

# Why are Cheng Lei's shades of grey not newsworthy?

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July 11 2024

Note: This article appeared in *Crikey* on July 11 2024.

For a while, everything about Chinese Premier Li Qiang's visit to Australia seemed to be going smoothly. Indeed, ahead of Li touching down, even opposition leader and former China hawk Peter Dutton [said](#) he would 'very much welcome the visit'.

So, when Chinese embassy staff tried to block Australian journalist Cheng Lei from view during a Parliament House signing ceremony, the [incident](#), while reflecting poorly on Beijing, was also a godsend for conflict-starved journalists.

Taken into custody in August 2020 on suspicion of carrying out criminal activities 'endangering China's national security', [Cheng Lei](#) was detained in China for three years and two months and then released nine months ago.

Judging by how enthusiastic the media were to talk to Cheng Lei following the incident, you could be forgiven for thinking that anything she said about China and Australia-China relations would be of immense interest to them.

But you would be wrong, based on her appearance in a recent UTS:ACRI public [event](#).

The event featured Cheng Lei and her partner Nick Coyle, and invited in-person and live-streaming audiences. As you'd expect, quite a few journalists registered to attend. However, despite Cheng's high profile in Australia, it seems none of the Australian media ended up running a story, despite her and Coyle speaking for over an hour, in response to questions from moderator Glenda Korporaal from *The Australian*, as well as from the audience. However, there was an [article](#) from the *South China Morning Post*.

What explains the conspicuous absence of such coverage? If you were in the audience or read the [transcript](#) of what Cheng and Coyle said, you might get some clues. First, what Cheng said seemed to challenge, rather than give succour to, some popular binaries perpetuated by our media.

For instance, our mainstream media tend to portray Chinese Australians — especially first-generation PRC migrants — as either flag-waving '[patriotic Chinese](#)' supporters who turned out for Premier Li's visit, or as 'anti-China' critics and dissidents who [protested](#) against Li outside Parliament House. But Cheng Lei refuses to see her relationship with China in such black-and-white terms. China, she told us, is a place comprising 'different parts', describing herself as 'very much a shades of grey person'.

There's also a [tendency](#) to consider those who are not vocally critical of China to be pro-China. But Cheng believes that attachment to some aspects of China and loving Australia should not have to be mutually exclusive. She seems suspicious of talk of belonging that is premised on undivided loyalty and nationalism:

When it comes to China, it just evokes so many feelings in me because I'm a very sentimental person and China represents so much, and we all have hopes for people to get along, for beauty to be appreciated. And the whole concept of nations is fiction anyway.

Cheng also reminded the audience that the demonisation of China can directly cause suffering for Chinese Australians:

China becomes a dirty word. And that might sometimes affect people who live here, people who have family and business interests, and a great affection for China. And I just wish people would be less extreme.

Cheng seems to resent being often typecast by people seeking to conform a particular framing of her to their various political agendas. [Writing](#) about her experience at Parliament House during Premier Li's visit, she said, 'I do not like the feeling I'm fodder for China hawks or an unfortunate existence for China doves'.

Cheng said that she 'hadn't realised that the media landscape was so polarised'. And to her, to present China and Australia-China relations in polarised terms may jeopardise rather than serve the public interest. When it comes to ways of writing about China, she told the audience that 'demonising is not the way to go'. She wanted to see a 'rational', 'more intelligent' discourse that does not 'label' or 'cancel' people:

I think we should first agree on the facts. I think a China hawk would still agree that China is our biggest customer. I think a China dove would still agree that some of China's behaviour is belligerent. ... I'd like to see newspapers not labelled as left or right. I'd like to see commentators who are not always about the same view and get the same guests on.

These comments were perhaps not what our media expected to hear. At the event, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* Eryk Bagshaw asked:

It strikes me that both of you, out of most anyone in Australia, would have cause to feel aggrieved by what the Chinese government has done to you. And yet I don't get a sense of that from your comments. And indeed that bitterness, if there is any, is mostly reserved for the Ministry of State Security, your treatment by particular officials, but not for the Chinese government as a whole, or perhaps, rather, ... the Chinese people and the country as a whole. How hard was that to maintain, I guess, a sense of optimism in the face of extraordinary challenges that I imagine many in Australia could not even comprehend?

During the past three years, detention not only deprived Cheng Lei of physical freedom but also to some extent muted her voice. Against her wishes, she had indeed become 'fodder for China hawks' as well as 'an unfortunate existence for China doves'. In detention, she had little control over how her story was told and whose interests were being served. She was mostly spoken *to* by the Chinese authorities and *about* by the media and commentators. She has been represented as either a hapless victim or an icon of martyrdom.

In the meantime, she has also been denounced and pilloried by [some](#) commentators on Chinese-language platforms, who literally called her a 'traitor'. Now, she is back in Australia and free to write and to speak her mind. And as it turns out, what she has to say does not always make a 'good story'.

To be clear, Cheng Lei does not mince words when she criticises Beijing. She talked about China's censorship, its political control, and its lack of freedom. If you were thinking she was turning into a China dove, her latest [article](#) in *The Australian* will disabuse you of that notion.

On the other hand, she thinks there is too much ‘fearmongering’ about China, and that our fear of Chinese influence and interference may come from a lack of confidence in our democracy. She asked, ‘Can we be [more] confident in our own values?’

So, what is *not* newsworthy about Cheng Lei saying all these things? And what does the absence of coverage of this event tell us about our media when it comes to reporting on China? Could it be that they did not think it newsworthy, or was it just too difficult to find an angle that would resonate with audiences and editors?

To be sure, there was scarcely any bitterness and outrage in her talk; that might have made for a ‘better’ story. As Nick Coyle commented, ‘Everyone loves a bit of outrage.’ And it would be hard to translate her statements into clickbaity headlines – exploring her resilience and remarkable capacity for complexity, ambivalence and even contradiction may not help sell papers or drive online traffic.

Perhaps most importantly, a lot of what she said seems to fly in the face of the discourse on China that our mainstream media have contributed to building. Some journalists could even have taken her assessment of some of our media – as simplistic and lazy – as a not-so-subtle criticism of their work. If that’s the case, wouldn’t reporting on her criticism of the media amount to an own goal?

Sometimes a good clue to our media’s mindset is not what they tell us, but what they do not.

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