towards China but the development of an increasingly hostile attitude in public discourse, driven not just by government and politicians but also by opinion leaders of all kinds, including Think Tanks and journalists. The causes of this change are attributed to the China

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Threat: an existential threat to Australia from the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Communist Party of China (CCP).

Clearly, there are paradoxes and tensions in the changes in the Australian public discourse of the last few years, as well as generally the more longer term in Australia's relationship with the PRC. Simply put, the PRC and Australia have complementary economies but very different and largely opposed political systems. The PRC is essentially a one-party state with great power aspirations; it has been and remains to a large extent a developing economy, which introduced a major economic reform programme in 1978. Even now, after forty years of economic growth, China is still just about the world average for GDP per capita, and even in terms of Purchasing Power Parity calculations [PPP] only at a level 27.2% that of the USA (World Bank, 2021). Nonetheless, since the late 1970s, the PRC's changed economic development strategy has led it to reach an overall GDP greater than 60% of that of the USA and become the second largest economy in the world with all that implies for governmental capacity domestically and internationally. Part and parcel of that process has been China's economic integration with the rest of the world, eventually becoming the world centre of manufacturing through technology transfer, trade and investment.

In contrast, Australia is a medium-sized developed economy, with a relatively high GDP per capita—82.7% of the level of the United States of America (USA) in terms of PPP (World Bank, 2021). Australia prides itself on its liberal democratic values and political system, and has come in the era of globalisation to see itself as especially open in trade and investment. As a result of economic openness, while it now has comparatively little manufacturing, it is a great supplier of primary products and services, especially to China. From the Australian standpoint, it is not just that China rapidly became this country's main trade partner, as has now become the case for the majority of the countries in the world, but that Australia is by any measure heavily dependent on its economic relationship with the PRC. By value, 27% of Australia's imports come from China; and 32.6% of Australian exports go to China: Australia's most substantial trade partner in both categories by a long way (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

Managing the ambiguities inherent in Australia's relationship with China is never likely to be easy (Goodman, 2017). Declaring a China Threat would though seem to be misguidedly foreclosing on that relationship rather than building towards a sustainable future. At the same

time, there are always options way short of constant and regular appeasement. The idea of a China Threat suggests that it is primarily the result of a conflict between the USA and the PRC in terms of their aspirations and own particular views of the world, and their respective roles in it. As Zhao Suisheng (2021) has recently pointed out, this is a conflict moreover that the USA cannot win if it wishes to maintain its position as the sole dominant political economy. He also highlights that neither the USA nor the PRC are going to back down from their stated (if somewhat different) positions of leadership and great power aspirations, and in the latter's case this would be so regardless of CCP leadership and presumably by extension of whether China was a liberal democracy.

The language of existential threat is more likely to lead to war and open hostility rather than conflict resolution. This would seem not to be in Australia's interests not simply economically but given the PRC's continuing role in the Asia Pacific Region in which, needs must, this country operates. Better perhaps to recognise the challenge that the PRC poses to Australia, particularly the differences in social and world views, where these exist, and to develop ways to mediate those differences. It may then be possible to build on the complementarities for the benefit of both, not just economically, but also socially, difficult though that may be.

Understanding the PRC

The idea of a China Threat has the potential to be a self-fulfilling prophecy and highly destructive. Armed conflict and economic disruption are only the most obvious consequences. Polarised approaches to social and political problems may sell well in the political marketplace and on social media. At the same time, they require individuals to adopt extreme positions, as indeed was often the case during the Cold War, where anti-establishment figures in Europe and the UK had far more comfortable views of the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) than was realistic. When as in the case of Australia, the object of enmity (China) may be equated with a substantial portion of the country's population (Chinese-Australians) regardless of the attitudes the latter may hold such polarisation not only has the potential to be socially divisive (and worse) but actually to push the latter towards the former. The Australian opposition spokesperson on foreign affairs, Penny Wong, has forcefully

emphasised that domestic fear-mongering is not just socially and economically irresponsible, it is also politically counterproductive, internationally always and domestically in the long term (Wong, 2021).

Polarisation also results in even more increased misunderstandings about China in Australia, particularly as evidenced in the recent discussion of the contemporary China Threat (Goodman, 2021). Only if Australia starts to put some of those misunderstandings aside can a more sustainable framework for interaction with China develop. In particular, there have been three major misunderstandings: about the role of Communism in the contemporary PRC; about the social and political consequences of economic development; and about the totalitarian nature of the state.

Given that the PRC is a Communist Party-state, it would be convenient for those who wish to pursue the theme of China representing an existential threat if the major difference between China and Australia (or for that matter the liberal democracies elsewhere in the world) could be expressed in terms of the contrasting ideologies of international communism and liberal democracy, and their battle for world supremacy. This was what provided the Cold War with its cutting edge (in both directions) and justified hostility beyond a "you can't tell me what to do attitude to international politics". There were then different visions (however flawed) of present and future societies. Liberal democracy and capitalism versus the Communist Party-states, world revolution and socialism. There clearly are differences in the approach to politics of Australia and China, not least since Australia remains a Liberal Democracy with competing political parties and independent social and legal institutions while the PRC still has an institutionalised ruling party. The CCP, though, has come a long way since its embrace of proletarian world revolution, both before and for the decades immediately after 1949. This shows not only in its international stance but also in its domestic approach. These days, the membership of the CCP is very different to its Mao-era days. Half of the members are now college-educated, and a greater percentage are officials, professionals, technicians and managers than are workers and peasants (Xinhua, 2019; Zhang, 2021). Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the CCP, spoke at length on the 100th Anniversary of the Foundation of the Party. In his celebratory speech, there was no mention at all of the proletariat, workers were only mentioned twice, and peasants once. Not surprisingly, members of the CCP were mentioned eleven times, and there were many and frequent references to "the people" and "the nation" (Xi, 2021). The CCP certainly has an international strategy, but this is to remove the USA