

Tabled by Ms Frances Adamson
Secretary, DFAT
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Confucius Institute Annual Lecture: Australia and China in the 21st Century

**Speaker: Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade,
Frances Adamson**

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I acknowledge the Kurna people of the Adelaide Plains, the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we meet today, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present. I extend that respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people present here amongst us.

It is a great pleasure to be back at the University of Adelaide to deliver the Confucius Institute's Annual Lecture as part of the OzAsia Festival.

OzAsia is Australia's leading international arts festival focusing on Asia and I want to compliment Douglas Gautier and his team at the Adelaide Festival Centre on the outstanding work they do in building cultural connections through engaging international and local communities.

Cultural exchange helps foster goodwill and mutual understanding, both valuable assets at any time, but particularly – and this is an idea I will come back to – in the 21st Century.

The last time I walked onto a podium at Adelaide University was in fact last century. It was in May 1985, three months after I joined the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade as a trainee and I had come back to receive my Economics degree.

Economists were in demand in Canberra as the Hawke Government rolled out major economic reforms. The Australian economy and financial system were becoming more open and as a new graduate I could feel it.

Only a little earlier, in 1979, China had begun what was to become a decades-long, and utterly transformative, process of opening and reform.

Had I realised what an impact this would have on Australia, our region and the world, I might have looked beyond the Napier Building and made an earlier start at learning Mandarin.

And I'd like to think that if there had been a Confucius Institute then, the attraction would have been irresistible.

Fortunately, for the past ten years, students at Adelaide University have had the opportunity to engage with Chinese language and culture through the Confucius Institute here on campus – one of 14 such institutions throughout Australia.

Universities in Australia

Our universities hold a very important place in the public consciousness.

The University of Adelaide was founded with the goal of “[preparing] for South Australia young leaders shaped by education rather than by birth or wealth”, reflecting the values of a “distinctively progressive and democratic way of life”, with a spirit “of liberty and discovery, immune from intolerance or external influence”.¹

Universities are places where young minds explore new horizons, and challenge assumptions.

Universities encourage the development of new ideas just as much as the dissemination of accepted ones – a process that requires critical engagement with subject matter, and a tolerance for a broad range of perspectives and opinions.

As the great man [Confucius] said –

“Learning without thought is labour lost;
Thought without learning is perilous.”

Australians recognise just how important the pursuit of knowledge is to our society – and just how central a role our network of world-class universities plays in supporting it.

The Chinese understand this too and attached great importance to education from well before Confucian times 2500 years ago.

Australia’s universities have roots a mere one millennium old.

Against that ancient backdrop, we modern nations and peoples of Australia and China are only just getting to know one another.

During this century, which some are already calling the Asian century, our two nations will matter a great deal to one another.

The way we pursue our common interests today, and the way we manage our differences, will help establish the pattern of that relationship.

With this in mind, today I will attempt to define the basis for the conduct of a respectful, productive relationship that will grow in this 21st century in ways we can only imagine.

History of Australia China Relations

Before turning to the present and the future, let me speak about the past – because if I had spent *even* longer at university, I would have studied history also.

The history of Australia-China relations goes back some 200 years – to the very first days of European settlement on this continent.

It is fitting, in a way, that we meet in Elder hall – George Elder arrived here in 1839, not long after the first Chinese came to Australia seeking new opportunities.*

Sir Thomas Elder, for whom this hall is named, made his way out to Adelaide in 1854 at the age of 36.

In a few years, Thomas had built a great fortune of his own – establishing a pastoral lease at Nilpena station, and farming a land mass approaching the size of his native Scotland.

But while the Elder brothers went on to great success in matters pastoral and political – the early Chinese settlers had a far more challenging reception, often finding work as farmhands in very trying conditions.

The gold rush changed everything.

The early trickle of Asian and European migration into Australia turned into a torrent – with thousands flocking to the fields in Victoria.

Numbers dropped off considerably from there – as the newly federated colonies of Australia pursued a series of discriminatory immigration policies.

In time, these policies were subject to intense protest and debate – including at this university, until they were dismantled in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Today, Chinese Australians number well over one million² – and are prominently represented across our society. Mandarin is the second most widely spoken language in Australian homes.

And Elders now conducts a great deal of businesses through its Chinese representative offices – running feedlots, and selling top quality Australian produce into the discerning markets of China.

So although settlers from China and Europe worked together and survived together in those early days of colonial settlement – it was a very long time until the Australia that emerged forged a formal relationship with the Government of China.

This year, Australia and the People's Republic of China are proud to be celebrating the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations – a significant milestone in our modern relationship.

I've spent nearly half of my career working in China – first as a young Vice Consul in Hong Kong in 1987, and most recently as our 12th Ambassador in Beijing.

