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Opinion

# In Australia and China, government action hammers human ties

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For all the concern this year that political tensions between Australia and China might harm trade and investment, this isn't the most acute stress in the bilateral relationship. Compared with the battering that people-to-people ties are receiving, the current economic dramas rate a distant second.

It is people-to-people ties that provide a broader base of mutual understanding and cooperation than is sometimes evinced in Canberra and Beijing. And even in a narrow economic frame, if these ties are undermined the costs will be felt sooner or later. A new study by KPMG and Sydney University documented how Chinese Australian entrepreneurs – born and raised in China but frequently educated in Australia – were drawing on their knowledge and networks to drive cross-border trade. That virtuous cycle can become a vicious one.

Tariffs imposed by Beijing that stop Australian barley exports entering the Chinese market are one thing. But such restrictions are easily identified (and potentially removed), the cost is readily calculated (and mitigated, at least in part), and meanwhile, other goods continue to be sold as before. But once professional and personal networks become infected with perceptions of risk, they can unravel at pace and with potentially dire consequences that are impossible to predict.

China's strategic manoeuvring, such as that in the South China Sea, partly explains why these days only 23 percent of Australians trust that it will 'act responsibly in the world'.

But Australian perceptions have also been damaged by Chinese government actions that have had consequences at a more individual, human level.

On January 23 2019, Australian academic and blogger, Yang Hengjun, was detained at Guangzhou airport. What followed was seven months of 'residential surveillance at a designated location' during which time Yang was denied contact with a lawyer or his family. On August 27 he was formally arrested on 'suspicion of espionage', prompting Foreign Minister Marise Payne to forcefully deny he was ever spying for the Australian government. On December 2, following a consular visit Minister Payne described the conditions he was being held in as 'unacceptable'. Now, more than 19 months on, with patchy access to Australian consular officials and amidst claims of torture, he has still not faced trial.

On July 7 2020, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) adjusted its travel advisory to China after Beijing imposed a sweeping national security law in Hong Kong. It warned, 'Authorities have detained

foreigners because they're 'endangering national security'. Australians may also be at risk of arbitrary detention'.

On August 14 2020, Canberra was notified that Cheng Lei, a Melbourne-raised anchor for Chinese state media outlet CGTN, was also being detained in 'residential surveillance'. Three weeks later China's foreign ministry said she was 'suspected of carrying out illegal activities endangering China's national security'.

And then last week, the *ABC* and *The Australian Financial Review* sought to rush home their correspondents after being warned to consider doing so by DFAT. Bill Birtles and and Mike Smith eventually made it back but not before each had a midnight visit from six Chinese state security officers and an exit ban placed on them.

No wonder that PwC's Asia practice leader Andrew Parker remarked last week that Australian businesses in China were now starting to ask, 'are we actually safe here now?' On Monday this week, Mike Smith, now Sydney-based, reported that, 'Dozens of big Australian companies are reviewing the safety of their expatriate staff in China...'

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that Australian citizens are the only ones feeling the pressure.

Last week, Chinese state media reported that on June 26 2020 four Chinese journalists had their properties raided by 'about 10 ASIO agents' in each case. In the *Weekend Australian* on 12 September, foreign editor Greg Sheridan dismissed any comparison between what had happened in Australia and China as 'ridiculous'. Sheridan is right in arguing that there is no equivalence between the execution of a search warrant on Chinese journalists in Australia to what the Australians, Yang and Cheng, are now experiencing in China, or even to the scenario that Birtles and Smith faced.

Yet he went on to say, 'No-one was threatened. No one faced detention. No one breached the privacy of the Chinese journalists involved...The Chinese journalists who left Australia did so, unharassed, of their own free will'.

After being awoken in their pyjamas and then allegedly having their computers, phones, removable storage devices seized, and clothes rummaged through for between four to six hours, it is unlikely that the Chinese journalists themselves would concur with such a blithe recounting.

And they might also have suspected that the enforcement of Australia's foreign interference laws wasn't the only motivation at play. After all, at the same time their properties were being raided, a Melbourne-based Australian journalist was in place to film the same event unfolding at the Sydney home of NSW MP, Shaoquett Moselmane, plainly having been tipped off.

It wasn't just Chinese journalists. Two Chinese academics with Australian literature backgrounds, Professors Chen Hong and Li Jianjun, also had their Australian visas revoked in connection to the same investigation.

Of the 37 Australian studies centres in China, Chen and Li are directors of two of the largest and most active. They are colleagues and friends to scores of Australian academics, including me, who have known them for years. To now read that they have been assessed by security agencies as being 'directly or indirectly a risk to [Australia's] security' does not gel with lived experience.

Of course, without access to the information possessed by security agencies it is impossible for outsiders to conclude with certainty one way or another. All that is currently on the public record is that the Chinese journalists and academics were members of a 'social media chat group' that security agencies interpreted as a forum of foreign interference. In the absence of any further explanation by the Australian government, some scepticism seems justified.

The consequences of these moves are likely already being felt and extend far beyond just two academics. In one of his last reports from China, Mike Smith wrote that a number of Chinese scholars had told him they were cutting off communications out of 'fear they will be accused of being Communist Party infiltrators'.

Challenges are not only coming from the two capitals. On August 24, *The Australian* published photos resembling 'mugshots' of 32 academics employed at Australian universities, almost entirely of Chinese descent, under the headline of 'China's great science swindle'. The fact that none of these academics have to date been identified by Australian law enforcement agencies as having done anything wrong appeared to count for little.

After having attended the 7th annual conference of the Foundation for Australian Studies in China (FASIC) in Suzhou last November, John Ross, Asia-Pacific editor for the *Times Higher Education*, provided a unique account of the 'deeply personal side to a bilateral relationship that is more usually viewed through a geopolitical lens'. He wrote of the coming together of the two academic communities following the recent passing of Du Ruiqing, a member of the original 'Gang of Nine', a group of Chinese scholars who arrived at Sydney University in 1979 and that went on to build the Australian studies centres in China. It's hard to imagine what form an 8th FASIC conference might take, or indeed whether it could be held at all: another opportunity for mutual understanding and cooperation lost.

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