



Australia-China relations are more than just government



MELISSA CONLEY TYLER · 17 DECEMBER 2020 AUSTRALIA-CHINA, CULTURE & SOCIETY

With official relations at a new low, it is easy to be pessimistic about Australia-China relations. But there are many actors involved in Australia-China diplomacy. These connections can help provide communication channels for when official relations are frosty. They also bring economic, educational and cultural benefits.

I was at a webinar earlier this year where we were asked to rate the current state of Australia-China relations. “Terrible”, I said, thinking of government-to-government relations. “Fantastic”, said my colleague from the arts and cultural sector.

In the midst of a downward spiral in official relations, it’s worth remembering that Australia-China relations are much more than just the relationship between Canberra and Beijing.

In recent years I’ve been researching the role of new diplomatic actors in Australia-Asia relations including local councils, state governments, educational institutions, think tanks and companies. This reveals plenty happening in the Australia-China relationship that doesn’t depend on how we feel about the government in Beijing.

Sister cities

Out of Australia’s 500+ [sister city](#) agreements, [more than 100 are with China](#). Some are longstanding, with [Melbourne and Tianjin](#) celebrating 40 years, [Townsville-Changsu](#) 25 years and [Canberra-Beijing](#) 20 years.

[Sister city relationships](#) have been shown to build connections that bring cultural, educational and economic benefits. [Sister Cities International](#) has measured both the [direct economic benefits](#) and flow-on effects of these partnerships.

Looking at Australia-China relations, examples of people-to-people and cultural exchanges include the high school links between [Darwin and Haikou](#) involving an English language competition and collaborative art project, the City of Sydney's library agreement with [Guangzhou](#), and the program linking the [Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Xinghai Conservatory of Music](#).

Collaborations focusing on business and trade links include the [City of Warrnambool's](#) establishment of a local business export bureau with Changchun, and the [City of Melbourne's](#) platform for Australian start-ups to present to investors in Nanjing.

Mostly these sister city partnerships have been uncontroversial. However, earlier this year the [City of Wagga Wagga](#) briefly terminated its [32-year sister-city relationship with Kunming](#). A councillor put forward a motion to raise concerns about human rights violations and COVID-19, which [unexpectedly passed due to absences](#). Once the full council met, the relationship was reinstated.

State and territory governments

The political furore over the [Victorian government signing up](#) to the Belt and Road Initiative might make you think this is a recent development. But state governments have [always had a role](#) in promoting trade and international links both before and after Federation. State governments even have "embassies" abroad: [representative offices](#) promoting trade, investment and tourism.

China is the largest two-way partner for six of the eight states and territories, so it's not surprising that it's a focus for engagement. Victoria has a [China Strategy](#), South Australia has a [China Engagement Strategy](#) and New South Wales has a [China Strategy](#). Western Australia has an [Asian Engagement Strategy](#) that puts a significant focus on China, as does Queensland's [Trade and Investment Strategy](#) and [Asia Tourism Strategy](#).

There are sister-state relationships, similar to sister cities. [Tasmania and Fujian](#) have an almost 40-year relationship, celebrated by [President Xi Jinping](#) himself; [South Australia and Shandong](#) have been linked for more than 30 years; and the [Northern Territory and Anhui](#) have partnered for 25 years, including [university staff and student exchanges](#).

Like sister cities, these can involve a mix of trade promotion and cultural exchange. Last year, for example, [Victoria and Jiangsu](#) celebrated their 40-year relationship with an exchange of visual artists while New South Wales and Guangdong held a [joint economic meeting](#) focusing on regional development.

State and Territory governments view the economic benefits as worth pursuing, [particularly as Australia looks to recover](#) from its first recession in three decades.

International education

Education links between Australia and China continue to be strong, both at secondary and tertiary level. This creates connections that are a massive boost for [Australia's soft power](#), as former students who have knowledge and hopefully some affection for Australia rise to leadership positions.

Despite the scale of the international education relationship, it's been argued that there are opportunities [to elevate, broaden and deepen engagement with China even further](#).

At the university level, there are thousands of arrangements for [student exchange, joint research and even joint degrees](#). I attended a [University of Melbourne-Tsinghua anniversary](#) celebration recently and was impressed by the number of initiatives responding to joint challenges from public health to positive psychology.

Unofficial diplomacy

[Think tanks are significant actors in diplomacy](#). Particularly during the period of diplomatic freeze between Australia and China, think tanks have been able to keep communication channels open. Think tank dialogues, often also including officials, provide an invaluable way to send messages and understand what issues are most important to the other side.

Both at the Australian Institute of International Affairs and at Asialink, [I've met with a number of visiting delegations including think tanks](#) (like the China Institute of International Studies and the Chinese Institutes of Contemporary International Relations), learned societies (like the Chinese Society of International Law and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences), outreach organisations (like the Chinese Public Diplomacy Association) and policy-focused academics (from Peking University, Fudan University and more).

Similarly, there is a role for corporate diplomacy that should not be discounted. I've been interviewing people who have worked both as official diplomats and then as corporate representatives, and have found that corporate "diplomats" currently have better access than officials in China and can be a conduit for communication.

Speaking with many voices

There are many other areas where non-state actors have a role in promoting friendly relations. For the inspiring – and somewhat unlikely – story of taking the [AFL to Shanghai](#), there's a [book just out](#) on how Port Adelaide developed its China connections.

This is why the *Australia's Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act* passed this month is a [mistake](#). The new law requires international arrangements made by local councils, state governments and universities to be notified to the Minister for Foreign Affairs who has the power to cancel arrangements.

Our aim as a country should not be to “[speak with one voice](#)”. International engagement by multiple voices gives many points of contact and provides ballast in a relationship to [ride out diplomatic storms](#). When things are difficult at a political level is precisely when you need to maintain other connections. Australia benefits when multiple actors across society engage internationally and balance the ups and downs in official relationships.



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