ABC EDITORIAL REVIEW 26

COVERAGE OF CHINA

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Review

This is an external editorial review to examine a selection of recent ABC news reports, analysis and interviews associated with the ABC's China coverage, with a particular focus on the Australia/China relationship.

Given the extent of coverage of this issue, the primary focus of the review is on analysis and indepth coverage, rather than the reporting of day to day news events.

Content

- China If You're Listening: 7 podcast episodes aired on June 1, 8, 11, 15, 22, 29 and July 6
 (episodes 1-6 plus bonus episode) https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/china-if-youre-listening/episodes/
- 2. China Tonight: 5 episodes aired in June (June 1, 8, 15, 22 and 29).
- 3. **Counterpoint:** One episode of the RN program ("Wolf Warrior") from 10th May. https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/counterpoint/10-05-21/13332400
- 4. **Between the Lines:** One episode of the RN program ("What does the next generation think about Australia's China policy?") on May 27th.

 https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/betweenthelines/what-do-young-people-think-about-australia%E2%80%99s-china-policy/13362004
- Late Night Live: One section only of one episode of the RN program ("A new way of navigating our relationship with China") on June 1st.
 https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/a-new-way-of-navigating-our-relationship-with-china/13368794
- 6. **Landline:** One section only of one episode of the TV program ("China Tensions: Is the Australia-China trade dream over?") aired on May 23. https://www.abc.net.au/landline/china-tensions:-is-the-australia-china-trade-dream/13356922
- 7. **Conversations:** One episode of the program ("The five personalities of China") aired on May 31st. https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/conversations/jason-yat-sen-li-china-childhood-five-personalities-of-china/13357566
- 8. **Q&A:** The relevant sections of the program that aired on April 15th, called "It's Complicated: Vaccines, China and Saying Sorry." https://www.abc.net.au/qanda/2021-15-04/13298684

- 9. 7.30: Five stories from the program that deal with China.
 - Darwin Port story May 4th: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/federal-government-set-to-review-china%E2%80%99s-lease-on/13329390
 - Scott Morrison interview 12th May: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/scott-morrison-speaks-with-7.30/13341840
 - Covid, climate change, China and the G7 14th June: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/covid,-climate-change-and-china-on-the-agenda-at/13387478
 - Yang Hengjun trial 16th June : https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/yang-hengjun-faces-verdict-in-china-following/13393078
 - Interview with Frances Adamson 24th June: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/australia%E2%80%99s-most-senior-diplomat,-frances-adamson,/13418228
- 10. Four Corners: One episode ("Poking the Dragon") aired in April. https://www.abc.net.au/4corners/poking-the-dragon/13318142
- **11. ABC Online:** Eight articles on the site, as follows:
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-27/frances-adamson-ai-weiwei-paradox-of-china-tells-more/100243816
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-13/morrison-g7-china-or-us-west-no-longer-global-power/100206994
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-06/china-rule-the-world-wang-xining-globalorder/100190208
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-04/china-signals-shift-in-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/100186166
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-29/china-record-meat-imports-as-african-swine-fever-bites/100174096
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-16/australia-achieve-economic-growth-china-missing-budget-speech/100136466
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-13/australia-china-relationship-silent-influence-over-budget/100134288
 - https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-04/port-of-darwin-chinese-lease-us-army-peter-dutton/100112788

Methodology

The reviewers will have regard to <u>editorial standards</u>, but the primary focus will be on the accuracy, timeliness, impartiality and completeness of the journalism as opposed to strict compliance against the standards and principles.

Reviewers

Richard McGregor is a former journalist and an author with extensive experience reporting in east Asia, primarily China and Japan. He was the *Financial Times* bureau chief in Beijing and Shanghai between 2000 and 2009, and headed the Washington office for four years from 2011. Prior to joining the *FT*, he was the chief political correspondent and China and Japan correspondent for *The Australian*. He also worked for the ABC in radio and television in Australia and Japan. His book *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers* won the Asia Society in New York award in 2011 for best book on Asia. His other books include *Asia's Reckoning: China, Japan, and the Fate of US Power in the Pacific Century* (2017) and *Xi Jinping: The Backlash* (2020). He was a fellow at the Wilson Center in 2015 and a visiting scholar at the Sigur Center at George Washington University in 2016. He is now a senior fellow at the Lowy Institute.

