

Chinese students in Australia: A critical examination of recent media coverage

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There are currently 131,355 Chinese students at Australian universities.¹ This year the economic and cultural contributions these students make to Australian society have been overshadowed by media attention covering protests directed at Australian academics.

In May a Chinese student at Monash University (MU) took to the Chinese social media platform WeChat to condemn a course quiz he deemed made fun of Chinese government officials and that promoted an outdated understanding of China.² MU stated that other Chinese students had also complained about the course material.³ One quiz question read:

There is a common saying in China that government officials only speak the truth when:

- a. to not speak the truth would result in dismissal
- b. they are making decisions in a group setting
- c. they have had their statements approved by

the Party
d. they are drunk or careless.

The 'correct answer' was d. Another question asked:

In China what has been identified as a major barrier to modernisation and the introduction of new technology and industrial reform?

- a. Lack of skilled workers especially managers
- b. A lack of English speaking negotiators
- c. Bureaucratic decision making by government
- d. Lack of appropriate infrastructure.

The 'correct answer' was a. MU responded by withdrawing the specific piece of assessment and reviewing the course materials. The lecturer was also suspended while the review was taking place.⁴ The Deputy Dean (Education) of MU's Business School emailed students and said, 'Some of the questions are unsatisfactory and do not reflect the beliefs and views of Monash

1 Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 'International student data 2017', 2017 <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Pages/InternationalStudentData2017.aspx#Pivot_Table>.
2 Kirsty Needham, 'China's internet erupts over Monash University's drunk officials quiz question', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 22 2017 <<http://www.smh.com.au/world/chinas-internet-erupts-over-monash-universitys-drunken-quiz-question-20170522-gwaazl.html>>.
3 Primrose Riordan, 'Monash University suspends lecturer over quiz question', *The Australian*, May 22 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/monash-university-suspends-lecturer-over-quiz-question/news-story/2bc64598623c5a0718c8fc808ef2ef14>>.
4 Kirsty Needham, 'China's internet erupts over Monash University's drunk officials quiz question', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 22 2017 <<http://www.smh.com.au/world/chinas-internet-erupts-over-monash-universitys-drunken-quiz-question-20170522-gwaazl.html>>.

University'. The textbook the quiz was taken from was subsequently withdrawn from use.⁵

In early August an Australian National University (ANU) lecturer was criticised for presenting a PowerPoint slide that had the text 'I will not tolerate students who cheat' in both English and Chinese language written on it. Some Chinese students felt they were being singled out for a predilection to cheating and complained to university administrators as well as on the ANU's official Facebook page after class. The lecturer subsequently emailed an apology to students saying that he did not realise it was offensive and it was simply intended for those whose first language is not English.⁶

Later the same month a University of Sydney (USYD) lecturer was criticised online for posting a map that included part of Chinese claimed territory as part of India. The lecturer apologised saying he was 'unaware that the map was inaccurate and out-of-date' and that it did not form part of the materials for the current offering of his Professional Practice in Information Technology course.⁷ While Australian media claimed at the time the lecturer had 'been forced to issue a public apology'⁸ the USYD later clarified that it had made no such demand.⁹

Also in late August, a University of Newcastle (UoN) staff member was taken to task over teaching materials that listed Taiwan as a separate 'country'. The confrontation with the lecturer was covertly recorded and subsequently posted on Chinese social media.¹⁰ The university responded by condemning the approach taken and for not resolving the matter 'through our normal process

in a fair and respectful manner'. UoN also made no demands that the lecturer apologise.

These four incidents generated significant media coverage, which has portrayed Chinese students as aggressive and acting on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party. In August, former Fairfax China correspondent John Garnaut wrote in the *Australian Financial Review*, 'In recent months we've seen denunciations of Australian university lecturers who have offended Beijing's patriotic sensibilities.' He claimed that in the ANU case the lecturer was 'forced to issue a long apology', while the academic at USYD 'apologised after being found guilty by a WeChat group called 'Australian Red Scarf' – which focused on the lecturer's Indian-looking name.' He concluded, 'Racial chauvinism is only one of the challenges that Beijing is exporting to universities.'¹¹ Later in August at a higher education summit Garnaut stated, 'The challenge for [Australia] is, how do we cope with the fact that our single biggest customer is instructing students and teachers to have red hot patriotic sentiment when they are in Australia.'¹²

The same month, Josh Horwitz, Asia correspondent for *Quartz* claimed that 'Chinese students at universities in Australia have their professors walking on eggshells' and that 'overseas universities are facing increasing pressure from Chinese students to not say anything that violates Communist Party orthodoxy, as Chinese students studying abroad become increasingly bold in exerting their nationalism.'¹³

In similar vein the following month, a *news.com.au* reporter wrote, 'Australian educators are

5 Primrose Riordan, 'Monash throws out the textbook over Chinese student complaints', *The Australian*, May 30 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/monash-throws-out-the-textbook-over-chinese-student-complaints/news-story/3453651355ed61ab28989e7623c8dd9d>>.

