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19. Cross-cultural Literacy as Social Knowledge: Implications for Australia’s Understanding of China

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As the perception of a global power shift to Asia and to China in particular takes hold in Australia, there has been a general consensus that this nation’s security and prosperity depend to a large extent on an Asia-literate citizenry capable of making most of the “Asian Century.” The Australian government’s China Country Strategy issued in 2013 notes that despite the depth of China literacy in Australia, the study of Chinese and China in this country has not kept pace with the development of its economic ties with China, now Australia’s largest trading partner. In this context, whether Australia needs more Asia or China literacy is rarely in dispute. Ken Henry, the former Treasury Secretary in charge of the development of the Australia in the Asian Century White Paper, notes that “Not one of the submissions [to the White Paper] said [Asia literacy] is not something Australia should be doing.”

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2 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, China Country Strategy, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia, 2013, p. 11.


Yet, despite this growing consensus, one question that seldom comes up in the debate is what China literacy—and for that matter, Asia literacy—is. On appearance, this seems to be essentially a non-question: “China literacy” of course means knowledge about China in general and skills and understanding about that country’s language, culture, geography, history, politics, economy, and society in particular. With this definition, not only do the meanings of both “China” and “literacy” seem self-evident, but there is also a tacit assumption that knowledge about China is fundamentally no different to the most common form of knowledge we know, namely, scientific knowledge. The objects of study between natural sciences and social sciences may differ, but it is believed that the same theory of knowledge still applies, that is, knowledge is an objective reflection of something real. Although most social scientists no longer explicitly aim to emulate natural sciences, many nevertheless continue to subscribe to a positivist and scientific belief in the possibility of objective, cumulative knowledge about reality or, in this case, China. The most pressing question surrounding China literacy (and Asia literacy more generally), then, seems to be how to make the Australian populace better equipped with such knowledge.

Yet, I contend that this conventional conception of China literacy is, more than any other factors, responsible for the extant impediments to Australia’s China literacy. To help Australia better understand China and develop more widely shared literacy about that country, it is crucial that we get the first-order question of “what China literacy is” right, for the simple reason that if we misunderstand the identity of the thing we are looking for, we are not likely to find it.

In this context, this chapter argues that contrary to the popular understanding, China literacy cannot be modelled on scientific knowledge. Rather, it ought to be seen as a type of social knowledge

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1 Few have explicitly defined what China literacy means, but given that China literacy is seen as a subset of “Asia literacy,” it is reasonable to assume that the tacit definition of China literacy mirrors the standard conception of Asia literacy as ‘knowledge, skills and understandings of the histories, geographies, literatures, arts, cultures and languages of the diverse countries of the Asian region’. See Asia Education Foundation, Building Demand for Asia Literacy: What Works, Melbourne: Asia Education Foundation, 2012, p. 7. Available at: http://www.asiaeducation.edu.au/verve/_resources/Building_Demand_Report.pdf
that entails a different understanding of knowledge (and its associated methodology) than positivism and scientism. In the pages that follow, I shall first discuss what social knowledge means and what it entails to further such knowledge. Then I examine how Australia’s China literacy, as it currently stands, is an unreflective form of social knowledge which has failed not only to critically examine its own socio-historical roots in Australia’s self-imagination, but also to engage in more open-minded dialogue with its “object” that is China. Finally, through a critical discussion of Kevin Rudd’s style of China literacy, the chapter concludes by examining the challenges and opportunities associated with the need for dialogue and engagement so as to enable China literacy to become more reflective social knowledge.

What Is Social Knowledge?

Social knowledge is different from scientific knowledge in that its object of study—the social world—is not an “object” in the conventional sense of the word. To the extent that the social world is epitomised by human subjectivity and social relations, the “object” of social knowledge is from the beginning about human subjects. The relationship between the knower of social knowledge and the knowable object is therefore not as detached as that between chemists and chemicals, or between biologists and bacteria. In chemistry and biology, neither chemicals nor bacteria have among themselves social relationships (or at least not as we know of); nor are they able to interpret what chemists or biologists are doing to them and then react accordingly. By contrast, as the object of study in the social sciences, human society (or part thereof) is made up of meaning-making agents and subjects, whose relationships and activities are always already embedded in and mediated through social meaning and interpretation. As such, the object of study in the social domain is never pure, uncontroversial fact, transparent and clear for all to see.

