

# Australia's narrow understanding of China is of its own making

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The Australian Academy of the Humanities' 2023 [report](#) into the knowledge capability of Australia's universities concerning China has brought into sharp relief just how far a fraught relationship with China is permeating national life.

Since at least 2017, the [rhetoric of Australian political leaders and prominent media commentators](#) has [emphasised](#) that Australia faces an existential threat to its security and prosperity from a rising and more assertive China. Public [opinion polls](#) now [consistently show](#) deepening [negative views](#) of Chinese President Xi Jinping's China.

The most obvious effect of this relationship breakdown was Beijing's freezing of high-level political contact and its ultimately counterproductive imposition of tariffs on key Australian exports. Those restrictions are now being eased and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's government has [stopped the shouting](#) of its predecessor. Still, there remains little realistic hope that the bilateral relationship can advance much beyond [stabilisation](#) in the near to medium term.

But a light has now been shone on how Australia's China debate is [affecting the kinds of choices being made](#) by – and provided to – younger Australians about the study of China at Australian universities. In short, the report shows a clear shift away from the study of language, history, culture and identity to a heavy focus on international relations and security.

This gradual ebbing of Asian expertise accompanying the rising tide of a China threat narrative is of deep concern to Australia which remains ever-keen to define itself as belonging to Asia.

As former Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade secretary Peter Varghese and language studies expert Joseph Lo Bianco [argued](#), 'the evidence shows us that Asian expertise is slipping at the worst time: when the region itself is changing, strategic relationships are re-aligning and economic models are shifting'.

The drop-off in the teaching of Asian languages is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, it taps deeper roots in Australia's ongoing search for markers of regional belonging. Australia appears to periodically discover its Asian knowledge deficit.

In the 1960s, the United Kingdom's departure from Southeast Asia and the recalibration of the United States' role in the region forced both sides of politics to come to terms with Australia's place in Asia as never before. Former minister for education Malcolm Fraser argued for more Asian studies in Australian schools.

Around the same time, former minister for the interior Peter Nixon was much more emphatic in declaring that ‘now is the time for us to place the war of the roses and similar ancient European events amongst the curios of bygone days’. Nixon said Australians needed to ‘throw overboard’ Latin, Greek and French and start learning Japanese, Chinese and Malay.

In the 1980s, the Ingleson report on [Asia in Australian Higher Education \(1989\)](#) gave the impetus for Australians to pick up unfamiliar dictionaries its fullest treatment. The report advanced the most dramatic claims for the changes which had overtaken Australia since the 1970s, stating that Australia was linked to Asia through geopolitics, trade, investment and immigration ‘in a way different from any other country’. Because of this, if Australians were ‘to manage their future as part of the Asian region’, Australia would need to have widespread knowledge of Asian languages and cultures.

But the Ingleson report’s grandest assertion, leading up to proposals for radical changes in university humanities and social science course structures, was that teaching about Asia was part of the ‘Australianisation’ of the curricula. Former prime minister Bob Hawke’s government took heed of the recommendations and made the teaching of an Asian language compulsory in primary and secondary schools.

The governments of former prime ministers Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard added the most recent chapter to this story. The Rudd government [introduced a program](#) to fund high school Asian language and culture studies and double the number of students exiting school with fluency in Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese or Korean by 2020. The Gillard government [outlined a policy objective](#) that every student in Australia be given the opportunity to learn an Asian language — particularly Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian or Hindi — and study Asian culture.

There is space for the Albanese government to emphasise the urgency of Australia’s Asian expertise deficit too.

After all, Foreign Minister Penny Wong is serious about projecting Australia’s ‘[full identity](#)’ to the Pacific and Southeast Asia. Wong has also been assiduous in recording messages in [Indonesian](#) to underline the greater intimacy of the new government’s approach to its [regional neighbours](#).

That example now needs to flow through to a sustained national program for Asian literacy and perhaps even the re-energising of the Australia–Asia Institute, once housed at the University of New South Wales. The Institute was described by its founder, former Australian ambassador to China Stephen FitzGerald, as having sought to host ‘high-level dialogues with Asia to incubate ideas and build relationships’, and be ‘a vehicle for Australian and Asian leaders to amplify their views and debate our Asian future’. Universities also need to [re-forge the link](#) between language and translation and society teaching.

Australia cannot continue to shape future policy towards China reliant only on the advice of its national security agencies. It would be foolhardy to suggest that nations never change — China too will change, perhaps in unpredictable ways. The question is whether Australia mortgages its image of China to the present or starts learning to be more adaptable and agile in the event that circumstances change.

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