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THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP
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Celebrating and remembering “The Special Relationship”

“We Westerners have been grappling with China for centuries, trying to read it, trying to engage it, trying to contain it and trying to profit from it.”

Kevin Rudd’s time as prime minister bears a striking set of similarities with that of his idol, Gough Whitlam’s. His well-crafted Labour ‘bandwagon’ campaign redolent of Whitlam’s ‘It’s Time’ was fought against a similarly conservative liberal ‘dynasty’ suffering from association with an unpopular war. Despite strong public support during their campaigns, both Rudd and Whitlam’s tenures were brief, resulting from controversial overthrows. Yet arguably the most historically significant point of propinquity between the two Labour leaders is that dimension of intimacy with China fondly recalled by both.

“My own intellectual odyssey and personal engagement with China and the region more broadly began with Gough….I watched with wide eyes on the flickering tube Gough and Margaret (Whitlam) embark on their triumphal march to China in 1973. I read every word about who Gough met and what was said.”

1. Maher, T. Another Sun - ABC Foreign Correspondent. 2005
Rudd’s reflection on his childhood connection with both Gough Whitlam and China in a speech given in 2001 shed light upon an epochal moment in Australian history that had effectively redirected Australia towards a more progressive, independent and Asia-Pacific outlook for the 20th century, just as it had veered a “starry-eyed” Queensland teenager towards diplomacy. The image no doubt seen by the young Kevin Rudd on his TV screen was of a physical and intellectual giant of a man, eagerly clapping along to a warm send-off given by a parade of Chinese dancers. Whitlam’s ALP delegation to China, welcomed symbolically by Premier Zhou Enlai, stands as a watershed moment filled with fanfare and celebration, and which echoed in a “Golden Decade” for Australian diplomacy. Since then, the relationship has transcended vested economic and political interests to a profound cultural understanding and respect. Yet, in the recent climate of uncertainty regarding China’s agenda as a rising superpower, what risks being lost is the symbol of celebration that Whitlam’s 1971 delegation represented. If anything, the course of the last fifty years of Australian diplomatic history has taught us that Australia and China must go beyond past fears and “commercial and foreign policy matters” to celebrate their past and present. To remember Whitlam’s “breaking of the ice” in China is to remember not only that “very special relationship” but to celebrate and remember the period of new nationalism, politic pluralism and diplomatic independence that sprouted from Australia, as a result of its dealings with China.

Prior to Whitlam’s delegation to China in 1971, Australian diplomacy was dominated by the anti-communist ideology of the Menzies era as well as a strong dependence on the U.S to effectively “shield [Australia] against red arrows from the yellow peril” that China posed to the region. Before becoming communist in 1949 the image of China was already linked with profound apprehension. This was reflected in the laws enacted in the 19th century by the Australian colonies prohibiting Chinese immigration and the White Australian Policy consolidated in the 20th century. By the 1950s the nation was gripped by the fear of China not only as a source of “yellow peril” but also as a northern “red menace” and the then incumbent Prime Minister, Menzies was not one to shy away from exploiting the electorate’s fears of a communist incursion, effectively “kicking the communist can” in order to remain in power. Labour opposition leader Ben Chifley, in a bid to win over the electorate was forced against recognising Communist China. Anti-communist sentiment reached such fever pitch in the 50s that Renouf, former head of Foreign Affairs wrote, “we had become in the eyes of people overseas almost more anti-communist than the Americans.” Rather than instigating friendly dialogue with China, Australia opted for a Two-China policy, thereby recognising Taiwan as

being politically distinct from mainland China. The Gallup Polls of June 1971 show that 52 percent, a majority of the public, were in favour of this Government policy. Relations with Beijing frost further with when in 1966, the Government set up an embassy in Taiwan, even though there was not yet a diplomatic representation on the mainland.

An economic connection with China was the only link existing between the two nations during the pre-Whitlam era. A lucrative wheat trade had been set up in the 1961 with the support of the Country Party and from 1963 to 1964 two-way trade between the two countries was valued at $184.6 million. There were a handful of political leaders in the mid-20th century ready to take the radical yet visionary approach to recognising China. Among them, a young Gough Whitlam, who as early as 1954 called for U.N and Australian recognition of Communist China. Over the next two decades, with growing public disillusionment towards ‘cold war’ politics, a more realist, pluralist perspective emerged throughout Western nations and Whitlam as new leader of the Labour party, sought to redirect the nation towards a more tolerant approach to China. George Blainey, first Chairman of the Australia-Council, described Whitlam around this time as the figure responsible for Australia’s transition to a period of political “calm” “almost unique in [Australian] history” which arose from “cordial relations with China.”