To complicate the matter further, the social scientist is not a disinterested observer either, but s/he is inevitably situated in a

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1 Strictly speaking, scientific knowledge is also a form of social knowledge. First, the scientist cannot be detached from his/her social environment. Second, science is capable of changing the world it studies. In doing so, the so-called natural world is ultimately part of the social world.
particular social context and subject to the influence of culture, history and tradition associated with that context. In other words, s/he does not simply observe, but always has to imbue his/her observation with embodied and subjective interpretation. Indeed, it is safe to say that without some measure of interpretation to begin with, the observer simply cannot know what and where to look at in the first place. In addition to these hermeneutic connections between the object of study and its social milieu on the one hand, and between the observer and his/her social milieu on the other, there is also the dynamics of what Anthony Giddens calls the "double hermeneutic" of the social sciences. As Sanford Schram explains, 

By virtue of its distinctively human subject matter, social scientists inevitably are people who offer interpretations of other people's interpretations. And the people being studied always have the potential to include the social scientists' interpretations in theirs, creating an ever-changing subject matter and requiring a dialogic relationship between the people doing the studying and the people being studied.

Consequently, a significant challenge for doing social research or developing cultural literacy about society is how to navigate such a complex hermeneutic web, which is not just an inconvenience for the production of social knowledge, but is its necessary precondition. All knowledge about the social world is inherently social; it cannot be observed from nowhere with a God's-eye view, but is from the beginning obtained within social relationships. The relationship between the observer and the observed is not only social (as opposed to being neutral or scientifically objective), but it constitutes one of the most power-laden social relationships. Indeed, to claim to know is to exercise discursive power over the known, for knowing always involves policy-relevant generalisation, categorisation, and simplification of the latter.

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In doing so, social knowledge does not exist outside of reality or power relationship, but is intrinsic to and constitutive of it. Social knowledge’s constitutive relationship with its object of study means that it cannot be objective, and claims by social scientists to have discovered the fixed essence of their object must be met with doubt. Insofar as the "essence" of the object is always potentially and at least partially constituted by the very knowledge that purports to describe it, that "essence" is not external to the observer and his/her knowledge, and thus ceases to be "essence". Given that the knowledge and practice of the knowing self is an integral part of what the known object is, no social knowledge of the other would be complete without critical reflection on the knowing self and his/her knowledge practice.

We may add that not only the object but also the observer is likely to be transformed in the inherently social relationship of knowledge production. As Tzvetan Todorov argues, "knowledge of others depends on my own identity. But this knowledge of the other in turn determines my knowledge of myself. Since knowledge of oneself transforms the identity of this self, the entire process begins anew: new knowledge of the other, new knowledge of the self, and so on to infinity." To illustrate, a case in point is the personal experience of American sociologist Richard Madsen as a scholar of Chinese society and culture. While his research on China "changed the lives of at least a few Chinese and even influenced how some of them think about their own society", China—his "object" of study—in turn has made him a different person. And being a different person in turn is likely to give him some new perspective on China. In this sense, social knowledge is not a fixed product that can be gained once and for all and then safely stored on the knowledge shelf without a use-by date. By changing both its object and subject, social knowledge itself needs to be constantly refreshed through ongoing dialogue. Qua social knowledge it can never be settled or complete.

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Thus, for social knowledge to remain true to itself, it entails the intervention of self-reflexivity and intersubjectivity in its production and regeneration. Self-reflectivity refers to the ability of social knowledge to be critically conscious of its particular social and historical roots associated with the observer. No social knowledge turns up completely pure and fresh; it always builds on some prior knowledge which has more to do with the knower’s social and historical upbringing than with the nature of the object he or she seeks to know. As Gadamer puts it, “Understanding always implies a preunderstanding which is in turn prefigured by the determinate tradition in which the interpreter lives and that shapes his prejudices.”

Thus, understanding of others is almost inevitably autobiographic in nature: it may reveal as much about the observing self as it does about the observed object.

To call for critical self-reflection is not, however, to suggest that one should completely sever one’s ties with such preunderstanding or prejudices; such is nigh impossible. Much rather, it entails first realising this social bound-upness and autobiographical nature in social knowledge production and then calling into question the usual pretension to objectivity in our pursuit of social knowledge or cross-cultural literacy. Essential to this process is the development of what Gadamer calls “effective-historical consciousness” on the part of the knowing subject. “The task of effective-historical consciousness”, as he argues, “is to bring to explicit awareness this historical affinity or belongingness” of the observer.

