Introduction: New Perspectives on Cross-cultural Engagement

Chengxin Pan and David Walker

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. 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.” He instead characterised it as “a mature and broadly based relationship.” But on many occasions even this more modest designation seems to be an overstatement. Immediately coming to mind is the stunning revelation that in 2009 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.” More recently,

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1. See Baogang He’s chapter in this volume.
almost echoing Rudd’s tough stance, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop said to Fairfax Media that “China doesn’t respect weakness,” citing the apparent lack of economic fall-out from China after Australia forcefully protested against China’s declaration of Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea in November 2013. Though with a brief nod to the importance of ‘deeper engagement’ with China, Bishop did not mince her words that “we’re also clear-eyed about what could go wrong. So you have to hope for the best but manage for the worst”. This sounds like hardly a vote of confidence in “a mature and broadly based” relationship. And what is remarkable is that the “clear-eyed” views came out of both Rudd and Bishop who are otherwise miles apart in their political persuasions.

True, going back at least to John Howard, new Australian governments tend to have an initial rough ride in dealing with China, but the fact that it is often in relation to China testifies to the chronically fragile nature of this relationship. As the relationship continues to grow in scope and importance, it is imperative that we understand what factors are responsible for its volatility. If material interests, however important, are not adequate in helping build trust between the two countries, what alternative avenues are available to improve this relationship? If such avenues are not currently in place, how can they be created?

On the eve of the 40th anniversary of Australia-China diplomatic relations, Australia’s first ambassador to the People’s Republic of China Stephen FitzGerald launched a sweeping yet incisive attack on the state of Australia’s strategy towards China. Lamenting that Australia runs a deficit of leadership on ideas, FitzGerald urges that “We have to have that stretch of the imagination; we have to be able to imagine a different kind of relationship and a different concept of China to establish that political trust.” In a similar fashion, the ANZ Bank CEO Mike Smith stresses the importance of paying greater attention to “an over-arching view of the Australia-China relationship.”

FitzGerald’s and Smith’s calls for re-imagining and developing an over-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. Confucius said that “at forty I had no more perplexities.” But now well over forty, Australia-China relations continue to be fraught with perplexities.

Of course, commentaries 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. Among 250 submissions on the former Labor government’s “Australia in the Asian Century Strategies,” 47% were either wholly or partially related to China. Several recent books on Australia-China relations are particularly noteworthy. 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

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rivalry in the region and urges the US to rethink its pursuit of primacy in Asia so as to accommodate China's rise. James Reilly and Jingdong Yuan's edited volume *Australia and China at 40* is a comprehensive collection of essays on a wide range of issues and challenges in this bilateral relationship, such as security, trade and investment, politics, diplomacy, and strategic relations. David Uren's *The Kingdom and the Quarry* is a rich and vivid account of a series of events over trade and investment as well as diplomacy and strategic posturing that took place between Australia and China, especially during the past seven years. Yi Wang's book, a systematic, historical account of Australia-China relations since 1949, both challenges the long-held view that Australia's China policy has been largely dependent on its "great and powerful friends" and draws attention to the trade-politics nexus in the development of Australia's relations with China. Colin Mackerras' reflection on Western images of the People's Republic, aided by fascinating stories from his personal experience and observation in China, provides an insightful window into the ways in which Western and especially Australian perceptions of China have been shaped.

Sifting through this literature, one comes across diverse and illuminating perspectives on the causes of successes and failures in Australia-China engagement. And yet, none of the above-mentioned books are designed to probe into the cross-cultural dimensions of this relationship from a consciously dialogical angle. All the literature to some extent contributes to domestic debate on China and Australia-China relations, but what is lacking is research focusing on cross-cultural dialogue. However vibrant the domestic debate may be, it is not adequate.

Also, the questions regarding "non-material" factors posed at the beginning of this chapter are yet to be more fully explored. Very often the value-laden meanings of such terms as 'China' and 'Australia' are taken not only as given, but also as dichotomous, rather than problematised as specifically historical, cultural and social constructs. Consequently, even before the debate begins, a particular relationship between the two countries is already implied and accepted. But it is such often unexamined assumptions about identity, culture, society, and history that prove to be a thorny issue as to how we can take the relationship forward. Although the headline issues of security, defence, trade and investment are doubtless vital to any study of Australia-China relations, ideas, identities, cultural literacy and cross-cultural understanding are equally, if not more, important to a healthy and sustainable engagement. It is against this background that we think that a book like this present collection is called for.

