



23 October 2020

ABC response to submission made to the Senate Committee Inquiry into Australia's Foreign Relations

Introduction

The ABC was informed by the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee on 16 October that a submission had been made to its current Inquiry into Australia's Foreign Relations¹ by an ABC staff member which makes some adverse reflections on the ABC.

The staff member's submission makes claims about potential Chinese Communist Party influence on the ABC program "*The Power of Falun Gong*" and other claims about the relationship between the ABC and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

As the ABC had no prior knowledge of, or involvement in, the submission, the Committee afforded the ABC the opportunity of a right of reply to the specific claims made in this submission prior to its publication.

This submission by the ABC has been prepared in response to several of the specific claims made in the staff member's submission which the ABC considers are inaccurate, unfounded, and made without the provision of supporting evidence.

ABC response to allegations it is "pro-Chinese" or under the influence of Chinese state agencies

Any suggestion that the ABC *Foreign Correspondent* program, or the ABC more generally, has been subject to CCP influence is rejected.

The ABC does more critical reporting on China and the CCP, day in and day out, than any other Australian media organisation – even when it creates difficulties, such as China Correspondent Bill Birtles being withdrawn from Beijing earlier this year, leaving the ABC without a correspondent on the ground for the first time in more than 40 years.

On top of the regular news coverage, the ABC conducts deep examinations of China's activities in our country and the world, appropriate scrutiny given its importance as a growing global superpower.

¹ Senate Committee Inquiry into Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Bill 2020 and Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) (Consequential Amendments) Bill 2020.

In June 2017, *“Power and Influence: The hard edge of China's soft power”* laid bare the growing concerns about covert Chinese actions taking place on Australian soil. This joint ABC /Nine Newspapers investigation took five months and uncovered how the CCP was secretly infiltrating Australia.

In April 2019, the same team revisited the subject in the *Four Corners* program *“Interference”*, which focused on the CCP's machinations in the political life of Australia's Chinese communities, including how it was seeking to undermine critical voices in Australia's Chinese-language media.

In June 2019 *Four Corners* presented *“Tremble and Obey”* marking the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre and in July 2019 *“Tell the World”* showed the plight of the Uyghur community.

Since the *Foreign Correspondent/Background Briefing* investigation *“The Power of Falun Gong”* appeared in July, Falun Gong practitioners have mounted a concerted campaign over the reporting. The ABC completely rejects the claim its reporting was sourced from, or influenced by, the CCP. The sources of the allegations were within the Falun Gong movement itself, both current and former practitioners, and its published literature. A detailed response in relation to the ABC's story on the Falun Gong is set out below.

In addition to this reporting, the ABC has an established Chinese-language news team working out of the Asia Pacific Newsroom, publishing mainly in simplified Chinese, and covers China without fear or favour. A sample of recent stories includes:

- <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2020-10-19/senator-hits-back-at-aoc-boss-over-beijing-olympic-boycott/12781888>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2020-10-16/asio-warning-for-local-politicians-over-foreign-spies/12776952>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2020-09-24/china-building-bigger-uyghur-detention-camps-in-xinjiang/12699100>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2020-09-23/china-knows-its-place-in-the-world-can-australia-live-with-it/12693382>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2020-09-23/chinese-propaganda-shows-fake-attack-on-us-air-force-base/12693152>
- <https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2020-09-21/matthew-carney-foreign-journalist-china-intimidation-birtles/12686498>

Chinese-language content is subject to the same standards and processes as all ABC News content and is regularly reviewed for compliance with editorial standards. The ABC has complete confidence in its accuracy, impartiality and independence.

It is the duty of a public broadcaster to investigate serious claims wherever they may arise, including in government, religious or charity groups. In a robust democracy no group is exempt from scrutiny, including Falun Gong. We stand by the accuracy and integrity of the reports.

ABC response in relation to Falun Gong criticisms

ABC News has reported dozens of stories about the persecution of Falun Gong followers over the past two decades, including two long-form stories by the *Foreign Correspondent* program. The latest reports also made it clear the Falun Gong has been persecuted in China.

ABC journalists approached several Falun Gong practitioners and leaders for interviews including: Dragon Springs spokesman, Mr Jonathan Lee, on 19 June 2020; Mr John Deller, a spokesperson for the Australian Falun Dafa Association, on 14 July 2020; and the President of the Australian Association on 17 July 2020.

The ABC also sent a written request to interview Li Hongzhi, affording him a fair opportunity to respond. He did not respond to that request.

The reporters who worked on these stories extensively researched, corroborated and fact-checked the claims made in the stories before they were broadcast and published. That research included interviews with current and former practitioners and their family members and friends, academics and specialists with extensive peer reviewed research of the Falun Gong, examination of medical and financial records, personal diaries and correspondence.

It is important to understand that the case studies that were presented in these reports represent the concerns of a very broad range of ex-practitioners and observers. The case studies were intended to illustrate for the ABC's audience the types of concerns that many ex-practitioners and critics of the Falun Gong raised with ABC News. Many ex-practitioners of Falun Gong spoke to ABC News on the condition of anonymity, explaining that they were afraid they would be harassed or condemned for speaking out.

