

AUSTRALIA-CHINA AGENDA 2013

The Best Job in the World? Taiwan, Australia and working holiday visas

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THE AUSTRALIAN Centre on China in the World engages with the public and policy discussion of relations with the People's Republic of China and the Chinese world. Australia-China Agenda 2013 is our contribution to this important election year and the on-going consideration of the bilateral relationship.

This is a relationship that touches on virtually every aspect of our national life. A mature and beneficial engagement of such breadth and depth requires the leadership and support of government at all levels, as well as public stewardship, media understanding, educational enhancement and the strategic involvement of the business community.

Australia-China exchanges are also profoundly influenced by regional and bilateral relationships. Australia and China trade in goods as well as culture, politics and people, ideas and education, community and personalities.

Australia-China Agenda: 2013 brings to the attention of the public and the media, politicians and specialists some reflections and policy ideas authored by specialists with a professional interest and involvement in the relationship.

—Geremie R. Barmé
Founding Director, CIW

2013

JANUARY 一月

FEBRUARY 二月

MARCH 三月

APRIL 四月

MAY 五月

JUNE 六月

JULY 七月

AUGUST 八月

SEPTEMBER 九月

OCTOBER 十月

NOVEMBER 十一月

DECEMBER 十二月

二〇一四年

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IN THE second half of 2012, nearly 18,000 young Taiwanese strapped on their backpacks and headed for Australia for a working holiday. Only the United Kingdom provided more workers. These figures are a big increase on Taiwanese visitors the previous year – first working holiday visas jumped up by 105.1% over the same period in 2011 and second working holiday visas increased by 65.8%. [1] Backpackers are a lucrative demographic – in 2012 the average young visitor spent \$7,259 while in Australia.[2]

When put together, these are serious numbers and indicate that the human dimension between Australia and Taiwan warrants further consideration.

Perfect One Day, Hideously Expensive the Next

‘One slurpee costs \$150 NTD (~\$5.62 AUD)’.[3]

Thus began the much publicised lament of the popular Taiwanese television personality and blogger Matilda Tao 陶晶莹 after her trip to Queensland. Having catalogued a

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number of comparatively high prices for consumer goods, Ms Tao groaned ‘prices in Australia are a tragedy for normal people’.

But Ms Tao’s beef with Australia was about more than just the steep prices and poor quality food. Yes, she acknowledged, the weather is good and the environment pristine, but there was something that really annoyed her. ‘The severe financial discrimination of Chinese by Caucasians was enough to fill your belly with obscenities’, Ms Tao wrote. The young Taiwanese she met were earning a decent wage but felt like they could not fit in to Australian society and would ultimately return to Taiwan. It was an unflattering portrait of an unfortunate and expensive holiday – and perfect fodder for Taiwan’s rapacious tabloid media, who promptly broadcast Ms Tao’s complaints about Australia (and the economic opportunities it gives migrants) far and wide.

Once Ms Tao’s grievances were picked up by the Taiwanese media, Steven Huang – a Taiwan-born Brisbane city councillor – was moved to rebuke her harsh words. In his statement, Councillor Huang mentioned the difficulties faced by small business owners (hence the high food prices) and stated that as a nation of migrants, Australia is a friendly place full of opportunities.[4] Echoing the oft-heard mantra of contemporary Australia, he closed by stating Australia’s future is closely aligned with Asia.

But while this statement might be true, it is important that we ensure this alignment is not based on a solely financial relationship. How Australia connects with the people of Asia, and in this instance, Taiwan, is a very real dimension of our 'Asian Century'.

What Do Taiwanese Really Think of Australia?

The general perception Taiwanese have of Australia is positive. The experiences of Hsieh Hsin-hsuan 謝昕璇, one of the finalists in Tourism Australia's much-hyped 'Best Job in the World' competition confirm this. Despite ultimately missing out on the gig, Ms Hsieh managed to attract media attention at home as she strove to win a job as a wildlife caretaker. Ms Hsieh had such a great time during the week-long final selection process that she plans to return to Australia on a working holiday visa. And when does return, she will not be alone.

Lured by the potential of plentiful work opportunities and relatively high wages, last year in Taiwan I met many youngsters eager to quiz me about living and working in Australia. Two or three brave ones even pulled out their application forms and asked for clarification in decoding near-impenetrable bureaucratise. All were excited about the adventures ahead in Australia.

Yet despite the prospect of economic opportunities for young Taiwanese, bad perceptions of Australia remain. The *Taipei Times* was sufficiently moved by the comments of a university graduate working in an Australian abattoir to editorialise on Taiwan's loss of skilled labour. Having trouble finding work at home, this young man ended up having 'to do jobs that most Australians are unwilling to do'.^[5]

But while slaughtering livestock certainly lacks the romance of being a scuba instructor on the Great Barrier Reef or pulling beers in a hip inner-city bar, it brings home the bacon, so to speak. And so, given the difficulty in finding well paying work in Taiwan, it is not surprising that young Taiwanese want to take advantage of the generous Australian visa and head down under for some hard yakka. Questions remain about what they think of Australia after they've come here – and what this relationship tells us about Australia's use of its working holiday visas to improve ties with Asia.