6 Shan Xin, 'Chinese students furious at ANU teacher's racist lecture', *People's Daily*, August 11 2017 <<http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0811/c90000-9254290.html>>.

7 Primrose Riordan, 'Wrong map ignites university fury', *The Australian*, August 24 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/sydney-lecturer-apologises-for-use-of-map-offending-chinese-students/news-story/2b1cccbe438d1c680fcbff60f8e7d97e>>.

8 Ibid.

9 Xiuzhong Xu, 'Chinese Nationalism Jostles With Academic Freedom in Australia', *The New York Times*, November 15 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/world/australia/china-students-censorship.html>>.

10 Primrose Riordan, 'Uni lecturer targeted over 'separate Taiwan'', *The Australian*, August 24 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/university-lecturer-targeted-over-separate-taiwan-materials/news-story/79febfc3fd91f84604173c79a1f249a3>>.

11 John Garnaut, 'Our universities are a frontline in China's ideological wars', *The Australian Financial Review*, August 30 2017 <<http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/our-universities-are-a-frontline-in-chinas-ideological-wars-20170830-gy74br>>.

12 Joanna Mather, 'Beijing is stirring up 'red hot patriotism' among Chinese students on Australian campuses', *The Australian Financial Review*, August 29 2017 <<http://www.afr.com/news/policy/education/china-follows-students-to-campus-20170828-gy650k>>.

13 Josh Horwitz, 'Australian professors and universities are being shamed into apologizing for offending Chinese students', *Quartz*, August 29 2017 <<https://qz.com/1064435/australian-professors-and-universities-are-being-shamed-into-apologizing-for-offending-chinese-students/>>.

increasingly coming under attack from Chinese students, raising concerns their government's influence is permeating our universities.¹⁴

In September, an ANU student researcher opined in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article that, '[w]hen asked their thoughts on any political matter, many [Chinese students] will respond: 'I don't discuss politics.' Those who will talk often borrow the slogans and phrases of China's propaganda machine.'¹⁵

The same month, Rowan Callick, the China correspondent for *The Australian* wrote that there was a 'war being waged' by Chinese students 'against 'politically incorrect' lecturers in Australia' and this flowed from a Chinese government ideological campaign.¹⁶

And freelance journalist Michael Sainsbury writing for *Crikey* warned of a 'recent, surging trend of nationalist Chinese students...turning their attentions to teachers who offend Beijing's doctored version of Chinese history...'.¹⁷

In October, covering a speech by the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Frances Adamson, the ABC's national security and defence reporter, Andrew Greene claimed that Adamson had asked students 'to engage in respectful debate rather than spread propaganda or attempt to gag views they disagree with'.¹⁸

In examining the evidentiary basis of this current media narrative, an accounting might consider the frequency and nature of the incidents themselves, as well as the general characterisation of the Chinese student cohort. The federal Education Minister, Simon Birmingham, has voiced concerns

with the quality of evidence being presented. He remarked:

It's unhelpful sometimes when media outlets, in particular, decide to frame stories in a way that suggests there are profound problems, with little evidence in the stories to back up those suggestions.¹⁹

That there have been four incidents involving Chinese students does not register large against the backdrop of 131,355 Chinese citizens studying at more than 30 Australian universities.

In addition, none of the four reported incidents involved classroom discussion or freedom of expression being shut down. Only the incident at UoN involved a face-to-face confrontation and this appeared to have occurred after class or during a break. The covert recording of the exchange was clearly inappropriate. Making complaints to university administrators about course matters through formal channels is a right that is open to all students, irrespective of nationality, and this avenue should have been the one taken. Online criticism is no doubt unpleasant for those subjected to it. But with the Australian academic and institution able to respond, it can hardly be described as a stifling of freedom of expression. Online criticism is also not something that is unique to Chinese students; Australian academics have long had to accept criticism carried by websites such as 'Rate my Professors' and in anonymous teaching evaluations on everything from their accent to dress sense.²⁰

Some of the issues being raised by Chinese students, while potentially uncomfortable, are not necessarily radical. In the incident at MU,

14 Emma Reynolds, 'Tensions rise as Chinese government's influence infiltrates Aussie universities', *News.com.au*, September 12 2017 <<http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/australian-economy/tensions-rise-as-chinese-governments-influence-infiltrates-aussie-universities/news-story/e7768b0bb1f5953a7608884527387372>>.