Chinese Government Persecution of Falun Gong

The newsworthy focus of these stories were the allegations about the destructive impact certain teachings and practices within Falun Gong have had on a range of former practitioners and their families. The reporting was not about the entirely separate issue of how the Chinese government has persecuted Falun Gong. The fact the CCP has persecuted Falun Gong was made clear in the reports, and the ABC has reported that issue on a newsworthy basis, over time, but that was not the material focus of the reports.

Reporting the newsworthy allegations of abuse from former practitioners and their families, and describing their view that this had a destructive impact on their personal health and relationships, did not create an editorial obligation to report on how the Chinese communist government has persecuted Falun Gong, or how many people practice it or benefit from it. The fact that Falun Gong has been persecuted by the Chinese government in no way detracts from the serious, newsworthy allegations about its own practices and teachings, or about how it treats its own practitioners and ex-practitioners.

Right of Reply

The newsworthy allegations that were the focus of the reports were put to Falun Gong on multiple occasions for response, and to the extent that its representatives were willing to respond, those responses were prominently presented.

It was a commonly accepted view - amongst all informed people the reporters spoke to - that Li Hongzhi promotes fundamentalist teachings that include not to eat meat, not to trust modern medicine, and not to accept homosexuality. The other commonly held view among those spoken to by ABC News was that Falun Gong is completely adverse to criticism of its teachings and practices, and that if any person criticises the Falun Gong, the default response is to claim the teachings are open to interpretation, the critics are wrong and fabricating their claims, and are most likely sympathetic to, or part of, the Chinese communist party.

ABC News made reasonable efforts to corroborate and confirm the accuracy of this widely-held view with a broad range of people it spoke to while preparing the stories, as well as a careful and conscientious review of relevant teachings from the principal Falun Gong book, Zhuan Falun and a series of lectures delivered by Li Hongzhi.

Dragon Springs spokesman Jonathan Lee as well as the Falun Dafa Association of Australia were afforded *a fair opportunity to respond* to the allegations related to the movement's view of medicine, including an interview with Mr John Deller which is prominently presented on the *Background Briefing* website. *Background Briefing* and ABC News online reported Falun Gong's response to the allegations about its teachings on homosexuality.

Trump Presidency

ABC News' investigation of the editorial direction of Falun Gong's affiliated media outlet The Epoch Times, and its overt support for the Trump Presidency, was newsworthy and a matter of public interest worthy of exploration by these investigative current affairs programs.

ABC News identified this NBC News online article from 2019, which reported how The Epoch Times had spent more on pro-Trump advertising on social media than any other organisation outside of the Trump campaign itself. The report also showed that The Epoch Times had been banned from buying further advertising from Facebook, after being caught bypassing Facebook's advertising rules while strongly pushing pro-Trump policies.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/trump-qanon-impending-judgment-day-behind-facebook-fueled-rise-epoch-n1044121>

The ABC's research also confirmed that in December 2019, another Falun Gong affiliated group was [banned](#) outright by Facebook after engaging in "co-ordinated inauthentic behaviour", including generating fake profiles of Trump supporters. Facebook confirmed that, although the people behind this network sought to conceal their identities and coordination, its investigation linked the activity to Epoch Media Group.

<https://about.fb.com/news/2019/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-from-georgia-vietnam-and-the-us/>

The *Epoch Times* was provided with a *fair opportunity to respond* to the allegations presented in the ABC's reports and to the extent that it did respond, those responses - as well as previously published Epoch Times statements - were presented in the reports.

The program makers put this issue directly to Dragon Springs spokesman, Jonathan Lee, and provided him with a *fair opportunity to respond*. His response was prominently presented in the reports. We also note that the ABC made two requests to interview Li Hongzhi to provide him with a *fair opportunity to respond* to these issues, but he did not respond to those requests.

Dragon Springs complex

The reports accurately characterised "the secretive world" Anna discovered at Dragon Springs, based on her first-hand personal experience of visiting the complex multiple times, including her disturbing encounter with Li Hongzhi.

ABC News made *reasonable efforts* to investigate the claims made by the concerned neighbour, Frank Ketcham, by obtaining a copy of the stop work order issued by the town of Deerpark's building department, which was addressed to Mr Jonathan Lee in 2016. This documentation states that Dragon Springs had illegally built "*an additional story*" and that this "*8th additional story was not approved in plans.*"

Mr Lee was provided with a *fair opportunity to respond*, to explain why the compound was heavily secured and that it follows all planning and environmental rules.

The ABC report echoes CCP propaganda used to persecute Falun Gong

ABC News made it clear to its audience that the CCP had: persecuted Falun Gong followers and done terrible things to it; had indefinitely imprisoned tens of thousands of Falun Gong followers and demanded they renounce the movement; had banned Falun Gong because it saw the movement as a threat to its grip on power; and had behaved like a cult and demanded robotic obedience from Falun Gong followers.