Putting Australia-China relations in broader historical and cross-cultural contexts (as opposed to the usual political contexts of post-1949 and post-1972 eras), this volume aims to probe the roles popular culture, language, discourse, identity, value, politics, social knowledge as well as non-state actors and agents have played in the ways in which Australia and China have been engaged. This focus promises to paint a richer, more dynamic, and more complex picture of the challenges and opportunities that face the two countries in the past, the present, and the future. While the picture outlined here is necessarily incomplete, it is a kind of picture that has not attracted adequate attention in the conventional study of Australia-China relations. In this sense, the book is not simply an updated conventional survey of the bilateral relationship; rather it is an experimental attempt to bring together scholars and observers from a wide range of disciplines and backgrounds to tackle an inherently multidimensional subject matter. Despite their multidisciplinary groundings and approaches, one common assumption across all the contributors is that Australia-China relations are not the sum total of merely economic, political, and strategic relations, important as these dimensions are. The relationship is also deeply rooted in ideas about history, culture, politics, and identity. Understanding this relationship is vital, but critically understanding how it is understood is even more so.

The book is experimental also in the sense that it is bilingual, with one chapter written in Chinese and the rest in English. Although the editors expressly welcomed either Chinese or English contributions, all but one chapter were submitted in English. Given that many of our contributors are bilingual, the results seem remarkable. Perhaps most of the papers had already been drafted in English, and in any case, they were presented in English at the two conferences, in accordance with the custom of most international conferences. Still, this suggests that by and
large the linguistic (and cultural) landscape through which we understand and engage with each other remains dominated by English, and needless to say that language is not an entirely neutral medium. To highlight the need for cross-cultural dialogue and understanding, the presence of both languages in the book is justified. Despite the imbalance in this bilingual experiment, it is hoped that it can still serve as a reminder that there are stories, insights, and perspectives told in other languages which we may or may not know, and that one’s own language, and the concepts, ideas, definitions, stories, images, and value-judgements associated with it, are not the only way and resources through which to think about another culture and international relations more generally. Such a reminder may sound unnecessary for many of us: in the age of multiculturalism and global integration, who isn’t aware of those plain facts? Yet, awareness is one thing, the willingness to put that awareness into practice is often quite another. Thus, hopefully one more little reminder here might help translate such awareness into more conscious change in attitude and action in the way we approach another culture and society.

Furthermore, the very experimental nature of this book means that more needs to be done. By this, we mean that although it is pleasing to note that the various chapters in the book have talked to each other, more direct “inter-chapter” dialogue and engagement would no doubt have made this a better book. Also, notwithstanding a rejoinder by an Australian PhD student to one of the chapters, the book would have been further strengthened by more diverse contributors and perhaps more rejoinders. No doubt, comparative perspectives from politicians, business people, journalists, educators, tourists, and students from both countries would add more nuanced dimensions to this largely scholarly discussion. However, it is fair to say that such an undertaking cannot and should not be the task of one book alone. Inclusive, open, and ongoing dialogue means that it is neither realistic nor desirable to hope for a definitive book on any social issue, much less on China.

Overview of the Book

With these caveats in mind, now let’s turn briefly to the main arguments of individual chapters. The book has four parts: “Australia and China Engaged: Past and Present”; “Cross-cultural Understanding and Misunderstanding”; “Understanding Australia”; and “Rethinking Australia’s China/Asia Literacy.” Part I contains five chapters, which critically examine the promises and perils in the engagement between Australia and China at social, commercial, and political levels over the past century or so.

In her essay, Sarah Paddle draws on the rich source of the historical letters of Australian women missionaries in China in the early twentieth century. She traces how their work with Chinese women and children reflected the historic moment of the formation of modern (women) subjects in China, in which those missionaries not only played an important part, but also in doing so created new identities and meanings of life for themselves. Much of this took place in a complex intercultural setting where desire and intention were necessarily negotiated and often compromised by misunderstandings and prejudice. She notes that “Although many Chinese women writers and intellectual reformers of the first decades of the twentieth century had been educated in missionary schools, their reflections on western missionaries, far from tending to the romantic, are critiques”. The contemporary implications of this finding is that the Chinese, often seen as the object of Western transformation, are rarely passive, uncritical followers of the West, however profoundly they may have been changed as a result of their engagement with the West.