Australia's first Ambassador to the PRC, Stephen Fitzgerald, recalls in his book 'Comrade Ambassador' that in 1973, Australians living in China, or with significant interests in China, could easily be assembled in a modest room.

Nowadays we can barely fit them into a football stadium – as Port Adelaide discovered in May when they played the Gold Coast Suns in an AFL match for points in Shanghai, attended by more than ten thousand screaming Power fans.

China's re-emergence

Our trading relationship has grown remarkably in recent times.

As China has opened to the world, its demand for raw materials has fuelled a mining export boom in Australia that has helped our economy to 26 years of unbroken economic growth.

The numbers are staggering: today China is Australia's largest trading partner by a considerable margin, both our principal destination for exports and source of imports.

A quarter of Australia's manufactured imports come from China, and Chinese demand for Australian raw materials and other products accounts for virtually a third of our merchandise exports.³

Our investment relationship is also deepening – increasing 27-fold over the past ten years.

The China Australia Free Trade Agreement is a significant milestone in our trading relationship – establishing the market access for Australian producers, and the access to investment for Australian firms, that will drive prosperity for the next generation.

And the agreement will soon give Chinese producers complete tariff free access into our market for their exports, as well as liberalised investment access.

In such promising times, both countries should be mindful of the risk of taking things for granted; of assuming our flourishing trade relationship – or the welcome progress in the links between our Governments and people – can be run on a sort of 'autopilot'.

While we are complementary economies, there is no getting around the fact that Australia and China are very different places, with different political and legal systems, values and world views.

Nonetheless, we are brought together by geography and shared interests today in ways that could not have been imagined 200 years ago. It is incumbent on us, today, to make sure the relationship is developed with an eye to more than simple convenience.

The work our countries do to understand each other is never completed.

It is our task to build links through education and business, as well as through diplomacy, to foster deeper understanding between our countries.

This is vital to advancing interests we have in common.

There are many ways we do this.

The New Colombo Plan, a signature initiative of the Government, championed by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, herself a graduate of Adelaide University, has given more than 4700 Australian students an opportunity to travel to China since 2014.

Students like Ryan Cunningham, from this University, who spent most of last year in Hong Kong – studying at the University of Hong Kong, and completing internships at the Global Institute for Tomorrow and CSR Asia.

Ryan is now working as a graduate at the South Australian Department of Premier and Cabinet – advising on China strategy in the international relations division.

The New Colombo Plan is establishing a cohort of students in Australia with experience across China, in the big name schools as well as regional institutions.

At last count, there were about 1200 formal linkages between Australian and Chinese universities, and NCP has the potential to grow this network much further.

Chinese students are coming to Australia in ever greater numbers seeking the experience and qualifications to enable them to achieve their personal ambitions.

In 2016, almost 200 thousand Chinese students were enrolled in Australia – 27.5% per cent of total overseas student arrivals, and up 15 per cent on the year before.*

We understand the high value placed by Chinese culture on the best possible education.

And we are honoured that so many have chosen to come to Australia to pursue that goal.

The Government's strategy for international education 2025 seeks to entrench Australia as a leader in education, training and research, and ensure domestic and international students alike obtain a world class education and student experience.

A significant benefit of international education is that Australian and Chinese students are building networks of friends and contacts that will lead to deeper engagement, closer economic and cultural collaboration and a chance together to make progress on common scientific, economic and other challenges.

Tourism is also providing an opportunity for us to get to know each other better.

More than 1.2 million Chinese tourists have visited Australia over the past twelve months, seizing the opportunity of the China Australia year of tourism to explore our country.

In February, Trade Tourism and Investment Minister Steven Ciobo launched this initiative alongside Dr Li Jinzao, the Chairman of the China National Tourism Administration.

In just the last ten years, Chinese tourists to Australia have gone from being our fifth largest source country to our second – and Australians made more than half a million visits to China in 2016-17.

Of course, this is another reason why Australians must engage with the languages of the region – including Mandarin.

How can we hope to understand what makes people tick or how they think if we can't communicate with them in their own language?

The Confucius Institutes have an obvious role to play.

“Language is insight itself”, as Confucius said.

Mandarin learners – particularly adult learners – know just how tough a task this can be.

Indeed, it is a challenging task for both sides to nurture the understanding that is required for our relationship to grow.

Partly this is because the closer we get, and the more we interact, the more we need to account for and manage the differences between us – differences that cannot be wished away but that should not prevent the further development of relations between us.

This emphasises the need for a healthy dose of tolerance, for mutual respect and for openness to the patterns of give and take that underpin any successful relationship.

We understand the hesitation in China to ‘air the laundry’ so to speak.

Australians are happy – perhaps too happy sometimes – to tell each other exactly what we think.

