



Media coverage of Chinese students in Australia

Chinese students in Australia have been a focus of media attention in 2017.

'In recent months we've seen denunciations of Australian university lecturers who have offended Beijing's patriotic sensibilities.

'Racial chauvinism is only one of the challenges that Beijing is exporting to universities.'¹

'Chinese students at universities in Australia have their professors walking on eggshells.

'...[O]verseas universities are facing increasing pressure from Chinese students to not say anything that violates Communist Party orthodoxy, as Chinese students studying abroad become increasingly bold in exerting their nationalism.'²

'Australian educators are increasingly coming under attack from Chinese students, raising concerns their government's influence is permeating our universities.'³

This fact sheet was prepared by James Laurenceson, Deputy Director, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney.

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- 1 John Garnaut, 'Our universities are a frontline in China's ideological wars', *The Australian Financial Review*, August 30 2017 <<http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/our-universities-are-a-frontline-in-chinas-ideological-wars-20170830-gy74br>>.
- 2 Josh Horwitz, 'Australian professors and universities are being shamed into apologizing for offending Chinese students', *Quartz*, August 29 2017 <<https://qz.com/1064435/australian-professors-and-universities-are-being-shamed-into-apologizing-for-offending-chinese-students/>>.
- 3 Emma Reynolds, 'Tensions rise as Chinese government's influence infiltrates

'Sadly, the spirit of protest, liberalism and human dignity that inspired Liu and the protesters of 1989 has all but vanished among Chinese students today.

'When asked their thoughts on any political matter, many [Chinese students] will respond: 'I don't discuss politics.' Those who will talk often borrow the slogans and phrases of China's propaganda machine.'⁴

'The war being waged by Chinese students against 'politically incorrect' lecturers in Australia...has flowed out from China's increasingly regimented education system.'⁵

'The recent, surging trend of nationalist Chinese students...turning their attentions to teachers who offend Beijing's doctored version of Chinese history is a potent illustration of what happens when an industry becomes reliant on a significant customer'.⁶

'[Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Frances Adamson asked Chinese

Aussie universities', *News.com.au*, September 1 2017 <<http://www.news.com.au/finance/economy/australian-economy/tensions-rise-as-chinese-governmentsinfluence-infiltrates-aussie-universities/news-story/e7768b0bb1f5953a7608884527387372>>.

- 4 Alexander Joske, 'End the isolation of Chinese students in Australia', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 4 2017 <<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/end-the-isolation-of-chinese-students-in-australia-20170902-gy9iv6.html>>.
- 5 Rowan Callick, 'Chinese students taught to 'snitch' on politically incorrect lecturers', *The Australian*, September 1 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/chinese-students-taught-to-snitch-on-politically-incorrect-lecturers/news-story/5cd4d2bc84ce0d976546706a23aef5>>.
- 6 Michael Sainsbury, 'China crisis: Australia hurtles blindly toward an immigration calamity', *Crikey*, September 13 2017 <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2017/09/13/china-crisis-australia-hurtles-blindly-toward-an-immigration-calamity/>>.

students] to engage in respectful debate rather than spread propaganda or attempt to gag views they disagree with'.⁷

An ACRI survey found this commentary was based almost entirely on the following incidents:

May – Monash University (MU); objections raised online in response to questions on a quiz that some deemed made fun of Chinese officials and reflected an outdated view of China.⁸

August – Australian National University (ANU); objections raised to university administrators and online about the content of a lecture PowerPoint slide that some regarded as insinuating they had a predilection to cheating.⁹

August – University of Sydney (USYD); objections raised online to a map presented in course materials that showed Chinese-claimed territory as part of India.¹⁰

August – University of Newcastle (UoN); objections raised in person to lecture content referring to Taiwan as a 'country'. The exchange was covertly recorded and subsequently posted online.¹¹

1. There are currently 131,355 Chinese citizens studying at more than 30 Australia universities.¹² Meanwhile, only four incidents have been reported.