Agnieszka Sobocinska’s essay delves into the personal but nevertheless highly political experience of Australian tourists in China, both during and immediately after the Cold War. She argues that such personal experiences, whose relationship with Chinese “reality” were rarely straightforward, strongly “contributed to [Australia’s] societal notions about what Asia was ‘really’ like” and became one important but little examined source of so-called “Asia literacy”. Despite this, Sobocinska’s account casts doubt on the commonly held view that personal experience and eyewitness account were “the best way to gain cross-cultural literacy,” for such experience was never totally independent from preconceived stereotypes. The equation between “being there” and having authoritative knowledge of the place is thus at best a problematic one, an insight which should serve as a timely warning about the high hopes that closer ties and increased mobility through travel as well as freer information flows would be automatically conducive to cross-cultural understanding. After all, tourism is not
Australia and China

merely a neutral activity of leisure, but is from the beginning intertwined
with politics both at home and at a regional level.

Sophie Loy-Wilson’s essay argues that the history of economic
relations between Australia and China is “one of the best but often
neglected avenues” to investigate and hopefully improve cross-cultural
relations between the two nations. Just as tourism always takes place in
a political context, economic processes cannot be divorced from their
cross-cultural settings. Not dissimilar to Sobocinska’s focus on the tourist
guidebooks, Loy-Wilson reveals how the bilateral relationship was
reflected in and shaped by the large number of business guidebooks
produced for Australians doing business in China and for nineteenth-
century Chinese migrants in Australia. These guidebooks are one
important form of cross-cultural knowledge, which illustrates that such
knowledge is inherently a socio-historical product, rather than just the
result of objective and detached analysis.

Colin Mackerras’ essay takes us to the more contemporary phase of
Australia-China relations under two Labor governments led by Kevin
Rudd and Julia Gillard. After systematically comparing the two Prime
Ministers’ economic and politico-strategic engagements with China
between 2007 and 2013, Mackerras argues that Australia-China
relations were in most respects better under Gillard than under Rudd.
Although circumstances did not seem to favour Rudd, Rudd’s attitude to
China displayed a lack of cultural sensitivity. By contrast, even though
or perhaps because Gillard did not claim to know China, she seemed
more willing to take advice and did not pretend to know the country.
This important finding shows that China literacy alone is not enough to
effectively manage bilateral relations, but more important is one’s
attitude to such literacy (or lack of it).

In Part I’s final essay, Baogang He recognises the great potential
for misunderstanding and even conflict between the two countries, and
therefore proposes a number of economic, political, military and cultural
mechanisms to reduce the chance of tensions. Among these practical and
often innovative mechanisms are: developing joint ventures to deepen
interdependence; developing hybrid forms of regionalism to
accommodate different regional visions; promoting media collaboration to
break down the normally closed knowledge production systems in each
country and increase mutual understanding; and developing joint history
textbooks to facilitate historical reconciliation. In order for such
mechanisms to work, he argues that both sides need to be committed to
pragmatism and tolerance. Matt Hood, a PhD candidate at Deakin
University, wrote a candid rejoinder to He’s proposal, and as
demonstrated in the rejoinder, such an exchange is valuable in terms of
helping us understand both the often neglected commonalities and
substantial but not irreconcilable differences.

Part II, as the title shows, puts spotlight on “Cross-cultural
Understanding and Misunderstanding”. Douglas Kirsner’s essay is based
on an important premise that the foundation of human relationships is
“the prisms through which we view one another together with the nature
of our basic assumptions about both ourselves and the other.” From a
political psychology perspective, he examines how some underlying
anxieties about turbulence in China and Australia’s economic
dependency on China can help explain some of Australia’s behaviour
towards China. Thus, he argues that it is important to recognise such
basic assumptions in each culture so as to decrease misunderstandings
and misperceptions and enhance mutual trust and confidence.