Dr. Minglu Chen is a senior lecturer in the Department of Government and International Relations at the University of Sydney. She received her Ph.D. In International Studies from the University of Technology, Sydney in 2007. Dr Minglu Chen was a lecturer in Chinese Studies in the Department of International Studies at the University of Guadalajara, Mexico in 2008-2009, a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Government and International Relations in 2009-2012 and a lecturer in the China Studies Centre in 2012-2016 at the University of Sydney. She is the author of *Tiger Girls: Women and Enterprise in the People's Republic of China* (Routledge, 2011) and co-editor of *Middle Class China: Identity and Behaviour (Edward Elgar, 2013).*

Alan Sunderland is a journalist with forty years' experience at SBS and the ABC. A former Political Editor at SBS, he was most recently the Editorial Director of the ABC from 2013-2019, with responsibility for overseeing editorial standards across the organisation. He has been involved in several editorial and content reviews for the ABC.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The Australia-China relationship is important and wide-ranging, evolving rapidly on numerous fronts since diplomatic ties were established in 1972.

China is Australia's largest trading partner, accounting for around one-third of our trade with the world. The two nations have had a free trade agreement in place since 2015.

Australia is one of the few countries that run trade surpluses with China.¹

¹ ABS media release: https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/exports-showing-steely-resolve

More than a million Australians have Chinese ancestry, and around 40% of those were born in China.²

As China's diplomatic and military power have grown and relations with the US and its allies become more confrontational, Australia's security and political ties with Beijing have come under increasing stress.

On the Australian side, there have been calls for a more rigorous international investigation into the origins of Covid-19 in Wuhan, accusations that Chinese communications company Huawei represented a security risk, concern over the influence of China in Australian politics, and concern over China's treatment of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In response, China has stepped up its public criticism of Australia and imposed a series of tariffs and other import restrictions that have significant impact on a range of Australian export industries.

Media coverage of the escalating problems in the relationship has been extensive and also become more challenging. The ABC, like other Australian media organisations, has had no resident correspondents in China since late 2020; in the ABC's case, for the first time since 1973.

This review provides an opportunity to look some of the more substantial coverage produced by the public broadcaster on this issue.

There are obvious challenges in providing insightful, accurate and balanced coverage of issues involving significant areas of national security and national interest with heightened rhetoric on all sides.

This review will consider whether the ABC's analysis and longer-form reporting of the issue demonstrated sufficient accuracy and an appropriate diversity of perspectives. It will explore whether sufficient time and focus was devoted to the issue, and whether there were other angles, aspects or elements which merited more or better coverage.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ABC's China coverage demonstrated an impressive depth and range of content, with new programs commissioned to explore aspects of the Australia-China relationship in addition to the coverage normally delivered by existing long-form and current affairs programming.

All reviewers felt this was to be commended.

There were no significant lapses in editorial standards apparent, although from time to time some reviewers pointed to issues of accuracy or ways to improve the range of perspectives included.

For the most part, the issues raised in this review go to ways in which the reviewers felt the content could have been improved, added to or expanded to ensure more insight, depth and comprehensiveness in its approach.

² ABS data:

Individual comments and analysis from each of the three reviewers can be found in the sections dealing with specific pieces of content, but some of the overall themes of the reviewers' observations relate to:

- The desirability of hearing from as broad a range as possible of expert views and analysis on China (this was particularly noted in the online opinion pieces, but also evident elsewhere);
- The need to seek out richer and more diverse voices representing a range of Chinese perspectives from both inside and outside of China. Good examples of where this was achieved included *China Tonight* and *Between the Lines*;
- The importance of attention to detail on key historical and factual issues, to avoid oversimplification that could prove misleading;
- The need for a more sophisticated understanding of the nature and structure of the Chinese governing system and the ruling communist party, and how the economy works.

It is clear that the absence of ABC correspondents on the ground in China is having an impact on coverage. This is, of course, not currently under the ABC's control. In their absence, it is more important than ever to cast a wide net for different opinions and perspectives, to ensure that the most obvious and simple perspective (that China can only be seen through the prism of being 'the enemy') is replaced by more insightful and useful analysis. The detailed review points to occasions where this was achieved well, and those which could have been improved.