15 Alexander Joske, 'End the isolation of Chinese students in Australia', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 4 2017 <<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/end-the-isolation-of-chinese-students-in-australia-20170902-gy9iv6.html>>.

16 Rowan Callick, 'Chinese students taught to 'snitch' on politically incorrect lecturers', *The Australian*, September 1 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/chinese-students-taught-to-snitch-on-politically-incorrect-lecturers/news-story/5cd4d2bc84ce0d976546706a23aeffe5>>.

17 Michael Sainsbury, 'China crisis: Australia hurtles blindly toward an immigration calamity', *Crikey*, September 13 2017 <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2017/09/13/china-crisis-australia-hurtles-blindly-toward-an-immigration-calamity>>.

18 Andrew Greene, 'DFAT boss warns international students to resist Chinese Communist Party's 'untoward' influence', *ABC News*, October 9 2017 <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-09/universities-warned-to-resist-chinese-communist-party-influence/9030372>>.

19 Hansard, 'Matters of urgency: Student visas', speech to the Senate, October 17 2017 <<http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=ld%3A%22chamber%2Fhansards%2F7fdeee09-88ec-4d59-8472-4ddb33a62d38%2F0131%22;src1=sm1>>.

20 James Arvanitakis, 'Who's afraid of 'Rate your Professor'?', *The Conversation*, January 21 2014 <<https://theconversation.com/whos-afraid-of-rate-your-professor-21218>>.

the quality of assessment was indeed dubious. Meanwhile, the claim by Chinese students at UoN that Taiwan is part of China is a position held on both sides of the Taiwan Straits. The ambiguity is that from the mainland's perspective China means the People's Republic of China (PRC), while from Taiwan's perspective China means the Republic of China (ROC). The Australian government recognises the PRC as China's sole legal government and does not recognise the ROC as a sovereign state.²¹

Other commentators have questioned the characterisation of Chinese students generally. In an address at LaTrobe University in October, Linda Jakobson, CEO of public policy initiative China Matters cautioned:²²

Chinese people have every reason to feel good about their country at the moment. It's something that I think Westerners generally have a bit of a hard time coming to terms with because we dislike the political system in China. Whatever one thinks of the Communist Party, one just has to acknowledge that under its leadership a tremendous amount of good has taken place from the point of view of the people who live in that country.

This sentiment is backed by polling that consistently finds high levels of popular support by Chinese citizens for their government and academic research that reports this support cannot simply be attributed to Chinese government propaganda campaigns.²³

In October Dr Merriden Varrall, a researcher at the Lowy Institute who has interviewed Chinese students, wrote:²⁴

The extent to which the political loyalties of Chinese students are the problem is

being overstated, and the focus on politics is obscuring the best way to remedy the challenge... the Chinese students I spoke to said they felt that students' behaviour as raised in the Australian press was rarely as simply about politics as it was portrayed.

Associate Professor Fran Martin at the University of Melbourne has conducted detailed ethnographic research involving regular and wide-ranging conversations with scores of Chinese students in Australia. On the issue of propaganda, one of her interviewees said, 'To tell the truth, I don't really believe the Chinese news media', while another ventured:²⁵

I don't read Chinese newspapers very much because, sometimes I feel the things they write aren't too meaningful. The point is, right from the start they say how great the country [China] is, and on and on—it's all so meaningless (wuliao)!

In August, Professor Rongyu Li, deputy vice chancellor of the University of Canberra said that travel and technology meant the 'brainwashing' of the past was no longer possible and that the 'political agenda [of Chinese President Xi Jinping] is very different to the agenda of the students and their parents'.²⁶

This year Professor Wanning Sun at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has run multiple focus groups with Chinese students. The key theme to emerge from Professor Sun's discussions was that far from uniformly parroting Chinese government positions, Chinese students hold a diverse range of opinions on contentious issues and sometimes there is even a deep ambivalence within individuals. She also concluded that straightforward factors such as language barriers, a lack of cross-cultural understanding

21 Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Taiwan country brief' <<http://dfat.gov.au/geo/taiwan/Pages/taiwan-country-brief.aspx>>.

22 La Trobe University, 'Kevin Rudd on China's rise and a new world order', *Youtube*, October 26 2017 <<https://youtu.be/psErow4xalo>>.

23 Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'China reality check series: Chinese public opinion and the durability of Chinese Communist Party rule', October 26 2017 <<https://www.csis.org/events/china-reality-check-series-chinese-public-opinion-and-durability-chinese-communist-party-rule>>.