Rowan Callick’s essay starts off with a description of a general
bemusement in Australia about Hu Jintao’s reference to earlier historical
counters between China and Aboriginal people in Australia. This
bemusement shows that history – even the history of bilateral relations –
is not necessarily shared by the two sides. Proceeding from one’s own
historical and political perspective, both sides are prone to developing
great expectations that are later almost bound to fail short. Based on his
journalist experience, Callick makes a pointed observation that Chinese
top leaders visit Australia every year, and every year he makes formal
request for an interview with them, but rarely with any luck. This
prompts him to suggest that the personal links between Australians and
the Chinese are more likely in the long run to create a valuable bond
than official programs and visits. Perhaps on these links it is still
possible to hold great expectations.

In contrast to the great expectations that take place in bilateral
engagement, Jing Han knows too well the day-to-day challenges of
mediating and creating cross-cultural understanding at the micro-level of
translation. She argues that translation is a process that “involves a shift
not only between two languages, but also between two cultures”. As
many of her first-hand and often hilarious examples can attest, between
two languages there is no one-on-one correspondence of meaning. It is
incumbent on the translator to skillfully negotiate and mediate through the cultural differences and facilitate communication and understanding. Her chapter shows that if it is difficult enough to translate a film from one language to another, it is far more challenging to enable common understanding of often complex political, social and economic issues from one culture to another. But one way to ameliorate such a challenge, as she notes, is to develop better bicultural vision and knowledge.

In their essay, Guo Qingmin and Sun Ruiyuan examine how the rise of China has been covered and constructed in mainstream US media. They not only uncover the underlying attitude or ideological perspective embedded in the media discourses, but also point out that the largely negative media coverage (of China’s rise, Chinese economy, and Chinese power) is responsible for deep-rooted misunderstanding and even hostility between the US and China. Their study also has important implications for Australia, whose media landscape is closely linked to that in the US. They rightly argue that “Furthering China-Australia engagement begins with a more balanced media coverage of both countries on both parts,” although this raises further questions of how such a balanced coverage could be obtained.

By examining how the Stern Hu case was reported in China and Australia, Lin Zheng’s essay shows how media on both sides contribute to miscommunication and misunderstanding. She argues that when meaning is “framed” by certain underlying assumptions that enable one’s own cultural bias to infuse events with extraneous meaning, miscommunication occurs. The miscommunication surrounding the Stern Hu saga illustrates the vast gap between Chinese and Australian understandings at the levels of culture, institutions, economy and politics.

In the final essay of Part III, Guoqiang Liu examines China’s much-misunderstood Confucius Institute program as a significant language policy and planning initiative. Unlike the popular portrayal of this initiative as China’s soft power strategy to exert China’s rising power at regional and global levels, Liu puts emphasis on its role in reconstructing China’s national identity in the context of its rise and its international relations. This reconstruction of Chinese national identity, as he illustrates, is an interactive process in which Western perceptions of the Confucius Institute initiative and Chinese responses to such perceptions together contribute to the outcome of China’s national identity reconstruction.

Part III includes four chapters that represent some diverse views on Australia from Chinese perspectives. Despite the apparent embrace of Asia in Australia’s Asian Century White Paper, Zhang Lei’s essay argues that the Australian government continues to subscribe to a West-dominated mindset, “viewing Asia as the other and positioning itself as an outsider to Asia.” Thus, Zhang finds it necessary to interrogate Australia’s cognitive mapping of itself in the “Asia Pacific,” and how such national cartographies help both frame its perception of Asia and constrain its Asia policy over the past few decades. He calls for a remapping of Australia’s cognitive position in the region, not only because simply speaking Asian languages and knowing the cultures are inadequate for the development of Australia’s cross-cultural literacy, but also because it is essential to the formation of a more independent Australian foreign policy.

Mobo Gao’s essay turns critical attention to a particular style of moral mapping in Australia, which underpins Australia’s value diplomacy towards China. While the “Asia Pacific” geographic mapping of Australia implicitly separates Australia from Asia, the value-based cartography is to place Australia above Asia and in particular China. But as Gao argues, Australia’s supposedly non-realist way of dealing with China is deeply intersected with realism. For example, the discourse of the “international community” of democracies justifies the formation of trading blocs as well as the maintenance of the political and strategic status quo. Yet, Gao points out that such “value diplomacy”, while serving realist and neoconservative interests, may backfire and hurt Australia’s long-term national interests. For Australia to better engage China, he makes a strong case for value ambiguity and value complexity (though not value relativism) so as to better appreciate other peoples’ way of life and their perception of value and reality.