To acknowledge knowledge’s belongingness, by definition, necessitates conceding the limited capacity of such knowledge to truthfully reflect the other worlds. In short, true social knowledge, insomuch as it is social rather than divine or transcendental, ought to openly recognise its own blind spot and ignorance. According to Confucius, knowledge includes not only something one does know, but

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also one's awareness of something one does not. In other words, knowing one's ignorance is valuable knowledge in itself, and only by knowing one's ignorance can one set out to know. In the words of Michael Singh, "Ignorance fuels inquiry. We proceed from a desire to overcome what we do not know and, through producing new knowledge, we concede new areas of ignorance." Herein lies a fundamental paradox of knowledge and understanding: the more we know, the more we shall realise how little we know. True social knowledge therefore should not be about making the knower appear more self-assured and authoritative, but rather more self-reflective and humble.

At the same time, the knower of social knowledge should be acutely aware that however limited, his/her knowledge is linked with power and inevitably has social consequences. No knowledge can be completely deprived of its power effect, but being self-reflective means that such power can be exercised in a more conscious and ethical manner. In distinction from the instrumental rationality of natural sciences, social knowledge is instead committed to value-rationality. In this way, it is best understood, in Aristotle's terms, as practical wisdom or phronesis, which "concerns values and goes beyond analytical, scientific knowledge (episteme) and technical knowledge or know-how (techne), and it involves judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social actor."

There is perhaps no better way of confronting the above-mentioned ethnocentric bound-upness of social knowledge and advancing it as value-rationality than gaining social knowledge through intersubjective dialogue. To provide an antidote to the unfortunately inescapable parochialism of our social knowledge, an ongoing open-minded dialogue is necessary not only within our own scholarly community, but also with

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those we are studying. Ideally, such dialogue should, as Richard J. Bernstein notes, “be based on mutual respect, equality, a willingness to listen and to risk one’s prejudices and opinions.” It is through such dialogue that the social quality of such knowledge is better realised, as it is co-produced via a dialogical social relationship. True, dialogue is no panacea and it will not make social knowledge more objective or scientific (or, for that matter, more biased, as there is no unbiased social knowledge to begin with), but it does help make it potentially more balanced, more inclusive, and more contextual. Above all, it allows our interpretation to be subjected to the counter-interpretation from our “object” of study, and vice versa. As Naeem Inayatullah and David Blaney argue, “Engaging the other in this way destabilizes our perspective, without eliminating perspective.”

Given the central role of dialogue in the production of intersubjective social knowledge, the best way of facilitating such dialogue is arguably through engaging with the “object” of study in social practice. Even in the natural sciences, as John Dewey argued, if a scientist wants to know something, “the last thing he does is merely to contemplate. He does not look in however earnest and prolonged a way upon the object expecting that thereby he will detect its fixed and characteristic form.... He proceeds to do something.” If doing something in the natural sciences is most commonly known as experimenting, in the social sciences this doing may involve experiencing and doing things together with the “object” of study. Indeed, there is probably no other way of developing social knowledge or cultural literacy of the human world than through practice and experience. Social knowledge is not something that can be quickly learned beforehand. It is a type of what Gadamer calls moral knowledge that “can never be knowable in advance like knowledge that can be taught”.

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1 Bernstein, Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, p. 220.
2 Inayatullah and Blaney, International Relations and the Problem of Difference, p. 165.
Gained and constantly challenged and reformulated through practice that involves both the knowing “subject” and the known “object” (whose roles in this relationship are always subject to reversal), social knowledge becomes practical wisdom (prudence). According to Aristotle, “prudence is not concerned with universals only; it must also take cognizance of particulars, because it is concerned with conduct, and conduct has its sphere in particular circumstances.”

1 As such, practical wisdom or social knowledge is by necessity contingent and contextual. Having to “respond to the demands of the situation of the moment”, “Aristotle’s definitions of phronesis have a marked uncertainty about them.”

2 Against this background, cross-cultural literacy may be seen as social knowledge par excellence. Any debate on cross-cultural literacy must take seriously the question of how it can be both limited and enriched by its inherently social quality.

