CHAPTER 9

Chinese Australians and the Public Diplomacy Challenge for Australia in the 21st Century

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Abstract

When relations were first established between Australia and the People’s Republic of China in 1972, the mission of public diplomacy to promote closer social, cultural, scientific and educational links with China was unambiguous. Four decades on the mission is less clear. The Australian nation includes close to one million people of Chinese descent of whom 318,969 were born in China. Today China is the third most common foreign country of birth for Australians, behind only Britain and New Zealand. China accounts for more international students in Australia than any other country and the aggregate spending of the 685,000 Chinese tourists who visited in 2012 exceeded that from every other source country. China’s economy is five times larger than Australia’s. At the same time, the government of China strategically engages with Chinese-Australian community organisations and media to a greater degree than with other communities in Australia to promote its national interests abroad. This chapter explores the implications of dynamic shifts in the demography and relative economic and strategic power of China and Australia for the ongoing challenge of promoting closer people-to-people ties between the two countries.

Keywords

public diplomacy – China-Australia relations – Chinese Australians – Chinese political activity

When Australia established formal diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China in 1972, its public diplomacy mission was unambiguous. A key despatch from the Australian Embassy in Beijing to Canberra in 1976 put the case succinctly in urging the Australian government to invest “disproportionate effort” in promoting closer cultural, scientific and educational links with China. The national effort to date had been woeful. “We send annually to China fewer students than Britain, Canada or, for god’s sake, Italy” (NAA: A1838,
In the early 1970s, Australia needed to build community engagement with China from a very low base through cultural, educational, sporting, business and scientific initiatives.

The author of the despatch, Dr Jocelyn Chey, recommended several targeted educational initiatives in Chinese language and culture on the Australian side, and the promotion of Australian culture, education, science and technology in China, to ensure that each society was more widely understood and appreciated in the other. The despatch concluded with a recommendation to establish a “government-funded and directed foundation” charged with supporting cultural, educational and scientific exchanges between Australia and China on the precedent of the recently established Australia-Japan Foundation. Dr Chey’s recommendation was the catalyst for the creation of the Australia-China Council (A.C.C.) two years later.

Four decades on, the A.C.C. is still a major contributor to cultural and educational relations, although operating within a more highly developed and diversified relationship linking the two countries. Like other bilateral councils and foundations, the A.C.C. regularly updates its strategy to keep abreast of a rapidly developing relationship between Australia and China, including a four-year strategic plan to 2018 focusing on “strengthening foundations and developing new frontiers” in the partnership. The A.C.C. understands its role as helping to bridge gaps in the partnership, to take advantage of opportunities in bilateral engagement and to encourage others to do the same (Australia China Council 2014). In practice this means supporting initiatives in education, economic diplomacy, arts and culture, while leaving further areas of engagement to other well-established players.

The strategy largely avoids science and research diplomacy, for example, on the understanding that other Australian government agencies and the university sector carry the burden of responsibility for science and research exchange. Science diplomacy is promoted through the Australia-China Science and Research Fund, jointly managed by the Australian Government Department of Industry (formerly Innovation, Industry, Science and Research) and the Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology. The aim of the fund is to support strategic science and research collaboration “of mutual benefit to Australia and China.” Science and research exchanges are also embedded in extensive university research contracts and engagements. More could certainly be done, as former federal minister Brendan Nelson has noted, to add science and research collaboration to our “diplomatic tool kit.” Nevertheless research exchanges in the sciences are substantial and continuing (Trounson 2013).

More could also be done, this chapter argues, to acknowledge the role of Chinese Australians in promoting people-to-people ties and to engage