24 Merriden Varrall, 'Chinese student furore reveals Australia's poor integration strategy', *East Asia Forum*, October 14 2017 <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/14/chinese-student-furore-reveals-australias-poor-integration-strategy/>>.

25 James Laurenceson, 'Let them speak: Australian values and Chinese students', *Australian Outlook*, October 11 2017 <<https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/australian-values-chinese-students/>>.

26 Joanna Mather, 'Beijing is stirring up 'red hot patriotism' among Chinese students on Australian campuses', *The Australian Financial Review*, August 29 2017 <<http://www.afr.com/news/policy/education/china-follows-students-to-campus-20170828-gy650k>>.

and age/immaturity are able to explain much of the conflict between Chinese students and Australian academics without needing to resort to explanations based on Chinese government propaganda or pressuring. She observed:²⁷

These so-called patriotic students we see waving Chinese flags, shouting patriotic slogans on TV...and see that as being quite threatening... But this could be the same students who could be quite clear-eyed about how Chinese propaganda works. They've lived through the system, they know how to deal with that. And they are very clever at dealing with that.

In October ANU Vice Chancellor Brian Schmidt also warned against making poorly-informed generalisations about Chinese students:²⁸

What we *absolutely must avoid* is the *flat-out wrong idea* that Chinese students are all spies, or incapable of critical enquiry, or that they all think alike. (Transcript emphasis)

On the issue of patriotism amongst Chinese students, Associate Professor Martin describes how this tends to be similar to the loyalty to 'one's family or school, yet not precluding criticism of the government and the Party'. It certainly was not 'a straightforward identification with either the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] or the Chinese state'.²⁹ In the same vein, Professor Sun said:

Patriotism has more than one parent. [Some commentators] thought that there is just one parent, the CCP. But it could be a lot of other things. It could be market nationalism. Nationalism is big business in China...I would

actually say that it more likely that their patriotism comes from these sources than directly from the government.

Survey evidence from the United State Studies Centre at the University of Sydney has also put Chinese nationalism into a comparative perspective. This finds that the average Chinese is less nationalistic than their Indonesian and Indian peers.³⁰ Other recent academic research has reported that younger Chinese tend to be less nationalistic than older generations.³¹

Almost entirely absent from Australian media commentary is the possibility that the freedom of expression being undermined might be that of Chinese students. Dr Varrall remarked:³²

[R]ather ironically, is a sense among Chinese students that they cannot freely express their views because their non-Chinese classmates and teachers will dismiss them as being brainwashed. Despite being told that 'all views are welcome', pro-Party views are understood as the exception.

Professor Sun observed:³³

[S]ome Chinese students came to Australia enchanted by the notion that Australia's media is free, but then when they read the local coverage of China, and about themselves, they were left feeling disillusioned by its perceived inaccuracy and frustrated when their opinions were either ignored or invalidated.

27 Australia-China Relations Institute, 'Chinese students in Australia - with Wanning Sun', *The ACRI Podcast*, September 14 2017 <<https://soundcloud.com/acripodcast/chinese-students-in-australia-with-wanning-sun>>.

28 Brian Schmidt, 'Engaging with our Asian partners: getting it right', speech, welcoming dinner of the sixth national meeting of China Matters, October 16 2017 <http://chinamatters.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Canberra-Nat-Mtg-Dinner-Keynote-Address_Engaging-with-our-Asian-partners_Brian-Schmidt_16102017.pdf>.

29 Fran Martin, 'Media, place, sociality and national publics: Chinese international students in translocal networks', in Koichi Iwabuchi, Olivia Khoo and Daniel Black eds., *Contemporary Culture and Media in Asia*, London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 207-224 <http://www.academia.edu/31550748/Media_Place_Sociality_and_National_Publics_Chinese_International_Students_in_Translocal_networks>.

30 United States Studies Centre, 'The Asian Research Network survey on America's role in the Indo-Pacific 2017', May 31 2017 <<https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/the-asian-research-network-survey-on-americas-role-in-the-indo-pacific/>>.

31 Alistair Iain Johnston, 'Is Chinese nationalism rising?: Evidence from Beijing', *International Security*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2017, 7-43 <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00265>.

32 Merriden Varrall, 'Chinese student furore reveals Australia's poor integration strategy', *East Asia Forum*, October 14 2017 <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/14/chinese-student-furore-reveals-australias-poor-integration-strategy/>>.

33 Australia-China Relations Institute, 'Chinese students in Australia - with Wanning Sun', *The ACRI Podcast*, September 14 2017 <<https://soundcloud.com/acripodcast/chinese-students-in-australia-with-wanning-sun>>.

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