By the time of the McMahon administration, the Government had already singled out “the China Problem” as a “central issue in foreign policy” but was not yet sure as to how to tackle it. McMahon held a non-recognition policy to Communist China, in spite of his long-term plans to start a form of dialogue with China in the foreseeable future. Not even a “simple recognition” of Communist China, advocated by one of his ministers, was agreed to by McMahon who held no desire to “step out of the US line;” just as no member of his cabinet was willing to compromise his position by engaging with China. McMahon’s statement that “politics and trade are two separate things” received an embarrassing response when in 1970 the Chinese Government suspended their purchasing of Australian wheat. The government’s inaction and hesitancy encapsulated, however, public opinion on China at the time, with most Australians still fearful of it as a communist threat. 1971 saw a shift in international relations with China and the McMahon administration was taken aback by the positive press coverage of Whitlam’s tour in China, as well as the U.N’s official recognition of Communist China later that year; but undoubtedly they were most confounded by Nixon’s unexpected visit to China. Yet even in the wake of these events McMahon was not willingly to expediently “move in a way that [he believed] would insult public opinion.” The extent of the

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5. Ibid. p. 88.
6. Ibid. 1, p. 45
7. Ibid. 3, p. 102
Australian public’s blind dependence on America was reflected in a poll taken shortly after the Nixon’s visit to China was announced. 56%\(^1\) of those in the poll instead of the former 6% now favoured recognition of the People’s Republic of China.

In July of 1971, Whitlam took the first active step in changing the nation’s fear of China into friendship by making his milestone visit to China. More than a year prior to this senior officials and diplomats were of the opinion that there was 'an urgent need to review policy towards China'\(^2\) While this fell on the deaf ears of the Liberal Government at the time, Whitlam was eager to take up the endeavour and after receiving invaluable advice from Mick Young, the Federal Secretary, wrote to the Chinese Government who quickly replied with an official invitation. Whitlam’s China delegation consisted of senior ALP members, diplomats and a travelling press contingent that included the ABC News Crew, selected to broadcast the historic visit. The trip was not without risk and many labour party members feared that it would cause the electorate to vote against the ALP in the upcoming election. Whitlam, on the other hand, believed whole-heartedly that he could emulate the Italian and Canadian models on Chinese relations and follow the string of countries that had already successfully normalised relations with China in previous years. After an extremely publicised landing in Beijing on the 2\(^{nd}\) July Whitlam met with Premier Zhou Enlai to engage in a series of talks. Fitzgerald and Whitlam quickly realised the following:

“Current Chinese thinking seems to be that the balance should operate by competitive co-existence and avoid military confrontations….from the discussions of the Australian Labour Party delegation in Peking, it is clear that China understands the central concerns of Australian foreign policy”\(^3\)

The ALP delegation was pleased with China’s sincerity and its willingness to co-operate peacefully with other nations rather than use military aggression. Whitlam was able also to use his position to lobby for the freedom of an Australian, Francis James, who had been arrested in 1969 for alleged espionage, in a set of circumstances bearing striking resemblance with that of Stern Hu’s recent arrest. Accounts by several of the delegation describe the meeting between Zhou Enlai and Whitlam as a cordial affair. The two leaders launched into an hour long discourse on Greek mythology and France\(^4\) after formal proceedings and in celebration of Whitlam’s 55\(^{th}\) Zhou sent over a cake to his hotel. Whitlam biographer Professor Jenny Hocking called Whitlam’s visit to Beijing, a “strategically brilliant…irresistible photo opportunity that placed Whitlam firmly on the world stage.”\(^5\)


Several newspapers at home, however, responded negatively to the visit:

“Mr Whitlam has not hesitated to seek Chinese smiles of approval at the cost of Australian interests … If Mr Whitlam thinks that this wholesale selling out of friends to gain a despot’s smile is diplomacy, then Heaven protect this country if he ever directs its foreign policy.”