Li Ping’s essay is a review of Alexis Wright’s award-winning novel Carpentaria. This novel is set against the background of the past encounter of the Indigenous tribes with the whites at the Carpentaria Bay. While exploring the land rights war, the novel embraces the promise of reconciliation between different peoples as well as the mortal and the immortal. As well as drawing lessons for China’s policy towards its ethnic minorities, Li provides a largely untold story of cross-cultural
communication at a personal level behind Chinese translator Li Yao’s translation of *Carpentaria* (and numerous other Australian novels). Over time, it is such “back-breaking” hard work of introducing one culture to another that holds the promise for a better Australia-China relationship.

Tian Lili’s essay deals with a practical and specific aspect of understanding Australia, namely, teaching and learning Australian English vocabulary in Chinese universities. In this exploratory study, Tian aims to understand the outcome of Chinese university students learning Australian English words through two instructional methods: the forms-focused and the form-focused. Her findings show that the forms-focused group recalled more words in the immediate post-test. Like many phrases and expressions identified by Jing Han in her translation of Chinese films, many Australian words come with strong historical and cultural connotations and cannot be easily understood at face value. But unlike in film subtitling, classroom teaching allows the introduction of more cultural background information.

The fourth part of the book returns to where the book project starts: Australia’s China literacy challenge and the need to rethink the way in which Australia does Asia/China literacy. The first essay, by David Walker, in response to Ken Henry’s bafflement that many Australians did not get China, suggests that it is the prior understandings and misconceptions Australians have that almost guarantee that they get Asia wrong. He argues that the first step to knowing Asia better is to “know how Asia has been represented in Australia over the last century or so and what that past now means to us.” He urges that Australians understand China not simply in terms of consumers, but as people, with their dynamic and multidimensional cultures and worldviews. In short, this entails the need to nurture “a range of ways of knowing China and a range of possible Chinese futures” and to interrogate our pre-conceptions and the limits of our knowing.

In her essay, Christine Halse presents a chronological account of the history of Asia literacy as reflected in Australia’s education policy on the study Asian languages and cultures. She identifies three phases of Asia literacy schooling in Australia: advocacy phase, the golden age and consolidation phase. Throughout these phases, Asia literacy schooling has been embroiled in political tensions and debates about the contending purposes of Asia literacy, be they individual, economic or democratic, and has been shaped by “changing strategic, economic and foreign relations conditions and agendas.” Halse suggests that Asia literacy schooling remains a work in progress and that as the geopolitical and geo-economic weight of Asian countries such as China grows, there is a need for continued discussion and reflection on the purpose of Asia literacy schooling.

Greg McCarthy and Mobo Gao’s essay offers a critical analysis of how Australia, through the dual lenses of Western modernity and neoconservatism, has treated China as a “problem,” which is at best abnormal and at worst threatening. While the purposes of Australia’s Asia literacy schooling have undergone changes, the approaches to China under four successive Australian governments (Howard, Rudd, Gillard and Abbott) have remained remarkably stable and similar: while trading with China, all these governments have been committed to strengthening the US alliance and beefing up strategic cooperation with Japan. They suggest that to develop a new form of China literacy, Australian governments need to question their own conceptual frameworks as embodied in those dual lenses.

In the final chapter of Part IV, Chengxin Pan insists that cross-cultural literacy, such as China literacy, should be treated and practiced as social knowledge, rather than as scientific knowledge as commonly assumed. Using Kevin Rudd as a case study, he argues that Australia’s China literacy is an unreflective form of social knowledge, which fails not only to critically examine its own socio-historical roots in Australia’s self-imaginations, but also to engage in open-minded dialogue with China. As he notes, both critical self-reflection and intersubjective dialogue are essential to the development of genuine cross-cultural literacy, which as social knowledge cannot be complete or settled.

For this reason, this book does not claim to uncover the secrets of how to do cross-cultural literacy in the Australia-China context. So long as cross-cultural literacy is conditioned on ongoing dialogue and continuous self-reflection, such a project is always a work in progress. Nevertheless, the new perspectives offered in the following pages will, we believe, help shed much-needed light on the perplexing challenge of cross-cultural engagement and make a contribution to the ongoing debate on Australia-China relations.