

SUBMISSION by Francis Lee, OAM

INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONS WITH CHINA
To: Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years China has opened up its doors very rapidly, both in economic and political terms. At the same time Australia has demonstrated its economic and political stability in the face of great global changes and upheavals. It is a very timely move for Australia to seek a closer relationship with China. Such a move would be beneficial to both nations.

One can look at this relationship from many angles: economic, diplomatic, political, social, cultural, trade, tourism, etc. For this relationship to succeed, it is important that we are aware of the historical and cultural sensitivities.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

From a historical perspective, China had been viewed by the west with suspicion during the early period of communist rule, even onto the time of the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution.

Australia has had a history of distrusting Asia: from the early days of Japanese invasion to our fear of Indonesia and China's expansion. There was a time when Australia referred to our northern neighbours as the "yellow peril".

The world started viewing China with a different light when the ex-US President Nixon visited China. However, his visit was preceded by one of Australia's statesmen - Gough Whitlam. China will not forget this. It could be relied upon to build up mutual respect and trust in spite of earlier attitudes.

DIPLOMACY AND POLITICS

In spite of Australia's early initiative towards China, Australia's inherent fear of Asia and communism has built up many barriers in the past, particularly in the way Australia has been seen to embrace the white, English-speaking countries such as America and Britain. In recent years Australia has done much to dispel that suspicion. Australia must continue to maintain its recognition of the one-China policy, irrespective how our other allies could change over time. The government can be commended in the recent suggestion of joint military exercise with China, and with the declaration that trade talks would not be marred by criticism of human rights. These initiatives can help to lessen suspicion.

This is not to say that human rights is not an important issue. There is a time and a place for this. While Australia may continue to seek dialogue in this area, it is important to observe the sensitivity of China in wishing to maintain a comfortable pace towards freedom and human rights. It is also unfortunate the issue of human rights has been hijacked by certain groups largely recognised as financially backed by America to embarrass China. China views these groups with great distrust and anger. Before venturing too far in the pursuit of human rights, Australia must identify these groups and consult widely so as not to be led into a diplomatic dead corner.

CULTURE AND EDUCATION

The general perception that the Chinese have of Australia is that Australia is a country rich in resources. The people are generally comfortable and highly educated, but lacking in cultural wealth. Australia is seen to want to emulate the United States in lifestyle and share the same indifference about other peoples. These misconceptions should be addressed. Australia should demonstrate to the Chinese our uniquely casual but righteous and independent national character through increased contact and cultural exchange.

Australia is a favoured place for offering education. At this moment Australia is exporting education by attracting students from China, as well as establishing educational facilities in China. Apart from being a good source of income, education can also serve the purpose of cultural interchange, and of sowing friendship among future leaders of China. Australia must boost its effort in this area by further encouraging and supporting operators in this field.

A lot of businesses have failed because of language barriers. Australia should increase effort in the teaching of second languages (especially in Chinese) and in encouraging bilingual writings and activities. Related areas include fundings for SBS and ABC in the Chinese languages, as well as fundings for translation and bilingual publications. The government should also increase resources for bilingual teaching in schools.

MUTUAL VISITS AND TOURISM

There is no better way to enhance mutual understanding and friendship than for one people to visit another place and its people. Australia should continue to promote travels to and from China. Australia should increase grants in areas that promote such activities, such as in the publication of travel and cultural information to attract more Chinese tourists to Australia, and vice versa, and in reducing travel restrictions, such as airport tax and accommodation costs in Australia.

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About the author:

Francis is the Head of the Chinese Cantonese Group at SBS Radio. He is an engineer by profession, with a Bachelor degree from Sydney University, and a Masters degree from the University of New South Wales (winning the Senior Prize upon graduation).

Francis is fluent in both English and Chinese and is a fully qualified translator and interpreter. Many years ago, while working as an engineer, he assumed a part-time radio broadcasting/journalism position, which eventually grew into a full-time position. He now pursues a full-time journalist/broadcaster/writer career. He is the founding Chairman of Asian Media Council of Australia and Vice President of Sydney Chinese Writers' Association, and Australia Community Multicultural Arts Association.

He has written two bilingual books: <English Idioms – a cultural fascination> and <English Idioms – under the lucky stars>.