McMahon capitalised on the media censure by calling Whitlam a “pawn of the giant communist power” and accusing him of “instant coffee diplomacy.” Malcolm Fraser referred to him as the “Chinese candidate for the next Australian elections.” However, what the world was not yet aware of at the time was that during Whitlam’s visit, Henry Kissinger, Nixon’s advisor had been conducting covert talks with Beijing about organising a potential meeting between Nixon and the Chinese government. On 15 July, news that Nixon would himself visit China to normalise relations finally reached Parliament House and McMahon’s subsequent mortification at the news was so great that he drafted a letter to Nixon expressing his concern at the President’s failure to advise his closest of friends, namely Australia.

The tide of media opinion also changed with the realisation of Nixon’s upcoming visit in 1972. The Australian Quarterly quickly called it a “success” and one newspaper termed it as a “new course in Asia.” The ABC news crew and journalists such as Laurie Oakes and David Barnett that had travelled with Whitlam were able to capture the celebratory element behind the visit. The travelling media viewed it as an evolution in diplomacy marking Australia’s movement from catchphrases such as ‘communism’ and ‘dictatorship’, to a celebration of common ground with China. But in 1971, the Australian public was not yet aware of the significance of Whitlam’s act and this was reflected in the minimal role that Labour’s international policies played in returning the party to power. China’s admission into the U.N confirmed the ALP’s progressive action in China to be both clairvoyant and beneficial for the nation’s interests, just as Whitlam expounded it to be throughout interviews conducted in China. By the time Whitlam touched down in Australia there was a media frenzy to record Whitlam’s experiences in China and by now the press was largely supportive of his foreign policy regarding China.

Many of the Chinese immigrants who were part of the 1980s influx to Australia were teenagers during Whitlam’s visit and had never heard of Australia prior to his arrival. Emerging from the Cultural Revolution was a growing interest in the West and the well-timed visits of both Whitlam and Nixon captured the fascination of many young Chinese people. The Chinese newspapers excitedly informed the Chinese people of Australia, including with statistics and explanations of its unique culture. Some Chinese who would later become migrants to Australia recall hearing about Australia for the first time in a climate of Chinese enthusiasm. They remembered Australia from that moment onwards as a Western nation ready to positively engage with China despite ideological and political differences.

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Fraser on Whitlam. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Interview with Mr. Jun Han. 10 August 2010.
While the Whitlam administration of the 1970s carried with it a reformist attitude, arguably the most pivotal action in Whitlam’s prime ministership was the movement in December of 1972 to officially recognise the People’s Republic of China as “sole legal government of China”\(^1\) effectively opening China up to increased relations with Australia. On 31 October 1973, Whitlam returned to China, as the first Australian Prime Minister to make an official visit to the country. This time he met with Chairman Mao Zedong and his visit was publicised to a greater degree. In the same year, Stephen Fitzgerald was appointed ambassador to China, heading the first Australian embassy established in Beijing. Despite Whitlam’s dismissal two years later, Fraser continued the relationship that Whitlam had fostered. Sino-Australian relations were no longer a partisan, labour against liberal form of division, but a national issue and documents of Fraser’s briefing papers for the trip to China are detailed with the profiles of all prominent Chinese leaders, notes for pronunciation scribbled in the margins, a table of dynasties and a brief historic and cultural overview of the country, all reflecting the intense focus on China. Fraser’s 1976 delegation was a success and Mr Peacock and Mr Fraser were suitably impressed by the sincerity of Chinese.\(^2\)

Moreover, in confidential documents, the Government stated the following:

“The imperious treatment of foreign envoys and dignitaries in former times is well known. But Chinese rites had an important function … procedures are important and they are measured in such a way as to bring Chinese leaders into necessary contact with foreign leaders without irritating or disturbing the Chinese system or offending other Governments.”\(^3\)

Fraser’s mantra was to focus on mutual interests as a strategic framework towards “closer links despite ideological differences”\(^4\) This new approach to Sino-Australian relations, involved tolerance of Chinese cultural practices in politics as well as a sharing of Australian culture with the Chinese. The embassy during Fraser’s visit took the innovative approach of introducing the Chinese to Australian dishes, creating a menu of kangaroo tail soup, rock oysters, crayfish tails, Australian fruit, cheeses, wine and beer.\(^5\)

When news of Mao’s death reached Canberra in 1976, Parliament made tributes in honour of him, and in so doing exhibited what Whitlam termed as the “changing attitudes of Australian politicians”\(^6\) to China and its leaders. However, the Coalition member for Mackellar walked out on the parliament session in anger and protestation crying out, ‘Mr Speaker, Mao was a murderer.’\(^7\) Indeed, some have criticised successive Australian Governments of “politically romanticising” their relationship with China; being “unduly optimistic” and having a “double vision” towards Chinese affairs. In many ways this is true and it is a factor that led to the shattering of Australia’s optimism in its relationship with China after the Tiananmen

\(^1\) National Archives of Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; A1838, Records relating to Australia-China Affairs, 1971 - 1972, 3107/38/3 PART 7, China - Relations with Australia - Statements by Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister and other ministers.