2. None of the four incidents involved classroom discussion or freedom of expression being shut down. Academics and universities were able to respond. There have been no reports of

universities forcing staff members to apologise, although MU did suspend an academic while an investigation was taking place.¹³

3. Chinese students were not raising radical political positions. For example, that Taiwan is part of China is a position held on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. The Australian government recognises the People's Republic of China as China's sole legal government and does not recognise the Republic of China as a sovereign state.¹⁴

4. Survey evidence from the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney finds that the average Chinese is less nationalistic than their Indonesian and Indian peers.¹⁵ Other recent academic research has reported that younger Chinese tend to be less nationalistic than older generations.¹⁶

5. Polling finds consistently high levels of support by Chinese citizens for their government and academic research reports this support cannot simply be attributed to Chinese government propaganda campaigns.¹⁷

'Chinese people have every reason to feel good about their country at the moment. It's something that I think Westerners generally have a bit of a hard time coming to terms with because we dislike the political system in China.'¹⁸

6. Experts have warned against simplistic commentary.

This year Professor Wanning Sun, Professor of Communications and Media Studies at the

7 Andrew Greene, 'DFAT boss warns international students to resist Chinese Communist Party's 'untoward' influence', *ABC News*, October 9 2017 <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-10-09/universities-warned-to-resist-chinese-communist-party-influence/9030372>>.

8 Kirsty Needham, 'China's internet erupts over Monash University's drunk officials quiz question', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 22 2017 <<http://www.smh.com.au/world/chinas-internet-erupts-over-monash-universitys-drunken-quiz-question-20170522-gwaazl.html>>.

9 Shan Xin, 'Chinese students furious at ANU teacher's racist lecture', *People's Daily*, August 11 2017 <<http://en.people.cn/n3/2017/0811/c90000-9254290.html>>.

10 Primrose Riordan, 'Wrong map ignites university fury', *The Australian*, August 24 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/sydney-lecturer-apologises-for-use-of-map-offending-chinese-students/news-story/2b1cccbe438d1c680fcbff60f8e7d97e>>.

11 Primrose Riordan, 'Uni lecturer targeted over 'separate Taiwan'', *The Australian*, August 24 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/university-lecturer-targeted-over-separate-taiwan-materials/news-story/79febfc3fd91f84604173c79a1f249a3>>.

12 Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 'International student data 2017', September 2017 <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Pages/InternationalStudentData2017.aspx#Pivot_Table>.

13 Primrose Riordan, 'Monash University suspends lecturer over quiz question', *The Australian*, May 22 2017 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/monash-university-suspends-lecturer-over-quiz-question/news-story/2bc64598623c5a0718c8fc808ef2ef14>>.

14 Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 'Taiwan country brief' <<http://dfat.gov.au/geo/taiwan/Pages/taiwan-country-brief.aspx>>.

15 United States Studies Centre, 'The Asian Research Network survey on America's role in the Indo-Pacific 2017', May 31 2017 <<https://www.usssc.edu.au/analysis/the-asian-research-network-survey-on-americas-role-in-the-indo-pacific>>.

16 Alistair Iain Johnston, 'Is Chinese nationalism rising?: Evidence from Beijing', *International Security*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2017, 7-43 <http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00265>.

17 Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'China reality check series: Chinese public opinion and the durability of Chinese Communist Party rule', October 26 2017 <<https://www.csis.org/events/china-reality-check-series-chinese-public-opinion-and-durability-chinese-communist-party-rule>>.

18 Linda Jakobson, La Trobe University, 'Kevin Rudd on China's rise and a new world order', *Youtube*, October 26 2017 <<https://youtu.be/psErow4xalo>>.