Australia’s China Literacy as Unreflective Social Knowledge

In the preceding section, I have outlined what social knowledge means and how self-reflection and intersubjective dialogue are essential to the development of such knowledge. In this section, I turn to the question of how Australia’s China literacy, as it is currently conceived and practised, measures up to the standards of social knowledge.

Australia’s China literacy is no doubt a form of social knowledge. This is not only because China, the “object” of this literacy, is a complex social entity, but also because this knowledge has always been situated in and informed by Australia’s social, historical, and international settings. In this body of knowledge, the Australian self (and indeed its broader Western identity) always looms large and what Australia knows about China necessarily reflects its knowledge about itself. In an attempt to know China, much of the understanding ends up being an autobiographic exercise of identifying similarity and/or difference to Australian (and Western) expectations, socio-political mores, and historical experiences, which ironically are often not

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acknowledged as such, but rather held as universal. Due to the space limitation, here I can only briefly touch on Australia’s China literacy in the political economic realm. Referring to some general but nonetheless powerful assumptions about China, I will illustrate how such assumptions—very often serving as unquestioned frames of reference in China literacy—are informed not primarily by what China is, but by how the Australian self has been imagined.

Much of Western political and economic knowledge on China centres on the dual themes of “threat” and “opportunity”.¹ And Australia is no exception. On the theme of the “China threat”, Australia has not been shy to describe China as a strategic and/or economic challenge. In its 2009 Defence White Paper, the rise of China was cast in a worrying light: “the pace, scope and structure of China’s military modernisation have the potential to give its neighbours cause for concern... about the long-term strategic purpose of its force development plans”.² In February 2014, a report by the government-funded Australian Strategic Policy Institute, titled China’s New Dream, described the “re-emergence of China as a great power” as Australia’s greatest foreign policy challenge of this century.³ In the broader Australian public, the perception of China as a challenge is also widespread. According to the 2014 Lowy Institute poll, 48% of respondents believe that it is either likely or very likely that China will become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years, a seven-point increase on the previous year’s result. On the economic front, 56% believe that Australia has allowed too much Chinese investment in Australia.⁴

But among the unease about China’s military and economic clout, Australia also regards China in a more positive light, especially in terms of economic opportunity. For example, with China seen as central to the

rise of Asia in the *Australia in the Asian Century* White Paper, much of the "Asian Century" opportunity is about China. Prime Minister Tony Abbott, on his official visit to the US in June 2014, reinforced this message by saying that "the movement, in just a generation, of hundreds of millions of Chinese into the middle class is a transformation unparalleled in human history." In the same aforementioned Lowy Institute poll, the "thermometer" measuring Australia's warmth towards China reached 60 degree, its equal highest score in this polling's ten-year history.

The two recurring themes of "threat" and "opportunity" about China are more than mere perceptions or stereotypes. To the extent that they are seen as true in the eyes of their beholders, they have been legitimate "residents" in the edifice of China literacy. In fact, no other "residents" have exerted so much influence on the Australian psyche when it comes to understanding China in international relations. Both "threat" and "opportunity" can thus be seen as tacit knowledge, knowledge which people possess but at the same time of whose specific content they are often unaware, like our knowledge about our own language. Just as our language plays a pivotal but often unrecognised role in our knowledge acquisition, "threat" and "opportunity" as tacit knowledge often lay the foundation (and set the limit) for what can be more empirically and specifically known about China.

From the outset such knowledge is rooted in Australian self-imagination. Both the "China threat" and "China opportunity" are

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5. On how Western self-imagination in general has informed the ways in which China's rise has been represented in the West, see Pan, *Knowledge, Desire and Power in Global Politics*. 
known primarily on the basis of China's perceived similarity and/or difference to "who we are/were". The China threat, for instance, is often based on the Otherness of China as a non-democratic, authoritarian state as opposed to "our" liberal democratic system. In years past, China's difference was characterised by its being a racially distinct "Yellow Peril" and an ideologically different "Red Menace". The danger posed by China, therefore, is predicated less on solid evidence from China itself than on an *a priori* equation of difference with uncertainty, challenge, and threat. As Timothy Kendall points out, just by being different, the Chinese labourers during the gold rush period were seen as a threat whether they were industrious or not.  

