

Inquiry into Building Asia Capability in Australia through the Education System and Beyond

**House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education
Parliament of Australia**

**Submission by:
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14 October 2025**

Submission: Asia Capability and the Future of Chinese Studies in Australia

1. Introduction

For four decades, *Asia capability* has been described as a key skill underpinning Australia's national project of engagement with Asia. By many measures—resource exports, international education, and research partnerships—Asia engagement has been highly successful, especially in relation to China.

However, the decline of academic Chinese Studies and Chinese language learning within Australian universities suggests a paradox. While Australia is now deeply integrated with Asia economically and institutionally, its capacity for independent, language-based understanding of Asia has steadily diminished.

This submission argues that, for China in particular, the current model of *Asia capability* or *Asia literacy*—defined as the skillset required to synthesise Australia's economic integration into Asia with a vision of progressive, post-colonial nation-building—has reached its limits, especially in the context of the Xi Jinping era. Renewing Australia's Asia capability requires a redefinition of the concept and recognition that Chinese Studies and language education constitute critical national infrastructure whose loss would diminish future generations' understanding of the region.

2. The Concept and Success of Asia Capability

Since the 1980s, *Asia capability* has guided Australia's approach to education, trade, and diplomacy.

Yet Asia capability has never been clearly defined in policy. It gestures towards broad social aspirations while, in practice, often reducing to language learning and the study of Asian societies. From its rhetoric, it can be inferred to describe a skillset that reconciles two aims:

- a **progressive, post-colonial national project**, implemented through education in which Australia becomes culturally and socially “at home” in the region; and
- an **economic project**, positioning Australia as an open, export-oriented economy targeting Asian markets.

Within this framework, Asia capability envisions an Australian multilingual professional class operating confidently between Australia and Asian societies—advancing the nation’s prosperity and exemplifying a modern Australian national identity.

3. Conceptual Limits of Asia Capability

This distinctive understanding of Asia capability has produced paradoxical outcomes.

As the skillset for an economic project, Asia capability has been highly successful. Over **60%** of Australia’s exports go to Asia, with China alone accounting for around **30%**. China also provides the largest share of international university students in Australia and the greatest number of university research partnerships and joint ventures, particularly in science and engineering. On these measures, Australia is indeed an Asia-capable nation.

However, by the measures associated with the social aspirations of Asia capability, the outcomes are less encouraging. Language learning, the study of Asia in universities, and Asia-related expertise have been declining steadily for years.

This paradox suggests deeper issues with the concept of Asia capability as a nation-building vision for a modern Australia. It also reflects the challenges of engaging with Asian societies whose development pathways, political systems, and strategic interests are not always aligned with Australia’s.

By linking Asia capability to post-colonial Australian nation-building, the concept has become intertwined with Australian aspirations rather than grounded in critical or dispassionate engagement with Asia’s diversity and increasingly complex politics. Asia capability envisions a modern Australia, but each country in Asia requires different skills and values—particularly the capacity to manage complexity, tension, disagreement, and, potentially, conflict.

4. The Challenge of China

This dynamic is most evident in the case of China.

Chinese Studies and Chinese language learning once grew under the Asia capability framework. Scholarship documenting China’s modernisation, urbanisation, and cultural dynamism complemented Australia’s national narrative of engagement and mutual benefit.

Under President Xi Jinping, however, China has taken a revisionist turn. The party-state has reasserted its authority, subdued civil society, repressed minorities, and pursued assertive policies regionally and globally. Understanding China now requires, more than ever, grappling with questions of authoritarianism, militarisation, and ideology.

Asia capability has succeeded as a framework for encouraging economic links with China, but in connecting it to a progressive Australian ideal, it has struggled to accommodate the realities of China’s political direction. Contemporary China tests commitments to equality,

justice, freedom of expression, and minority rights—principles central to Australia’s democratic and progressive identity.

This tension has left Chinese Studies and language programs in an uncertain position. The field is increasingly marginalised within universities, caught between the need to teach and research China critically and institutional preferences for maintaining uncontroversial, commercially aligned partnerships. Students, sensing this discomfort, are turning away.

The **2023 Australian Academy of the Humanities** report recorded a steep decline in honours and postgraduate training in Chinese Studies, alongside falling undergraduate enrolments and diminishing research opportunities. This represents a serious loss of intergenerational knowledge.

By limiting how Asia can be conceptualised, Asia capability has inadvertently placed disciplines like Chinese Studies in an impossible dilemma. When engagement is celebrated as an end in itself, rigorous academic inquiry—and the production of knowledge that can deliver uncomfortable truths—loses ground.

5. Towards a Renewed and Plural Understanding

Asia capability must be rethought as part of a broader reimagining of progressive Australia in an era of geostrategic competition. It should move beyond aspirational slogans and engage with the complexity of Asia as it is—not as a concept intended to reflect ideals of Australia’s identity.

A renewed framework should:

- recognise that Asia capability is not singular but plural—**Asia capabilities**—since different expertise is required for different countries in Asia. Australia’s needs for China differ profoundly from those for Japan, Indonesia, or Myanmar; and
- acknowledge that while Asia capabilities are central to building a modern Australia, their definition should accommodate the reality that Australian progressive values may be challenged by aspects of the political and social life of countries in Asia.

6. China as a Critical Case

For China, the challenge is both immense and distinctive. China is simultaneously Australia’s largest export market and a regional power whose actions shape the strategic environment in ways that affect Australian security and prosperity, even when not directed specifically at Australia.

Understanding this complexity requires sustained, language-based expertise and critical scholarship—capacities that the current Asia capability framework does not adequately support.

Rather than being framed as expressions of Australian nation-building, Chinese Studies and Chinese language learning should be understood as **essential national assets** in an era of strategic competition. They provide the intellectual infrastructure necessary to interpret developments in a country whose actions influence every dimension of Australia's future.

7. Conclusion

Asia capability has been one of Australia's most durable national ideas, guiding regional engagement for more than four decades. While successful in promoting trade and institutional partnerships, the concept is increasingly inadequate as a foundation for understanding.

Renewing Asia capability requires more than reaffirming engagement—it demands investment in the skills, languages, and disciplines that enable Australians to interpret Asia with nuance, independence, and respect.

Chinese Studies and Chinese language learning must therefore be supported as **critical national infrastructure**—integral to Australia's security, social cohesion, and democratic resilience. Without such renewal, Australia risks remaining a country well connected to Asia, but not truly literate within it.