

Is a re-set likely in our media's China coverage?

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During the wall-to-wall media coverage of Albanese's China visit, a couple of the questions frequently asked by [journalists](#) were along the lines of, 'Will Australia's trade with China return to where things were in 2016?' and 'Will there be a normalisation or a re-set of the bilateral relationship?'

An equally valid question to ask might have been, 'Will the Australian media's coverage of China and Australia-China relations go back to normal'? Or perhaps, 'Will there be a re-set in the dominant media narrative?'

[Research](#) suggests that the Australian media's reporting on China over the last decade has been increasingly written within a Cold War mindset. Such reporting tends to take as its point of departure the notion of China as a potentially hostile nation. This means that the media's ritualistic striving for objective reporting – which usually demands an attempt at balance and the provision of evidence – is apparently no longer necessary on this topic. Some international relations scholars have argued that the media have contributed to the 'securitisation' of Australia's public discourse.

Would the 'average Australian', in Park's words, be any wiser than before Albanese's visit about the opportunities and challenges that lie ahead? And how was Albanese's China visit – itself apparently a positive event on all fronts – covered in our media?

A close look at the media content during this period suggests that, overall, the coverage was patchy, uneven, and lacking in depth and nuance. Consequently, some tough [questions](#) about what is really in the national interest remain unanswered. And so far, a 're-set' seems unlikely in the media's China reporting. Nor is it likely that our media agree that there's a need for such a re-set.

On the right of the political spectrum, *The Australian's* [headline](#), 'PM's kowtow a necessary evil of doing business', was followed by the statement that 'the entire charade of the PM's visit has been on China's terms'. On the left, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Peter Hartcher, with his trademark binarism, penned an article with the headline, 'Albanese had a choice with China: Kowtow or stand up. We made the right call'. Hartcher saw the visit as evidence that Australia had stood up to the bully, and the bully had backed down. Although disagreeing in their assessments, both reports continued the narrative of the 'evil' bully, and missed the importance of dialogue and engagement that Albanese was at pains to emphasise.

Meanwhile, for journalists and editors back at home who were looking for a more 'click-baity' angle, the birth of the 'handsome boy' remark must have been a godsend. Apparently, someone on Chinese social media had called the Prime Minister *shuaige* (帅哥), a Chinese idiom meaning 'a handsome guy' – or 'a good-looking bloke', to use a more Australian idiom. Like the Chinese term, both of these expressions carry a connotation

of male attractiveness. Next, Premier Li, aiming to be friendly, told Albanese – in Chinese – that people were calling him *shuaige* on social media. Li's interpreter, apparently thinking on her feet, translated this term as 'a handsome boy' – an unfortunate mistranslation indeed, as 'boy' conjures up many unsavoury connotations in English.

Of course, Australian journalists and editors can't be blamed for the poor translation. But more culturally curious and astute journalists might have sought to find out what the original word was and what it meant, before risking a harsh judgement of Premier's Li's intentions – especially in the highly sensitive context of international relations, when so much stands and falls on the choice of words.

In fact, once this mistranslation had occurred, it took on a life of its own, and many editors back in Australia could not resist including 'handsome boy' in their news [headlines](#). Consequently, much of the coverage of Albanese's China visit turned on a frivolous [headline](#) based on an inaccurate translation, despite the historical importance of the event. But at least the 'handsome boy' must have generated more clicks.

Did our public broadcasters rise to the challenge? The results of this analysis seem to be mixed. With the exception of a few in-depth [analyses](#) offering background and context, many news media stories seemed to be simply going through the motions. Journalists seemed to know that they had to cover the visit, so the most readily available 'experts' were pressed into service to fill the requisite four-minute time slot. [Andy Park](#), having asked a good question about the 'average Australian's' China literacy, nevertheless fell back on a less original question along the following lines – first on Friday to ASPI's [Justin Bassi](#), and then again the next day to former parliamentarian, Dr [Kerryn Phelps](#):

What do you think of former Prime Minister Scott Morrison's comment warning that the Albanese government should be wary of the way that the CCP could be using this visit for its own propaganda purposes? Is this a reasonable concern?

As an experiment to see how easy it is to fall back on existing angles, you could ask ChatGPT to suggest a few questions for journalists to ask experts about the Australian Prime Minister's visit to China using key words and phrases such as *diplomatic freeze, stabilisation, economic coercion, south-China Sea, tariffs, human rights issues, Xi Jinping, Cheng Lei, Yang Hengjun, and the United States*. These expressions were chosen because they were the most frequently used angles in the ABC's coverage. If you repeat this process, you will find that ChatGPT's questions are not really inferior to those that ABC journalists actually asked during the week of the Albanese visit.

Given that a large media entourage went to China with Albanese, one question arises: how does an Australian reporter – usually reporting on domestic affairs – make sense of what they see when China – no longer an abstract concept – suddenly becomes an overwhelming physical reality?

Guardian journalist Katherine Murphy's reflection on her own trip to China as part of Albanese's media entourage offers a useful glimpse.

A 50-minute podcast [interview](#) with her about her three-day China trip was partly a well-informed narrative of the ups and downs in the bilateral relationship over the past few years, and partly an informative discussion of the myriad challenges that lie ahead. At the same time, however, her account was peppered with observations that seem to say less about China and more about her cross-cultural preconceptions and assumptions.

When asked what the meeting was like between Xi Jinping and Albanese, Murphy said Albanese was 'clearly nervous while Xi had a 'half-smile' that was 'hard to determine'. Regardless of her intentions, did she realise that this might remind some people of the 'oriental despot' and the 'inscrutable oriental' stereotypes?

When asked to describe the pomp and ceremony welcoming the Prime Minister, she said, 'We were greeted by 144 – yes, we counted them, 144 – military personnel with bayonets fixed in that ceremonial welcome as a projection of hard power, as well as a share of hospitality'. One wonders if Murphy also noticed the bayonets on display during the US President's recent ceremonial welcome for Xi Jinping. Or whether she viewed the German military honour guards with rifles as a projection of Germany's hard power, when Albanese

visited Germany a few months earlier. In fact, the visit to Germany was [hailed](#) by at least one journalist as a ‘bromance’ between two ‘like-minded nations’, despite the soldiers and their rifles.

It is unlikely Murphy would see the bayonets and rifles as a projection of hard power in either the US or the German cases, given that her reading of the Chinese bayonets may have been coloured by her belief that China is a ‘police state’, as she categorically puts it elsewhere in the podcast interview.

The take-away from all this is that the ‘average Australian’ is unlikely to become more informed about China unless our journalists are prepared to reflect on their assumptions and perceptions, and to realise the impact these assumptions and perceptions may have on their work.

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