But difference is not the sole source of China's perceived menace; similarity is another. Australia's fear of the Asian invasion, for instance, was modelled to a large extent on its own historical experience in which the invasion by European settlers delivered devastating blows to the indigenous people. Along the same line of reasoning, it was once widely believed that Asian neighbours could follow in the footsteps of European settlers to overrun Australia. Today, the similarity logic continues to be at play, with some strategic analysts arguing that China is no different from any other rising power. As the argument goes, like the United States which was determined to exclude the influence of other powers from the Western Hemisphere, China will seek regional leadership at the expense of other powers in the region and beyond. Hugh White does not see China's similarity per se as a threat; in his view, the challenge lies in an unconstrained rivalry between two similarly ambitious powers in this region: the US and China. Also employing a similarity logic in understanding China, former Australian intelligence analyst Paul Monk is blunter: today China's rise can be understood through the analogies of the rise of earlier powers such as the United States and particularly Germany (first under Bismarck and the

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Kaiser, then under Hitler). The few differences that set China apart from pre-war Germany are that China is “growing much faster, is far more opaque and has a more deeply ingrained sense of historic grievance and entitlement”. Consequently, he argues that China is more formidable a challenge than Germany “could ever have been”. ¹

With a different twist, China’s perceived similarity and relevance to “us” has also informed another strand of Australia’s China knowledge: opportunity. The Asian Century White Paper’s upbeat reference to Asia’s and particularly China’s burgeoning middle class (the term “middle class” is mentioned no fewer than 35 times in the White Paper) has much to do with the Australian self-image as a nation made of the middle class and the notion that China as well as Asia more generally will become more like “us” in this regard. ² To take another example, again from the same White Paper: “Now the world’s largest producer and consumer of coal, China accounts for almost half of the world’s coal consumption. Having been largely self-sufficient in coal until recently, China has quickly emerged as the world’s largest importer of coal”. ³ This particular knowledge about China seems to be rather banal and uncontroversial, yet its selection and inclusion in the White Paper also reveals that this knowledge is socially produced for particular purposes and audience. It is not coincidental that China as the world’s largest importer of coal is highlighted by Australia, the world’s largest coal exporter. Indeed, while ostensibly about Asia, the entire Asian Century White Paper is “on the economic and mainly about us and the ‘what’s in it for us.’” ⁴ It is, as Ian Watt, Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, puts it, “primarily a document about domestic policy” and about “us” as a nation and the “Australian workforce”. ⁵

Thus understood, though often supported by empirical data and concrete evidence from China, the China threat and China opportunity are not China-specific knowledge. Nor are these themes unique to the repository of Australia's China literacy. They are, rather, some of the generic Orientalist images about the other measured against a West which has come to global dominance following the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions and colonialism. Such binary depictions of China reflect the ambivalent Western (and Australian) colonial desire about the other, a desire characterised by both repulsion and attraction.¹ Ultimately, they are embodied knowledge that "has grown out of the particular sociopolitical, geographical and temporal context of European modernity."² The ways China is conceptualised in Australia reveal the latter's real and imagined positioning in this broader Western experience and knowledge production chain.³ Any genuine China literacy in Australia should start with reflecting on this yet-to-be-decolonised mindset when it comes to the relationship between Australia and Asia/China.

There is nothing inherently wrong or inappropriate for Australia to see China through the lenses of its self-imagination or socio-historical settings. As mentioned above, this cannot be helped in social knowledge. What is problematic, though, is that there has been little critical self-reflection on this autobiographic aspect of Australia's China literacy. Without self-reflection, the debate on China literacy is unlikely to come to terms with the real obstacle to the development of knowledge and understanding of China. By unconsciously basing China knowledge on who we are and who we are not, we end up knowing more about us than about China, whose continued complexity is then often explained away by the age-old "inscrutable Chinese" stereotype. Yet our lack of China literacy is not primarily due to China's inscrutability or lack of transparency, or because of the lack of resources in China studies. It

³ See Takayama, "Deploying the Post-colonial Predicaments of Researching on/with 'Asia' in Education," p. 6.
Australia and China

has a lot to do with the ways in which Australia first imagines self and then uncritically takes its imagination as a given fact against which to measure others. ①

On this front, there is now hope in that critical self-reflection has become part of the “Asia literacy” debate in Australia. Though the term “social knowledge”, as far as I know, has not been used in this debate, it has been acknowledged that Australia’s knowledge about Asia is a social product arising out of colonial encounters and that Asia (and its cultures) is not something simply out there, but rather a construct that does not exist prior to its relationship with the West in general and Australia in particular. For example, as Fazal Rizvi puts it aptly:

