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Introduction: New Perspectives on Cross-cultural Engagement

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Why Cross-cultural Engagement?

On the face of it, if there are two countries that should have a reliably cordial bilateral relationship, they should be Australia and China. Sharing neither land nor maritime borders, the two countries are untroubled by high-stake territorial disputes that have often dogged China’s relationships with some of its Asian neighbours. And perhaps no other two economies in the region are more complementary than those of China and Australia. 3 Abundant raw materials in Australia have been fuelling the world’s workshop. China, meanwhile, has been supplying Australian households with a wide variety of affordable manufactured goods. If all is needed for a cooperative relationship is shared material interests, then Australia and China could well lay claim to a special relationship.

Yet back in 1999, then Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer cautioned that “We should not succumb to any false notions that we have some kind of ‘special relationship’ with China.” 4 He instead characterised it as “a mature and broadly based relationship.” 5 But on many occasions even this more modest designation seems to be an overstatement. Immediately coming to mind is the stunning revelation that in 2003 the Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister Kevin Rudd confided to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton that he was a “brutal realist on China” and that the West should prepare to “deploy force if everything goes wrong.” 6 More recently,

3 See Baogang He’s chapter in this volume.

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FitzGerald’s and Smith’s calls for re-imagining and developing an ever-arching view of the Australia-China relationship are both timely and significant. Thus far, despite the increasingly important ties between the two countries, there continues to be a lack of systematic attempt to critically reflect on this topic. Confrontus said that “at forty I had no more perplexities.” 7 But now well over forty, Australia-China relations continue to be fraught with perplexities.

Of course, commentators and analyses on the difficulties and complexities of the relationship abound in the media. Meanwhile, there is no shortage of often insightful studies and policy advice on how to better manage this delicate relationship, particularly against the backdrop of the Australia-US alliance. 8 Among 250 submissions on the former Labor government’s “Australia in the Asian Century Strategies,” 47% were either wholly or partially related to China. 9 Several recent books on Australia-China relations are particularly noteworthy. 10 For example, Hugh White’s The China Choice, based on his Quarterly Essay article “Power Shift,” sheds important light on the danger of a China-US

3 See note 2.
