

# AUSTRALIA-CHINA AGENDA 2013

## Engaging Australia's Younger Generation with China

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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

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AUSTRALIAN CENTRE ON  
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Australian  
National  
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ANU College of Asia & the Pacific  
Canberra, Australia

2013  
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

CHINA'S YOUNGER generation elites have learnt English during their school days, visited Western countries as tourists and most likely, completed one or more degrees in the US, UK, Canada or Australia. Fluent in Standard or Mandarin Chinese, English and possibly a non-Mandarin mother tongue, they feel at home in a world where China is increasingly accorded respect as a rising if not already great global power.

### Asymmetry of Information

However, there exists a growing asymmetry of information between China and Australia. Increasingly, Chinese decision-makers can read any Australian document or

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view any broadcast that is available online any time they wish. The Australian counterpart is limited to what has been translated into English, often a translation provided by Chinese counterparts in an incomplete or 'massaged' format.

Chinese workplaces are equipped with faster broadband networks than in most Australian offices. Younger generation company managers or government cadres can surf the English-language world-wide web with ease, soaking up the latest news and trends in their areas of interest. An official working on Asia and the Pacific, for example, could begin his or her day by skimming the latest headlines from Australia's leading newspapers, or watch the latest broadcasts featuring Australian politicians.

The constant avalanche of news and information provided by Australia's media and lively civil society offers these young elites abundant insight into Australian attitudes and debates. In future,

this free flow of information will undoubtedly shape how these highly educated elites decide on China's strategy for negotiating with Australia.

The younger generation Australian counterpart working in foreign affairs, or for an Australian company, is unlikely to be able to glean the same insight into what is going on right now in China, nor into how China sees Australia on a day by day basis. The problem is not just a linguistic one. Chinese is a difficult language and only a handful of Australians of non-Chinese background learn enough Chinese to read an online newspaper or government report with relative ease. But even more difficult

to navigate are the constraints imposed by the Chinese state on all Chinese public media, a phenomenon the US scholar, Perry Link, has called ‘the anaconda in the chandelier’, the forces of censorship which tightly contain the flow of information in the one-party state. As well as learning how to read Chinese, a difficult task in itself, it is also necessary to find one’s way through the labyrinthine portals of the state-controlled web in China, in other words, to learn to ‘read China’ with the same skill as Chinese elites.

What are we missing out on and why does it matter? A glance at the semi-official, pro-government Chinese paper, *Global Times*, in both its Chinese and English language renditions for the 20 August 2013 provides some insight into this. In its lead article, the English *Global Times* offers a reassuring portrayal of both the US and Chinese Defense chiefs seeking to build trust in the Pacific region. The Chinese *Global Times*, designed for readers in China, puts forward a tougher image of the Chinese Defense Minister. He questions whether US activities in the region are directed against China and hence dangerous to the region. Many articles in the Chinese language *Global Times* on 20 August, as on virtually every other day, point to China’s grave concern with perceived anti-China activities by Japan. Anti-Japanese material is much less prevalent in the English *Global Times*. The only item about Australia in the Chinese *Global Times* on this day relates how a right-wing Australian political candidate criticized the gift of an elaborate ‘friendship gate’ from the Chinese city of Ürümqi to its sister city, the NSW Riverina township of Narrandera. The fact that the Narrandera Shire Council had decided to accept the gift was not mentioned. This article implicitly highlights residual racism in Australian society.

China-produced media tends to be Janus-faced, presenting a friendly reassuring face to the English-speaking world and a strident more assertive face to its domestic audience. If Australians are only aware of one and not the other then we are missing out on understanding how the Chinese elite talk to each other, and how they talk to their domestic audience.

### Access to Global Information

What would it take for younger generation Australians to be as well-informed about China as their Chinese counterparts will be informed about Australia? The government has recently put forward a White Paper, *Australia in the Asian Century*, setting out a plan for Australia to become a ‘more Asia-literate and Asia-capable’ nation. This includes broadening and deepening ‘our understanding of Asian cultures and languages’ in order to ‘build stronger connections and partnerships across the region’ (Executive Summary, p.2). The Leader of the Opposition has called for thousands of young Australians to spend times in Asian countries in order to learn how to engage

with Asian counterparts. Australia is entering another period when young Australians are being encouraged by a non-partisan government policy to gain Asian-relevant capabilities.

Learning an Asian language is integral to strengthening engagement with Asian counterparts. In the case of China, the Chinese government is very aware of the linguistic hegemony of English as the leading global language. The fact that Chinese families invest so much effort in ensuring that their offspring learn English, while very few Westerners learn Chinese, is a cause of disquiet if not resentment. As China rises, it will expect a greater space for Chinese as a significant global language. For decades the Chinese state has been promoting the teaching of Mandarin Chinese overseas. This is one of the motives behind the establishment of Confucius Institutes on college campuses throughout the Western world and the exporting of Chinese-language teachers overseas.