In the past, the contact between Australia and Asia took place in colonial terms, which positioned Australians as culturally superior, in ways that were not always explicit, but embedded nonetheless in the discourses used to describe Asian cultures. It is important now to finally abandon the view that cultures can be defined in terms of a set of closed cultural boundaries expressed in language, arts and cultural traditions, bracketed as homogenised entities frozen outside history and contemporary interactive cultural relations not only within particular national spaces, but increasingly beyond them as well. Cultures cannot be assumed to exist prior to the transnational dynamics of economic and political interactions. ②

If we agree that cultures are human constructs rather than stable, pre-existing or clearly demarcated entities, they are not subject to objective studies in the same way chemicals or bacteria are. Also, again without explicit call for a “social knowledge” turn, some scholars have taken issue with the tendency to view Asia literacy in instrumentalist terms. As Singh notes, Asia literacy has been little more than “a branch of Australia’s economic policies”. ③ If that is what Asia literacy is all

about, it is no wonder that such knowledge becomes ultimately optional so long as the West continues to enjoy the upper hand in the global political, economic and cultural order. Already, an Australian commentator has dismissed the idea that we need to learn Asian languages in order to reap the rewards from the “Asian Century,” on the ground that English is the global *lingua franca*, spoken by 800 million Asians. ①

Yet, despite some inroads made by critical insights in the debate on Asia literacy especially within the discipline of education, overall critical self-reflection, especially in relation to China literacy, remains in short supply. Valuable as the existing and emerging insights on Asia literacy and the schooling of Asia are, ② the predicament of China knowledge in this country warrants additional and focused attention. In the next section, I will turn attention to the question of how dialogue and engagement with China can help us both better reflect on and develop Australia’s China literacy.

Beyond Rudd: Challenges and Opportunities in Doing Cross-cultural Literacy

Judging by a scientific benchmark, Kevin Rudd’s China literacy should be as good as any Western politician can hope for. Fluent in Mandarin, Rudd seems to have the distinct ability to read the Chinese mind. His linguistic skills afford him the honour of a China hand, and are often upheld as an exemplar of China literacy. Even Hillary Clinton once sought his counsel on how to deal with China. And indeed his worthy contribution to the “Asia literacy” debate and the development of language policy in Australia should be given due credit.

Yet, Rudd’s China literacy, though proficient in linguistic or even cultural terms, ultimately falls short of being true social knowledge. Acquired primarily as a type of scientific and technical knowledge, it can be seen as social knowledge only in the sense that his knowledge of China is bound up with his intellectual formation during the Cold War,


which taught him, as Greg Sheridan wrote, “the importance of political values in international affairs, of democracy and human rights, of US leadership, of alliance solidarity, of the complexities of the US alliance system within Asia.” Given this, it is not surprising that what is missing is that his knowledge lacks a dialogical dimension that should be intrinsic to social knowledge and cross-cultural literacy. Insofar as he often seems too sure of his knowledge about China, his social knowledge misses a crucial element of humility and critical self-reflection through dialogue and engagement with China.

It is perhaps unfair to accuse Rudd of not engaging with China. He was a diplomat in Beijing for a number of years in the 1980s and China was on the list of the destinations of his first official visits as Prime Minister. He was once even accused by his political opponents of being a “roving ambassador for China.” Yet, in the development of cross-cultural literacy, “having been there” is one thing, having the ability and open-mindedness to engage with the Chinese, which is crucial to knowing China, is quite another matter. Such engagement and dialogue would no doubt benefit from language skills of the country concerned, which is partly why Rudd’s Mandarin skills are often seen as something extraordinary. Yet, language skills do not automatically mean engagement and dialogue, let alone open-minded dialogue. Geoff Raby, perhaps with Rudd in his sights, argues that speaking the language “is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for being China literate.” The former Australian Ambassador to China goes on to suggest that being China literate requires “being here on the ground, meeting people and building relationships”. In effect, this is a call for engagement and dialogue.