This of course reflects different cultural attitudes:

In China, the thinking is that proper friends will not say things that offend;
Whereas in Australia, a willingness to be frank is proof of a genuine friendship.

These characteristics apply as well to our government-level interactions, something that both sides have come to recognise (though not necessarily always accept!).

Each of our approaches has utility, and we will need large measures of both respect and candour as we conduct the far-sighted diplomacy necessary to bridge our differences and progress our common interests.

Both approaches, the saving of face and the preference for frankness, also have shortcomings.

For our part, Australians should, and I am sure will, be authentic and true to our own selves, while respecting the practice of others.

Australia is a pluralistic society: a place where open debate, individual rights and freedoms are the foundation upon which we have built our political and economic systems. We are a society that thrives on the competition of ideas.

The health and vibrancy of Australia’s democracy is fundamental to our national success - it helps explain why migrants come to our shores and why they can succeed based on their talents and hard work.

We are, as the Prime Minister has often said, the most successful multicultural nation on earth.

Our prosperity has grown from this competition of products and ideas, building on open access to information and on contestability throughout society.

Australia's university campuses have a proud history of supporting free debate – of enabling the robust exchange of viewpoints. Universities don't just give students qualifications, but prepare citizens capable of participating fully in political, social and economic life.

And here I want to address my remarks to those of you who are international students:

We want you to experience our contest of ideas and participate fully in it, as it is part of what constitutes an authentic Australian education.

You have paid your money; you are surely entitled to the full experience.

No doubt there will be times when you encounter things which to you are unusual, unsettling, or perhaps seem plain wrong. And can I tell you, as someone who has studied overseas in three different continents, if you aren't encountering strange and challenging things you aren't getting out enough! So when you do, let me encourage you not to silently withdraw, or blindly condemn, but to respectfully engage.

The silencing of anyone in our society – from students to lecturers to politicians – is an affront to our values.

Enforced silence runs counter to academic freedom. It is only by discussion, and of course discussion which is courteous, that falsehoods can be corrected.

Respectful and patient discourse with those with whom you disagree is a fundamental skill for our ever-more-connected contemporary world.

As listeners, as speakers, as citizens, we all have responsibilities.

And here I want to address my remarks to the broader audience:

There has been much attention in recent months to the quality and reliability of news and information available to us.

We have seen accusations of 'fake news' and we have seen attempts at untoward influence and interference.

This is worrying and is being taken seriously in a number of countries. In our case, the Prime Minister has said: "The sovereignty of Australia, the sovereignty of our democratic processes, free from foreign interference is a matter of the highest concern."⁴

The Australian Government takes seriously its responsibility to ensure a robust legal framework within which free and open debate is protected and can flourish. That work is proceeding.

As well, Governments themselves must expect, and invite, scrutiny of their actions and their policy positions.

As China becomes more important to Australia's future and to that of the world, it follows that there will be more scrutiny of China, including the ways in which it seeks to exercise influence internationally.

All of us here, as participants in a free society, have responsibilities as well.

It is our responsibility to challenge and question 'fake news'. We can readily reduce the risk of being manipulated by seeking out collateral and confirmatory information, by testing through a second opinion.

And when confronted with awkward choices, it is up to us to choose our response, whether to make an uncomfortable compromise or decide instead to remain true to our values, "immune from intolerance or external influence" as Adelaide University's founders envisaged.

The prospect of public scrutiny is an excellent discipline, and a vital corrective for our political culture and our institutions, including our universities.

We want to ensure these institutions remain secure and resilient.

Our success depends in part on the legal framework, but also on the attitudes and responses of all of us when exposed to unexpected pressure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, may I congratulate the Confucius Institute and the University of Adelaide on your first successful decade of partnership.

I want especially to congratulate all the students here – those of you who have come to Australia for an education and those of you who are learning Mandarin as a foreign language – for the initiative you have taken, in coming to this fine city and choosing this university.

You are well placed to become active participants – indeed leaders in the Australia-China relationship in the decades ahead.

Education, language learning, joint research, collaboration in the arts, cultural exchange, tourism, trade, investment, travel and migration: all these will drive our relationship forward and open the way to further prosperity on both sides in this 21st century.

As we do all this, let us be authentic and true to ourselves.

Thank you.

1. <https://www.adelaide.edu.au/VCO/beacon/founding-vision>
2. In the 2016 Census, 1,213,906 people in Australia identified with Chinese ancestry.
3. 32.8 per cent of Australia's merchandise exports went to China in 2016-17.

4. The sovereignty of Australia, the sovereignty of our democratic processes, free from foreign interference is a matter of the highest concern.” PM’s doorstep 6 June 2017

* Corrected after delivery.