Elites in East Asian countries, such as Japan and South Korea, have been quick to understand that in their region Chinese language is the key to deepening engagement with their peers in China. Australia has been slower in this regard. Australia has largely failed to grasp that it is Mandarin Chinese that is likely to emerge this century as the *lingua franca* of northern East Asia.

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### A New Strategy

If the younger generation of Australians are to have the chance to become as linguistically capable as their Asian counterparts, then a new strategy needs to be devised for the teaching of Asian languages. Recent developments in the use of digital tools offer new ways to teach spoken and written Chinese, to make curriculum material more widely accessible across educational sectors, to provide more customised 'packages' of language material to meet different needs, and to enable language students to reach a range of practical objectives, from learning elementary conversation to reading and responding to Chinese-language blogs.

These technologies rely on the downloading of commercially available digital language applications to i-tablets and smart phones. Using a smart phone, a Chinese learner can simply point his or her phone at a portion of text to digitally capture a Chinese expression and instantly look up its sound and meaning. A digital course reader could be opened in an online dictionary application and read with far more ease than the cum-

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bersome method of looking up words in a Chinese dictionary, or relying on a teacher. Some applications offer electronic flash cards of new vocabulary to allow for spaced repetition of new material. Other applications show the student how to write the stroke order of Chinese characters. Online programs are available on the web to assist with learning the sounds and tones of Mandarin Chinese. Self-correcting programs using a microphone are also available. Commercial businesses in Chinese cities now offer one-on-one conversation lessons using Skype technology to learners around the world at modest cost. These new E-learning aids

promise to radically transform the experiences of learning Chinese for the Western student (McLaren & Bettinson 2013).

Chinese language programs in Australia have begun to take advantage of some of these emerging digital applications, but there is much work to be done. While the heavy lifting will necessarily be done by language educators, Australian leaders and decision makers can help to promote the teaching of Chinese to young Australians in the following ways.

### What Can We Do?

- Encourage the teaching of Chinese (together with other key languages) at all levels of the education system and to Australian students of all backgrounds.
- There are enormous advantages in beginning a language in primary school and thus 'normalising' the experience of learning a foreign language.
- At present, Chinese language programs at secondary and tertiary level in Australia are dominated by students of Chinese background. This group is a valuable resource for Australia as it improves its Asia-relevant capabilities. However, as a matter of equity, Australia needs non-Chinese background Australians to have the same opportunities afforded by the Asian Century.
- For reasons of national security, critical skills and key knowledge should not be 'outsourced' to people of one ethnic background and largely denied other groups in society.
- Given the diversity of learners of Chinese in Australia, it is essential to encourage the development of curriculum and strategies suitable for both background speakers and non-background speakers. Currently non-background speakers are often discouraged by the presence of large numbers of background speakers in

the Chinese classroom. This is a significant problem in the teaching of Chinese in Australian schools (Orton 2008).

- Encourage the development of research into E-learning technologies and how these could promote new ways of teaching Chinese language across educational sectors, to members of the Australian public, and across institutional and distance barriers.
- Ensure that young Australians planning to visit Asia as part of government or private programs are able to participate in suitable Asia literacy and Asian language programs to make the very best of their opportunity to live in Asia.
- Monitor enrolments in Asian languages across educational sectors. At present only Year 12 enrolments are regularly reported. Tertiary enrolments in Asian languages are not monitored by any government agency. The Association of Asian Studies of Australia produces biannual reports on Asian language enrolments in higher education (McLaren 2011).

Languages should be considered a national resource. The responsible minister in the government should ensure that universities regularly report enrolments in Asian languages across all sectors and this data should be monitored to indicate trends and gaps in provision.

The nations in our region, aware of new emerging powers and changing world alignments, are investing hugely in education. The Asian Century is likely to be at least as complex and challenging as the twentieth century. The ability to access and interpret global information is the key to success in the information age. We have the opportunity now to strengthen the linguistic capacity of young Australians to prepare them for the challenges ahead. New e-learning tools offer significant potential to transform the way younger generation Australians gain China-relevant skills and engage with the region.

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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.

The Centre is a humanities-led research institution that is engaged with the broad range of social sciences to produce academic work that, while relevant to the full spectrum of demands of international scholarship, also relates meaningfully to those in the public policy community, and to the broader interested public, both in Australia and overseas. It values a New Sinology, that is an intellectual, cultural and personal involvement with the Chinese world (be it in the People's Republic, Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan or globally) that is underpinned by traditions of academic independence, local fluency and disciplinary relevance.

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