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2. See Colin Mackerras’ chapter in this volume.
3. “Rudd Must not Succumb to Turnbull’s China Taunt” (editorial), *The Age*, 1 April 2009.
4. See Agnieszka Sobocinska’s chapter in this volume.
It is not that Rudd was unaware of the need for dialogue. In fact, he went so far as to promote dialogue through the Chinese concept of zhengyou (true friends), which he viewed as the foundation for a new tradition of New Sinology. He argued that through the spirit of zhengyou “we can develop the language and the demeanour for a more sophisticated way of talking to and about each other”. Yet, in practice, his zhengyou principle went off to a shaky start. The first time he used this concept was during his speech at Peking University in April 2008, in which this principle was effectively a justification for his open criticism of China’s human rights record in Tibet. His empirical knowledge on this front was not necessarily inaccurate, but his specific deployment of that knowledge disregarded the contextual nature of social knowledge and its use in context. Further, despite the fact that zhengyou was meant to be mutual in a dialogical context, his practice of zhengyou was in effect a monologue. It defied the principle of mutuality for, as Nicholas Stuart commented on this episode, “one person can’t create a relationship by himself”. This is a good example of an instrumentalist appropriation of China literacy, with a Chinese concept used to sugarcoat an otherwise bitter pill for his Chinese hosts to swallow. But this is a good example of neither sophisticated China literacy nor an effective way of strengthening China literacy through dialogue, for in this one-way engagement, a particular type of China knowledge had already been preconceived.

As the relationship with China deteriorated in the years following his Peking University speech, it is clear that Rudd’s language skills and deep knowledge of Chinese culture did little to promote mutual engagement, which would require more of open-mindedness than just language skills. This illustrates that China literacy needs above all a deep commitment to intersubjective social knowledge through equal dialogue. But in this case, the dialogue was from the beginning unequal.

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2. Rudd, "Australia and China in the World."
3. See Mackerras’ and Rowan Callick’s chapters in this volume.
as Rudd had assumed the moral high ground vis-à-vis China.

One important lesson from Rudd’s zhengyou diplomacy is that dialogue is not as straightforward as it appears. Given the existence of often unequal power relations, it is always a challenge to maintain mutual respect and open-mindedness in dialogue. In reality, it is likely that one side might dictate the term of dialogue. Even when dialogue takes place, there is the challenge of how to treat and interpret perspectives from the other side. Very often in dialogue we hear mostly what we want to hear,¹ which is then conditioned by our own hopes, fears, and expectations. This is why critical self-reflection is vital in order for us to recognise in our knowledge of others the projection of our self-imagination. By the same token, it is easy to be dismissive of alternative perspectives from the other when such perspectives are not familiar or cannot easily fit with our own preconceived framework. Yet unless we are genuinely prepared to appreciate different and diverse perspectives, dialogue in itself can become merely ceremonial, thus doing little to advance cross-cultural understanding.

Equally, one should not take others’ perspectives at face value. Despite claims otherwise, it is not true that only the Chinese can truly understand China; otherwise, dialogue again becomes pointless. True knowledge about China does not exist exclusively in China, or anywhere else for that matter. It can only exist in between and in the process of ongoing dialogue and intersubjective engagement. As a process, dialogue requires long-term commitment and patience. Even with this long process, there is almost certainly no guarantee that complete mutual understanding and cross-cultural literacy will be within easy reach. No amount of dialogue could ensure that we end up agreeing on everything. After all, different peoples, cultures, and countries have different socio-historical contexts and they are not always commensurable. As a result, real social knowledge and cross-cultural literacy should be able to accommodate uncertainty and ignorance. When American Sinologist John Fairbank was confronted by a persistent student who kept pushing

¹ A classic example of such a phenomenon is evident in Donald Horne’s widely misunderstood ‘lucky country’ argument. Horne was meant to be satirical, yet most Australians took the title of his book at face value in part because that was what they liked to hear. Sometimes our interlocutor may intentionally say things we want to hear. At other times, they may have already appropriated our way of thinking, which may make dialogue less valuable than otherwise would be the case.
him to explain the logic of Mao Zedong's revolution, finally Fairbank smiled and said, "Just remember: Mao Zedong didn't make the Chinese Communist revolution for you!" Just as not every word is translatable into another language, cultural literacy will not be able to deliver us total enlightenment about another society.

Yet, this is not to say that trying to understand another culture is a fool's errand. In social knowledge, it is not all or nothing, since social knowledge is not meant to be equated with universal truth. However difficult it may seem, there is no other shortcut to knowledge and understanding. This, perhaps, is at the core of the long-term challenge for Australia-China engagement in the twenty-first century.

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2. See Jing Han's chapter in this volume.