The review concludes with some broad recommendations based on the observations of the reviewers.

DETAILED REVIEW OF CONTENT:

ABC News Online analysis articles

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-04/port-of-darwin-chinese-lease-us-army-peter-dutton/100112788

Andrew Greene wrote this piece, looking at the future of the Darwin Port, currently operated by a Chinese company. A 99 year lease was given to a Chinese state-owned company in2015. Many criticised the decision at the time, but heightened tensions mean the decision is back in the spotlight. The lease is now being officially reviewed.

This story explores the tensions below the surface within Defence that have always been there since 2015, but it also looks at the likely impact of Dutton taking over as a particularly hawkish new Defence Minister.

The story flags that any change could draw 'the most furious response yet' from Beijing.

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-13/australia-china-relationship-silent-influence-over-budget/100134288

This piece by David Speers explores the underlying impact of the deteriorating Australia-China relationship on the Federal Budget. He says that China is rarely

mentioned in the budget documents, and yet the deterioration in the relationship "permeates" various aspects, including the risk assessments and the increases in defence and national security spending.

In particular, it looks at what may be happening with iron ore, with vaccine capacity, and with security measures.

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-16/australia-achieve-economic-growth-china-missing-budget-speech/100136466

This piece from Stan Grant came just a few days after the Speers piece and takes a different perspective.

In this case, while Speers notes that the Government is taking active steps to 'protect' itself against China while being careful not to acknowledge that, Grant focuses on the growing and inevitable importance of China to Australia, and our failure to properly acknowledge and constructively engage with that.

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-05-29/china-record-meat-imports-as-african-swine-fever-bites/100174096

This is a fairly straightforward piece from Landline which explains the growing Chinese demand for red meat. One of the main points to take away is that there is potential for the Australian industry to benefit, if we can get past some of the current trade wars affecting that sector.

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-04/china-signals-shift-in-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/100186166

This piece comes from China Correspondent Bill Birtles, and analyses a recent speech from Xi Jinping for signs that he may be softening the country's tough diplomatic approach, colloquially referred to as "Wolf Warrior".

It starts by suggesting that Xi's speech heralds a desire to rein in the more aggressive nature of China's foreign policy and become less confrontational, but then the bulk of the analysis indicates this is unlikely to be the case.

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-06/china-rule-the-world-wang-xining-global-order/100190208

Another Stan Grant piece, this time off the back of an interview on China Tonight with China's Deputy Ambassador to Australia, Wang Xining.

Grant refers again to the notion of a "historical hinge-point" with China about to emerge as the dominant world power. He puts China's aggressive and overly-sensitive approach to the world in a historic context, and the overall sense of the piece is that the rise of China is inevitable and needs to be accepted as such. He portrays much of the views of the West (including Australia's) as backward-looking and outdated.

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-13/morrison-g7-china-or-us-west-no-longer-global-power/100206994

The third Stan Grant piece in this list. This one deals with a key foreign policy speech by Scott Morrison and makes it clear that, essentially, Australia has chosen the US over China. In his analysis, there is a looming and unavoidable problem that he believes no one is properly facing up to: China will economically become the dominant player, and yet it is excluded from many world multinational organisations on trade and other issues because it is not Western or democratic. It teases out the issue well, without pointing to any solutions.

• https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-27/frances-adamson-ai-weiwei-paradox-of-china-tells-more/100243816

The final Stan Grant piece in this collection, comparing the views of China expressed by former Australian Ambassador Frances Adamson and Chinese dissident Ai Weiwei. His central notion here is that China cannot be both 'insecure and defensive' and 'aggressive and dominant'. This piece argues that the former view is based on an outmoded idea that liberal democracies are still ascendant in the world.

Sunderland felt that in the Greene piece on the port, there was no official Chinese comment, or any voices in support of the port arrangement (other than those at the time). He felt that six years of operation might have provided an opportunity to review how the arrangement had worked in practice including by reference to those who continue to support the arrangement, and whether any real world issues had arisen.

