Within China’s Orbit?

China through the eyes of the Australian Parliament

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2007 Australian Parliamentary Fellow
Presiding Officers’ Foreword

Since its establishment in 1971, the Australian Parliamentary Fellowship has provided an opportunity for academic researchers to investigate and analyse aspects of the working of the Australian Parliament and the parliamentary process. The work of Dr Timothy Kendall, the 2007 Australian Parliamentary Fellow, explores the history of the Australian Parliament’s dealings with ‘China’, from Federation to the 41st Parliament of Australia.

Through examining specific moments when China has become the object of parliamentary interest and the subject of parliamentary analysis, Dr Kendall’s monograph offers an historically informed and critical account of the Australian Parliament’s fears and hopes for China.

Senator the Hon. Alan Ferguson
President of the Senate

Harry Jenkins MP
Speaker of the House of Representatives

August 2008
Timothy Kendall holds a PhD in cultural and literary studies from La Trobe University. He has published widely on the Australia–China relationship and is author of *Ways of Seeing China: From Yellow Peril to Shangrila* (Curtin University Books/Fremantle Press, 2005).
Acknowledgments

The Australian Parliamentary Fellowship provided a unique opportunity to undertake research within the parliamentary environment. For this, I thank the Joint Standing Committee on the Parliamentary Library, particularly the co-chairs, Senator Russell Trood (Queensland) and the Hon. Dick Adams MP (Member for Lyons); the Parliamentary Librarian, Roxanne Missingham, and the Assistant Secretary of the Research Branch, Dr Jane Romeyn. I also wish to thank my former colleagues in the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section of the Parliamentary Library.

I am particularly indebted to Dr Frank Frost, Special Director Research in the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section, for acting as Advisor to this project. Within China’s Orbit? has benefited significantly from Frank’s knowledge of the history of Australian foreign policy and from his understanding of the operations of the Parliament. I also thank Professor Geremie Barmé, Australian Research Council Federation Fellow at The Australian National University, for acting as External Advisor to the project and for his continuing support of my research.

The fourth chapter of the monograph draws upon the results from a questionnaire that was distributed to all Members and Senators during 2007. I am grateful to those who responded to the questionnaire and to the Members and Senators who made themselves available to be interviewed for this section of the research. I also thank the various government and parliamentary officers who made time to discuss aspects of this project.

A number of other people offered support either through discussing the architecture of the project or through offering feedback on the manuscript. I thank Nigel Brew (Parliamentary Library), Jeffrey Robertson (Parliamentary Library), Dr Ann Kent (The Australian National University), Dr Jian Zhang (Australian Defence Force Academy), Michael Richards (Old Parliament House) and Dr Carol Hart (Lingnan University, Hong Kong). I am also grateful to Dr Miles Goodwin for assisting with the development of the parliamentary questionnaire; Richard Ryan for editing the manuscript; Maryanne Lawless and Sandra Bailey for formatting; Janet Wilson for indexing (Parliamentary Library); and Ella Curnow and Ronald Curnow for proofreading.

For permission to reproduce images I acknowledge the National Library of Australia, the National Archives of Australia, Auspic and the Australia Tibet Council.
Introduction

As the People’s Republic of China continues to develop as the subject of intense economic, political and cultural interest, this study examines the place ‘China’ has held in the parliamentary imagination. It achieves this by exploring the history of the Australian Parliament’s dealings with China. The monograph’s period of historical focus is broad: it begins with an analysis of Federation debates over immigration restriction and concludes with a detailed assessment of the bilateral relationship during the 41st Parliament (November 2004–November 2007). While the monograph provides extensive coverage of the changing nature of Australia–China relations, it does not attempt a full narrative history of the period with which it is concerned; rather, it offers an analysis of a series of foundational moments in the development of the relationship.1 Such a methodological approach enables the research to document the profound transformation that has taken place in Australian parliamentary attitudes towards China.

In seeking to establish how parliamentary attitudes have been formed through a complex and interactive series of cultural, historical and ideological processes, the overarching goal of the monograph is to examine specific moments when China has become the object of parliamentary interest and the subject of parliamentary analysis, for example: the formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949; recognition of the People’s Republic in 1972; Hu Jintao’s address to the Parliament in 2003. Through identifying the historical continuities and discontinuities in parliamentary attitudes, the study also documents how Australian parliamentarians have appropriated ‘China’ to serve a variety of political and nationalist ends. While China has been used to define Australia’s place in the world—variously emerging as an ‘other’ to Australia and as integral to Australia’s economic, political and strategic future—China has also been manipulated for domestic political purposes. At Federation, parliamentarians drew upon the Chinese presence in Australia to assist in the cultivation of a white nationalist identity; during the Cold War the Liberal-Country

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Party exploited the fear of Chinese communism as a potent political mobiliser which would help it retain power for 23 years; and in the period following recognition, both major parties have drawn upon the bilateral relationship for purposes of political differentiation, each claiming itself best placed to manage the relationship.

A concomitant goal of the research is to examine the specific contribution made by the Parliament to the development of bilateral relations. In the first instance, this involves identifying the way the relationship has been advanced through the processes, practices and outputs of the Parliament—policy and legislative debates, the activities of parliamentary friendship groups, the visits of delegations, the work of the committees of the Parliament. Beyond this, the monograph is also interested in exploring the importance of the Parliament as a powerful knowledge-producing institution, one which has played a critical role in the formation of Australian attitudes. In claiming that the Parliament has operated as an originating site for many popular Australian understandings of China, the monograph suggests that the Parliament’s fears and hopes for China have contributed to the creation of some enduring and pervasive social and political visions—the yellow peril, the red menace, the land of sublime opportunity.