\(^4\) Ibid


\(^7\) Ibid.
Square Massacre of 1989. The Hawke Government described itself to be suitably horrified by “the unyielding forces of repression brutally killing the vision of youth.”

The complex, and oft-interpreted ambiguous nature of Sino-Australian relations, which has only been exacerbated by China’s astronomical rise in the last few decades, has perhaps led to our nation’s fear of China as an “inhuman, greedy, omnipotent and mysterious dragon” China too has its insecurities concerning Australia, having not quite recovered from events such as the Rio Tinto affair and Uighar separatist Rebiya Kadeer’s visit to Australia. The Australian Government also classifies China as a strategic threat in its defence white paper.

Yet a profound lesson is to be learnt from each individual government succeeding Whitlam’s. Every post-Whitlam administration has sought to extend and profit from the Sino-Australian connection both economically and politically and has often used cultural activities to do so. Under Whitlam and Fraser, various cultural exchanges were promoted, including ballet teachings, missions of Australian arts writers to China and a Chinese Archaeological Exhibition in Sydney. Today, art exhibitions such as Brisbane’s “Asia Pacific Triennial” and the recent ‘Cultural Revolution - China’s memory’ exhibition at the University of Sydney are a common occurrence and a continuation of that tradition of cultural sharing. These cultural initiatives are in large part integral in reminding both nations of the undeniably special and unique nature of the Sino-Australian relationship, first celebrated in 1971. It is imperative therefore for Australia to first and foremost dispel its fears of becoming a supplicant to China and re-engage on a “basis of reciprocity” that goes beyond merely safeguarding and advancing individual interests. History and the collective wisdom of each Post-Whitlam Government highlight the necessity for nations to have bilateral forums for open diplomatic discussion.

Just as Chris Healy argues that history is embedded in the social consciousness and involves a “myriad ways in which relationships between past and present are formed” Whitlam’s remarkable actions in relation to China have become exceedingly relevant to the course of Australian politics today. They symbolise a movement away from the cold war climate of fear and suspicion as well as Australia’s abandonment of its ‘satellite’ country status. The last three decades have shown to us that we must look beyond the figures of Australia’s $68 billion economic trade with China and politically beneficial partnership to realise that what has made the Sino-Australian relationship so strong transcends economic and political gain. What is evoked in the rhetoric of politicians and diplomats alike is the memory of the cause for celebration over thirty years ago when a tall stately Australian politician, touted instigator of the Sino-Australian relationship, travelled to China rid Australia of the “habits of the past” and direct the nation towards ‘the demands and opportunities of the future.’ Just as Rudd reminisced about it as a boy in front of the TV, we too must remember and celebrate the historical event for what it teaches us today.


[Prime Minister Whitlam with Premier Zhou Enlai by his side receiving a warm send-off in China, 1973]

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Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Archival Records


Contains useful records on Malcolm Fraser’s visit to China and valuable insight into the Fraser administration’s desire to consolidate on the relationship started by Whitlam.

- National Archives of Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Central Office; A1838, Records relating to Australia-China Affairs, 1975-1978, 3107/38/1/4 PART 1, China - Correspondence between Department and Peking Embassy on its role.

Contains correspondence between Peking and Australia as well as information provided by both the Embassy and the Department concerning the nature of relations with China from 1975-1978. Provides a useful section on cultural relations with China.

- National Archives of Australia. Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; A1838, Records relating to Australia-China Affairs, 1971 - 1972, 3107/38/3 PART 7, China - Relations with Australia - Statements by Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Prime Minister and other ministers.

Provides useful insight into the Whitlam administration’s perspective on Sino-Australian relationship.

Interview:

- Interview with Mr. Jun Han. 10 August 2010.

My father, only a teenager at the time of Whitlam and Nixon’s visits to China, recalled the explosion of fascination in the Chinese newspapers towards Australia. He was able to provide an invaluable Chinese perspective on the celebratory meetings between China and Australia.