He felt that the two budget pieces, from Speers and Grant, worked together well in exploring the need for Australia to do much more to publicly deal with the issue of our relationship with China, while making it clear that the main thing we are doing at present is taking cautious steps back from engagement.

Overall, **Sunderland** noted that in the absence of senior correspondents on the ground, the weight of ABC online analysis on China is coming from Stan Grant.

His noted that his writing is informed, insightful and regularly seeks to draw a big picture to provide challenging context about the rise of China. The central premise – Australia needs to wake up and realise that Western liberal democracies no longer call the shots – is undoubtedly right, but at times the restating of this view in several pieces meant there was a certain sameness to them. He felt that the ABC's online news coverage would benefit from a wider range of voices and perspectives. For example, the ABC has a relationship with The Conversation and regularly runs pieces from it. The Conversation runs a lot of analysis on China from expert sources, and perhaps some of it might have been considered for inclusion here.

McGregor considered that by and large the articles were intelligent commentaries and analyses. He agreed with Bill Birtles on the 'Wolf Warriors' – there was less than meets the eye in Xi's latest declaration on propaganda. He thought that Stan Grant wrote well but, like **Sunderland**, thought he had to be careful about writing the same "big picture" column many times over. In the case of the columns about the budget, **McGregor** wondered whether there could have been mention of the Treasurer's leadership ambitions, and the way that moulds his views on China at a time when there is little upside in internal domestic politics in saying anything positive about our largest trading partner. The same goes for Dutton on Darwin. Dutton's hawkishness – as reported in the article – has a domestic context as well.

Chen felt that most of the pieces were impartial and insightful, while noting occasions where there was an opportunity to hear from more established experts (as in Birtles' piece). In several pieces (the Darwin port story, the Wang Xining interview and the Grant piece on Morrison and the G7), **Chen** felt that at times the analysis moved too quickly and easily into a "drumbeats of war" characterization.

7.30 Stories

• Darwin Port story May 4th: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/federal-government-set-to-review-china%E2%80%99s-lease-on/13329390

This story started with the recent comment by Department of Home Affairs Secretary Mike Pezzullo that, in relation to Australia's relationship with China, 'the drums of war' are beating. It went on to look at the implications of the growing concern about China on the deal (struck in 2015) to give a Chinese company a 99 year lease to operate the Port of Darwin.

It teased out the details, revisiting the official evidence given to a Senate Inquiry into the issue some years ago, and making clear that, officially, the Defence Department has not raised any concerns about the situation.

It then teased out two contrasting views, using ASPI's Peter Jennings, who it made clear had opposed the deal from the outset, and Jason Yat-Sen Li, who pointed to the impact the revisiting of the port deal and the general 'war rhetoric' about China could have both on trade and on the local Chinese Australian community.

Sunderland described it as a good summary of the issue, and an appropriate diversity of perspectives.

However, **McGregor** felt that the story had diverted from a core point of the issue, which is whether the Chinese lease represents an ongoing security risk;

and if it wasn't when the purchase was approved, is it now, and why? What's changed, other than the fact that the bi-lateral relationship has deteriorated? This echoed a similar concern **Sunderland** expressed in relation to the online article on the port, which he felt had failed to explore in more detail the reality of whether the lease had in fact proved to be a security risk in the years since the arrangement was put in place.

• Scott Morrison interview 12th May: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/scott-morrison-speaks-with-7.30/13341840

This interview with the Prime Minister was dominated by other domestic issues – the budget, the vaccination rollout, Brittany Higgins and Andrew Laming. The issue of China came up at the 16-and-a-half minute mark of the 21 minute long interview, and lasted for approximately 90 seconds, so it was a very small part of a wide-ranging interview. Despite the importance of the other issues canvassed, **Sunderland** felt there was an argument to suggest that the China relationship issue warranted more time. The questions were primarily focussed on whether the Prime Minister had personally sought to intervene in the matter to help improve the relationship, and whether he shared some of the more pessimistic assessments of the chances of war between China and the US. The PM said he always stood ready for further talks with Xi Jinping, and referred back to formal expert advice of the current state of China.

