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Three years in Beijing: thoughts on China’s rise

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In 2012 the then Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced the creation of a new Chair of Australian Studies at Peking University, Beijing. Although there were other Chairs of Australian Studies in countries like the United States, the UK, Ireland, Denmark and Japan, our failure to have an established presence in China was considered a serious omission. This was all the more the case as there is now an extensive and significant Australian Studies network in China which has an interesting history.

In 1979, right at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), and as China opened to the world, nine young Chinese academics were sent to Sydney University to study the English language and Australian literature. This group later became known as the ‘Gang of Nine’ and on their return to China they were influential in establishing the first Australian Studies programs across China. In 1988, they also created a peak body, the Chinese Australian Studies Association, which from that time has hosted an Australian Studies conference every two years. The Australian Studies network continues to grow and diversify. At present, the network of Australian Studies Centres in China has close to forty Centres across China.

As wonderful as that growth has been, it created a problem. It proved difficult to provide all the support this growing network required. To solve this problem a new Australian entity was created: the Foundation for Australian Studies in China (FASIC). This is a unique, not-for-profit organisation was designed a) to support a newly created Chair of Australian Studies, at Peking University and b) to build the research and teaching capacity of the Australian Studies network across China. FASIC is supported by the private sector, notably by BHP Billiton as well as by Universities Australia and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT).

Since taking up my position in February 2013 and after many talks with Chinese colleagues and students several images of Australia emerged. The Chinese have an almost unshakeable view that Australia is a pristine continent largely untouched by the social and industrial impacts of the last two hundred years. Whether earned or not, Australia has a fresh green image. This idea is driven by a comparison with the massive scale of China’s development since the late 1970s with its inevitable effects on the environment. There are huge cities in China that retain virtually nothing in the built environment that is more than fifty years old. When I visit the capital of Mongolia, Hohhot, I can plausibly claim to be one of the oldest things in that city.

Along with environmental protection, heritage and heritage management are big questions for China. Enormous efforts are going into tree-planting programs, landscaping and development of environmental amenities and restoration of historical buildings. That said, the Chinese often do not have a great attachment to their countryside in the way that we know it. For many Chinese, especially older Chinese, life in the countryside brings harsh memories of poverty and privation. But that is changing. Our vast local German supermarket in Beijing now displays a considerable range of tents and outdoor camping equipment. The Chinese are becoming very environmentally conscious and the pivot towards renewable energy with the use of solar and wind power is very evident.
It is also very apparent that education matters in China. When we walk out the main gate of Peking University on any weekend, we pass very long queues of people lining up to come in and look over the campus. Often these are middle school students or parents and grandparents with a young child, showing them what a wonderful place the university is and confirming how proud they would be to have a child studying there. This emphasis on Tier 1 universities presents a challenge for the technical education sector as the Polytechnics and technical schools are often seen as second best. But there are opportunities here too to craft different messages about the importance of gaining premium skills. A Peking University graduate in mass communications told me recently that there were no good jobs in her field and not much money. So she had taken a course in jewellery design and is now doing very well indeed in the fashion industry.

China has now rehoused most of its people. So as the Chinese economy now moves from its massive obsession with rebuilding China, tower block after tower block, new questions are emerging about how best to design and service cities for people with middle-class lifestyles and growing disposable income. There is a huge demand for new things, smart things, well-designed things and expensive things. Any idea we might have that cheap is the way to go in China is a mistake, whether it relates to wine or cars or anything else. In targeting products to China, including educational products, we need to remember that quality matters.

Surprisingly, history also matters. Whenever we visit a University one of the first things we are shown, even in quite small universities, is their museum. A guide tells us about the University history with evident pride and we are shown well-presented photographs and memorabilia. In a very good initiative, Australian Universities have made a commitment to managing their educational memory by setting up the Australia China Alumni Association (ACAA), the largest body of its kind anywhere in the world. This is network building on a very big scale with all the events, awards and ceremonies that such organisations create. Alumni is family and there is a large investment in family in China. Links, associations and friendships are essential to creating that insider group that Chinese will want to belong to.

It seems to me that there is an opportunity here for the TAFE/VET sector to create its own alumni organisation and its own family history for China. Such an organisation would provide incomparable opportunities for networking. It would also help create opportunities to address the important question faced by the TAFE sector of educational prestige. There are so many good stories to be told about the value of technical and vocational skills, about the creativity, ingenuity and foresight needed to build the new future we are entering. An Alumni Association would be an excellent way to do this.