The ABC did not echo CCP propaganda or in any way align itself with the CCP treatment of Falun Gong. The fact that the CCP has persecuted Falun Gong does not preclude the ABC from reporting on newsworthy allegations against the movement by former practitioners and others with knowledge and experience of the movement.

The allegations and concerns that were presented and examined in the reports were independently considered on their individual merits to be newsworthy and to represent a matter of public interest worthy of investigation by the ABC. ABC News provided the following statement:

The multi-award-winning team that put together these series of reports are among the most experienced and respected journalists in the profession. Over the years they have rigorously investigated and published criticisms of the Communist Party of China, its human rights abuses, its authoritarian nature and its undue influence in Australia and the region.

The ABC has arguably done more to expose the wrong doings of the Chinese Communist Party than any other media outlet. It is simply incorrect to suggest that the ABC is influenced by the CCP.

The Executive Producer of *Foreign Correspondent*, Matthew Carney as China bureau chief was one of the first journalists to investigate the mass detention of the Uighurs in Xinjiang, China's surveillance state, and the execution of political prisoners. For this he was expelled from China in 2018. Eric Campbell has over 30 years reporting all over the world and has been particularly critical of the Communist Party, reporting on persecution of the Uyghurs and underground religious groups. When he was Beijing Correspondent he faced multiple threats of expulsion. Undeterred by this intimidation, Campbell was one of the first journalists to uncover the extent of China's illegal bases and take-over of the South China Sea.

Regarding the claim Mr Campbell was 'rewarded' for his reporting at Masanjia with a trip to the Tibetan Plateau - that is also untrue. The Chinese Foreign Ministry organised a tightly supervised group tour that was available to all foreign media residing in Beijing. Some 40 journalists took part, as the region is normally closed to foreign media. Mr Campbell used the tour to obtain interviews with repressed Tibetans and to show CCP efforts to distort the truth. He later travelled to India to interview the Dalai Lama for the report. Ms Zhao could have seen that by watching the report, which is still publicly online. <https://www.journeyman.tv/film/1305/chinas-new-railroad>

ABC MOU with Shanghai Media Group (SMG)

The general purpose of the ABC's agreement with the Shanghai Media Group (SMG) reached in 2014 was to seek to continue to promote mutual understanding and friendship between the people of Australia and China, and to expand co-operation between the parties in areas such as TV dramas, other programs, and training visits. The MOU expired in June 2018.

MOUs with China are not uncommon. The Australian Government has had a range of MOUs with China, for example: in 2014 Australia and China signed a MOU on climate change; an MOU on Reciprocal Years of Culture (2010-2012) to increase cultural exchange between China and Australia was signed; the Turnbull Government signed an MOU in 2017 for cooperation on building infrastructure.

The ABC's MOU with SMG is consistent with Australian government policy towards China. The Department of Foreign Affairs states in its *China country brief* that "in 2014 the Australian Prime Minister and Chinese President agreed to describe the relationship as a "comprehensive strategic partnership". Both governments have committed at the highest levels to building our relationship and strengthening cooperation on important shared interests".

At the time the MOU was signed (2014) the stories reported on the Chinese language webpages of the ABC's international programming were in the category of 'lifestyle and topical Australian issues'. It was not a news and current affairs service. Examples include an exchange of content during our Window Week programs – where programs from the ABC are played on SMG, and the reverse where lifestyle programs are played on our international TV service (at the time known as Australia Plus). It also included a visit to Australia by SMG reporters to cover the Melbourne Cup for mainland Chinese audiences.

Changes made to the ABC's international programming following a review in 2017 reorientated the Chinese language output on ABC.NET.AU to be news and current affairs. For example, there was extensive coverage on the Chinese language webpages of the 30th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Further information is provided at the following links:

<https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2019-06-02/tiananmen-square-massacre-30-year-anniversary/11169964>

<https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2019-06-04/badiuca-reveals-face-amid-threats-from-chinese-authorities/11176372>

<https://www.abc.net.au/chinese/2019-06-05/tiananmen-memory-pass-on-to-young-generation/11179116>

It should be noted that the ABC online has been inaccessible in mainland China since 2018.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ABC strongly rejects claims that it or any of its programs are, or have been, influenced by the Chinese Communist Party. Such claims are without foundation. The ABC has strict editorial policies and standards and has adhered to those standards. There is no evidence whatsoever to support the assertions made in the staff member's submission, and we would also point out that the person who has made these claims does not work in news or current affairs and is not involved in the *Foreign Correspondent* program.

In terms of broader relationships - like any other government and private sector organisation - the ABC has – consistent with Australian Government policy of encouraging cooperation, increased understanding, community and cultural links – hosted high-level visits and meetings.

The ABC adopts a fit-for-purpose approach in relation to MOUs and other partnership agreements depending on the organisation. As part of our standard due diligence process, we include consultation with appropriate Australian government departments to ensure relevant factors are taken into account where necessary.