Journal Articles:


Invaluable insight into the Whitlam delegation of 1971 as well as an opinion on the future of
Australian diplomacy with China by the interpreter and chief diplomat of the ALP contingent.


*An international perspective on Whitlam’s initiatives in relation to China. Outlines the future of Labour’s foreign policy.*


*Offers a more critical view of Whitlam’s progressive foreign policy and discusses the achievements of Fraser in extending the Sino-Australian relationship. The article argues the need for continual Sino-Australian relations and that this relationship should transcend parties.*


*Provides a commentary on Whitlam’s actions in China in 1971 in relation to political events at the time*

**Multimedia:**


*This TV news footage includes Whitlam’s reasons for pushing international recognition of the Chinese Government as well as the imperative for Australia to develop closer relations with China.*

**Photographs:**


*Both pictures that capture the celebration and respect linked with Whitlam’s visits to China in 1973. They encapsulate the essence of the Sino-Australian relationship.*

**Speech**

- Whitlam, G. “It’s time for leadership,” 13 November 1972, Policy Speech for the Labour Party at the Blacktown Civic Center, retrieved from:
A party leadership speech by Whitlam which includes improving Chinese relations as part of his foreign policy agenda.

**Secondary Sources:**

**Books:**


  *An informative and clear overview of the history of Sino-Australian relations divided into the tenures of each Prime Minister since Menzies.*


  *Provides a brief overview of Whitlam’s progressive foreign policy within the context of surrounding events and attitudes of Prime Ministers. Good for a very brief, holistic perspective of events.*


  *The relationship between Australia and China in the framework of the Asia-Pacific Region.*


  *Outlines in which direction Australian foreign policy to China should head in order for peaceful and mutually beneficial relations to be maintained.*


  *Conveys the evolution of relations and the importance of maintaining the core elements of cultural engagement and friendship*

**Journal Articles:**


  *An account of Sino-Australian relations in the 1980s, including a prediction of the future of these relations.*

A useful valuable retrospective insight into the failures and the hesitant approach the McMahon administration took towards normalising relations with Communist China. It looks into detail at the events that allowed Whitlam to take such a successful and radical initiative in his visit to China.


Detailed account of Labour’s policy towards Chinese relations.


Contains different perspectives on the Sino-Australian relationship and discusses the importance of cultural exchanges in developing a relationship beyond economic and political benefits.

Lecture:


An invaluable source of information concerning the details of key diplomatic visits to China as well as the significance of certain events and decisions to both the Chinese and the Australians. Makes useful references to archival sources and documents.


Paints Whitlam as an important figure in redirecting Australian foreign policy and diplomacy.

Multimedia:

- Australian Broadcasting Services. 4 September 2009. ‘ABC bureau in Beijing celebrates 35th Anniversary. Retrieved from:
  http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2009/s2677086.htm

Explains the role of ABC in delivering the events of Whitlam’s delegation to China in 1971 and 1973.

Newspaper Articles:

Looks at the current diplomatic issues and events that could weaken Australia-China links


Rod Tiffen is a professor in Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney and his article compares past issues concerning China with contemporary ones and extrapolates the lessons that must be learned from the past.

Transcripts:


Whitlam’s view on his delegation to China in 1971 and subsequent policy towards Chinese relations.


Good for analysing the rhetoric the current Government uses in describing and embracing the Sino-Australian relationship


Acknowledges the contribution of Whitlam in starting relations with China. He also talks about his personal affinity with China and how it originated from an inspiring letter from Whitlam given to him as a teenager.
Quotes from important leaders like Zhou en Lai and Whitlam as well as providing opinions of a vast array of prominent figures in the international community about the surge of Chinese foreign policy in the 1970s.


A transcript of a radio interview between Geraldine Doogue and former president of the ALP Tom Burns who provides an insightful personal account of the events surrounding the ALP’s delegation to China in 1971. Useful as he was a prominent member of the delegation

Websites:


An excerpt of a lecture emphasising the importance of cross-cultural exchanges to maintain the Australia - China relationship in the future


Shows how the Australian media has perceived China and how this image has been influenced by the “historical baggage” between Australia and China in the past. Includes a useful cultural examination of China


In-depth and useful insight into the Australian Government’s changing perception of China.


An analysis of the Labour Party’s traditionally closer relationship with China. It provides useful information about prominent Labour party figures.