University of Technology Sydney (UTS) has run focus groups with Chinese students. She reports they hold a diverse range of opinions on contentious issues and sometimes there is even a deep ambivalence within individuals. Factors such as language barriers, a lack of cultural understanding on both sides and maturity/age are able to explain much of the conflict between Chinese students and Australian academics.¹⁹

Fran Martin, Reader in Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne is conducting a five-year ethnographic study of the social experiences of a group of fifty Chinese women students at eight universities across Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney.²⁰ She asked her cohort about recent media coverage.

The overwhelming response...has been incredulity at the extreme nature of the claims about their motives and influence and disappointment at the way media reports depict them as a homogeneous group lacking the power of independent thought. Some also expressed concern that such claims may further entrench the anti-Chinese prejudice that already exists within Australian society, as well as indignation at the double standard implied in criticisms of them.

She adds that the patriotism of Chinese students tends to be similar to the loyalty to 'one's family or school, yet not precluding criticism of the government and the Party'. It certainly was not 'a straightforward identification with either the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] or the Chinese state'.²¹

Merriden Varrall, Director of the East Asia Program at the Lowy Institute writes: ²²

[T]he Chinese students I spoke to said they felt that students' behaviour as raised in the Australian press was rarely as simply about politics as it was portrayed.

7. There are concerns that freedom of expression for Chinese students is being suppressed.

Merriden Varrall writes:²³

[R]ather ironically, is a sense among Chinese students that they cannot freely express their views because their non-Chinese classmates and teachers will dismiss them as being brainwashed. Despite being told that 'all views are welcome', pro-Party views are understood as the exception.

Lauren Bliss, an Early Career Researcher in Screen Studies at the University of Melbourne said: ²⁴

[Recent publications that portray Chinese students] as posing a threat, so too do they, paradoxically, triumph freedom speech – ignoring or avoiding the fact freedom of speech means, in part, an ability to allow contradictory, opposing ideas to be freely expressed. To my mind, there is no serious problem on campus, or within the humanities...the only problem is in the rhetorical fallacies of journalists, politicians and intelligence officials in their generalisation and hyperbole, lack of concrete research or reference, and their politicisation of what it means to be a university student.

Wanning Sun remarked:²⁵

Some Chinese students came to Australia enchanted by the notion that Australia's media is free, but then when they read the local coverage of China, and about themselves, they were left feeling disillusioned by its perceived inaccuracy and frustrated when their opinions were either ignored or invalidated.

19 Australia-China Relations Institute, 'Chinese students in Australia - with Wanning Sun', *The ACRI Podcast*, September 14 2017 <<https://soundcloud.com/acripodcast/chinese-students-in-australia-with-wanning-sun>>.

20 Fran Martin, 'Overstating Chinese influence in Australian universities', *East Asia Forum*, November 30 2017 <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/11/30/overstating-chinese-influence-in-australian-universities/>>.

21 Fran Martin, 'Media, place, sociality and national publics: Chinese international students in translocal networks', in Koichi Iwabuchi, Olivia Khoo and Daniel Black eds., *Contemporary Culture and Media in Asia*, London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 207-224 <http://www.academia.edu/31550748/Media_Place_Sociality_and_National_Publics_Chinese_International_Students_in_Translocal_networks>.

22 Merriden Varrall, 'Chinese student furore reveals Australia's poor integration strategy', *East Asia Forum*, October 14 2017 <<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/10/14/chinese-student-furore-reveals-australias-poor-integration-strategy/>>.

23 Ibid.

24 Lauren Bliss, 'Despite what politicians and the media say, freedom of speech is alive and well on campus', *The Conversation*, November 29 2017 <<https://theconversation.com/despite-what-politicians-and-the-media-say-freedom-of-speech-is-alive-and-well-on-campus-86929>>.

25 Australia-China Relations Institute, 'Chinese students in Australia - with Wanning Sun', *The ACRI Podcast*, September 14 2017 <<https://soundcloud.com/acripodcast/chinese-students-in-australia-with-wanning-sun>>.