The monograph begins by offering an account of the evolution of the Australia–China relationship through exploring three binding themes: immigration, political economy and foreign policy. This is followed by an analysis of the spectacular growth in Australia–China relations at the start of the 21st century. To achieve this the monograph utilises a diverse range of material: parliamentary reports and debates, personal papers, archival documents, policy and legislative outputs, committee reports and data from surveys and interviews conducted with members of the 41st Parliament. As a whole, the research provides the most extensive history of the Australian Parliament’s engagement with China that is currently available. Each of the four chapters gives priority to those themes, events and debates which have hitherto received limited critical analysis—J. G. Latham’s visit to China in 1934, Hu Jintao’s address to the Australian Parliament in 2003, and the attitudes of parliamentarians to subjects ranging from Chinese ‘soft power’, to human rights in China to the political status of Taiwan.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One explores the way the Chinese presence in the colonies of Australia during the 19th century provided one of the central motivations for Federation and played a significant role in the development of an early Australian national identity. Antipathy towards the Chinese—fears about miscegenation, contamination and anxiety about the degradation of the white type—manifests itself in discriminatory legislation which
included one of the first acts of the new Federal Parliament, the *Immigration Restriction Act* of 1901. In offering an account of Federation attitudes towards the Chinese, this chapter is particularly concerned with examining how Victorian racial theory and fears about racial intermingling, blood-mixing and degeneration came to inform parliamentary debate to produce an immigration policy which would help cultivate a white Australia.

Chapter Two turns to examine how the Australia that was imagined at Federation—racially pure, separate from Asia and committed to pursuing imperial interests—was gradually replaced by a nation which began to imagine China as part of its economic future. In outlining the activities of Australia’s first diplomatic mission to Asia, the Australian Eastern Mission of 1934, the chapter investigates how the effects of the Great Depression prompted Australian policy makers, still committed to the policy of a white Australia, to seek engagement with the peoples and nations of Asia. Following an assessment of the shift that took place in Australian self-perceptions during this period, the chapter turns to identify parliamentary reaction to the establishment of the People’s Republic. After exploring how the fears of Chinese communist expansionism led to calls for the containment and isolation of China during the Cold War, the chapter concludes by examining the way China was resituated in the parliamentary imagination following Gough Whitlam’s recognition of the People’s Republic in 1972.

Chapter Three documents a landmark event in the recent history of the Australian Parliament’s engagement with China: President Hu Jintao’s address to a joint meeting of the Parliament in 2003. After examining the reaction to the prospect of an address to the Parliament by a non-democratically elected head of state, the chapter charts the development of the bilateral relationship during the Howard years. A discussion of the speeches by Prime Minister Howard and President Hu, which reveals differences in the way the two nations seek to engage diplomatically, concludes with a discussion of how John Howard employed a model for Asian engagement which sought to differentiate him from his political rivals. The chapter also reveals why President Hu Jintao’s address to a simultaneous and co-located meeting of the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Australian Parliament would be the last by a visiting head of state.

Chapter Four offers a detailed discussion of the specific contributions of the 41st Parliament to the development of bilateral relations. It achieves this through examining the major China-related outputs of the Parliament—committee and delegation reports, parliamentary debates and policy and legislative material—while
also drawing on the results from a survey and interviews with members of the 41st Parliament. The survey and interview materials provide unique insights into the attitudes of contemporary parliamentarians. Based on this information, the chapter explores a range of subjects including the activities of parliamentary friendship groups, influential historical milestones in the relationship, attitudes towards the current state of economic relations, sources of information about China, travel to China, and relations between the Chinese Embassy and Members of the Australian Parliament.

In its entirety, the monograph tells the story of profound social, political, economic and attitudinal transformation. In telling this story, it is argued that ‘China’ has held a critical place in the parliamentary imagination and played an integral role in modern Australian political history. The anxieties about economic competition and genetic corruption, which prompted the first Parliament to pass legislation that sought to exclude the Chinese (and other non-white people) from Australia, are replaced by a China which emerges as an indispensable economic and strategic partner, positioned near the centre of Australia’s foreign policy. Perhaps the full extent of the transformation is evidenced by the fact that at the start of the 42nd Parliament, Australia has both a Chinese-speaking Prime Minister and the first overseas-born, ethnic Chinese, member of the Federal Ministry, Senator Penny Wong.

In a study which canvasses the Parliament’s fears and hopes for China, the monograph seeks to look beyond many of the laudatory statements that are often made about China’s burgeoning economy, to provide an historically informed and critical account of the evolving attitudes of the Australian Parliament towards China. In such a quest it is useful to note J. G. Latham’s caution to the House of Representatives in 1934:

> It has been usual in Australia to regard China as offering great potentialities for the marketing of Australian goods. This arises, no doubt, from our habit of thinking of China in terms of China’s population … But perhaps no other market offers more difficulties, and no other market requires such specialized knowledge of local conditions and sales procedure. It can also be said that in no other eastern market is competition so keen, or is there such a concentration of international commercial representation, both business and official. Most countries have recognized the necessity for official trade representation, and the trade representatives are, generally speaking, men of extraordinary ability and acumen.2

Some seventy years after Latham offered this advice, it would appear appropriate to investigate the intellectual, cultural and strategic capacity of the Australian Parliament

to manage the gravitational pulls and influences—the shifting forces of attraction and repulsion—which now keep the Australia–China relationship in orbit.