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Everybody Needs Good Neighbours

When talking about Australia and Taiwan there are features that tend to be mentioned: similar sized populations, developed democracies, connections with the Pacific island nations, strong economic ties, a penchant for wearing Ugg boots in public. These are all true and important.

Yet while Taiwan unfortunately does not have the cachet among young Australians of other Asian destinations, many do visit, especially to study Chinese or teach English. As both Joel Atkinson and Sue Chen have observed, Taiwan was given scant recognition in the Australian government's 2012 white paper *Australia in the Asian Century*. Nor does Taiwan appear in the government's recently published country strategy for China.

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The New Zealand government, on the other hand, has been more strategically engaged with Taiwan, and in early July 2013 signed a Free Trade Agreement. The resulting reduction in tariffs is claimed to save New Zealand exporters NZ\$40M a year.[6] Interestingly, the FTA recognises the links between the indigenous peoples of New Zealand and Taiwan and includes measure to foster this connection.

Australia and Taiwan do not have such cultural connections, however the significant number of youth that spend long periods of time in the other country are worthy of more consideration. The masses of young Taiwanese coming to Australia each year present a great opportunity for the Australian government. As part of the hubbub generated by the government's White Paper, the need to foster a generation of 'Asia-literate' young Aussies was frequently cited. But there already exists a deep well of Asia-literacy in Australia courtesy of our expansive pool of migrant talent. These people, many of whom are Taiwanese, are a great resource that should not be ignored.

Taking this idea further, and if we want to we could perhaps look at how better to integrate Taiwanese visitors (and those from other Asian countries too, for that matter). If we do not draw on their direct experience and skills, then we should at least examine how we give them the infrastructure to have a positive experience, as well as exploring how to make them feel like they are wanted here, especially in the remote locations where many are now working. Offering more government publications and tourism resources in Chinese would be a start.

The Australian government has identified Mandarin as national priority language – yet Mandarin programs face funding dilemmas. Perhaps Taiwanese backpackers could be organised in a way to teach Mandarin across Australia, similar to the long-running JET program in Japan.

Staying here long-term, our young Taiwanese guests are a gift to Australia; but this raises the question of how we can encourage other countries to send more of their young people our way. Scouring the statistics on working holiday visas, one quickly becomes aware of two very large omissions – India and China. Were working holiday visas available to the youth of India and China, the dynamics in Australia could be very different. Not just because of the sheer volume of potential workers, but also how these visitors are integrated into the Australian economy in a meaningful and productive way. If Australian education providers are having trouble attracting international students, then the Australian lifestyle, broadly speaking, might be able to draw foreign youth in. Having enjoyed their time as workers, some might be encouraged to stay on as students.

Yet, it is important that we also pause and think of the ongoing hoopla around Australian 457 visas and the risks and complications, real or otherwise, that these migrant workers really pose to Australia. It would be a tough sell for politicians to convince the electorate of the benefits of allowing thousands of more young foreigners into the country. And as working holiday visas are often arranged as exchange, we must also consider the diplomatic angle.

Given this context, Taiwan's relatively small pool of backpacker labour – while a large part of the working holiday visa population – may appear much more manageable for the government. And given the growing numbers of Taiwanese working here, this could be a valuable example for the government in understanding how to effectively manage large numbers from a non-English speaking country. Taiwan could serve as a role model for other, trickier visa negotiations.

After her traumatic Australian experience Ms Tao felt that 'I have never so much wanted to return to Taiwan'. The cheap meal of Taiwanese staple foods that she lovingly ate on her return probably tasted better than ever before. Ms Tao concluded her blog post with the emphatic:

Mandarin programs face funding dilemmas. Perhaps Taiwanese backpackers could be organised in a way to teach Mandarin across Australia, similar to the long-running JET program in Japan.

‘I
Love
Tai
Wan.’

Unfortunately the price of slurpees in Australia is not going to go down any time soon. But maybe just letting our Taiwanese guests know that there is some love for them here could be an effective way of strengthening the bonds between our two countries. When Australia is able to meaningfully engage Taiwanese and other Asian working holiday visa holders as part of Australia’s ‘Asian Century’ and provide more Chinese language resources for visitors to Australia, then hopefully Ms Tao will be able to return and blog that ‘I love Australia’. And let us hope that the Indian and mainland Chinese equivalents of Ms Tao can similarly, one day, do the same.

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AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON CHINA IN THE WORLD

The Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW), College of Asia & the Pacific (CAP), The Australian National University (ANU) is an initiative of the Commonwealth Government of Australia in collaboration with ANU, a university with the most significant concentration of dedicated Chinese Studies expertise and the publisher of the leading Chinese Studies journals in Australia. CIW is a national research centre that is jointly managed by a body of academics that includes scholars of China at universities in Adelaide, Brisbane, Hobart, Melbourne and Sydney.

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