Chen praised the interview, describing it as "a good example of journalists holding politicians accountable" through the use of challenging questions. But **Chen** also noted that as China is not the focus in the interview, there is not enough space to provide an overall picture of the PM's approach to China.

Covid, climate change, China and the G7 14th June:
 https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/covid,-climate-change-and-china-on-the-agenda-at/13387478

This was essentially a story summarising the outcome of the G7 meeting, and Australia's involvement as an observer. Once again (as with the standalone Morrison interview a month earlier) the China issue was a minor one compared with the others issues canvassed (which included Covid, climate change and border policies). It was largely framed in terms of the difference in approach between the last G7 with Trump and the latest one with Biden, and included a grab from Biden warning of the growing risks and problems about China's behaviour on a global stage and its human rights abuses at home.

• Yang Hengjun trial 16th June: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/yang-hengjun-faces-verdict-in-china-following/13393078

This story, from China Correspondent Bill Birtles, was a story about the fate of Yang Henjun.

It was a fairly straightforward summary of this case, featuring input from a range of analysts. **McGregor** wrote "that the story did well in not presenting Yang's case as a simple good-versus-evil morality play, as short news items inevitably do. Yang's treatment in detention is a black-and-white issue, but Yang himself and his career is altogether more complex." The only relevance for the wider story was the passing suggestion that the poor state of Australia-China relations may lead to a longer sentence being imposed, although this was stated as a tentative and hypothetical possibility.

Chen said 'through discussing the Yang Hengjun the story looks at the bigger issue of the political and economic disputes between China and Australia, which is a good perspective'.

 Interview with Frances Adamson 24th June: https://www.abc.net.au/7.30/australia%E2%80%99s-most-senior-diplomat,-frances-adamson,/13418228

This was a wide-ranging interview with a former senior diplomat with extensive experience of China. Specific discussion of China took up about half of the interview, and Adamson made two key points. The first was that, despite the 'war' rhetoric, she did not believe that hawkish security experts had too much influence on Australia's relationship with China, and secondly that Australia had been broadly right to call out China on certain key issues, as China was currently facing the need to temper its exercise of power against smaller nations. Her comments about China's sense of "insecurity" and its need to conform to international norms were subsequently challenged in a piece Stan Grant wrote for ABC News Online three days later.

Sunderland noted that there was an advantage for readers/viewers to have the benefit of both Adamson's views and Grant's critique of them, but viewers of 7.30 would not necessarily have come across the latter.

McGregor wrote that he "would have like some more direct questions about whether DFAT has been marginalized in the China debate. We got little of that,

but Ms. Adamson may have had little to say about that (it was an edited interview) and the reporter had many other topics to cover."

Chen raised one issue, which was the comment by Adamson that "I think there is no reason why the Chinese people shouldn't feel confident to take their place as a major power in the community of nations, but to do so in a way that absolutely respects the rights of smaller countries." **Chen** said this "confuses the Chinese state with the Chinese people".

China If You're Listening

In relation to the podcast as a whole, all three reviewers were positive in varying degrees.

McGregor wrote "The series is, by and large, excellent. Deeply researched, well written and produced with sophistication and skill. It is also witty, but in the service of story-telling without trivializing the issues being reported. Bevan manages to compress lots of complex subjects into shorter and accessible vignettes. He has also assembled a good mix of voices, from high office to ordinary citizens, to give the narrative the kind of breadth that it often lacks in political reporting. I particularly liked the episode on international students, and the way Australia has mishandled them."

Sunderland said "I found this an excellent series and a particularly useful addition to the ABC's output. It filled a much needed gap by providing historical background and context to an important issue for a general audience. I thought it was an example of something the ABC should be encouraged to do more often."

Chen commented that despite saying it aimed to reveal how and why the China-Australia relationship came to collapse, the podcast mostly explored China itself, rather than both sides of the relationship. "Such an approach is fine," writes Chen, "as it is necessary to understand China's history, politics and society to make sense of its foreign policies." However, Chen felt two things undermined the program to some extent – some inaccuracies or arguable assertions, and the lack of more expert academic voices and analysis on key issues like Taiwan, the economy and Xinjiang. Chen said she was making this point "not because I am obsessed with academia. But it is important to show the audience not only what things are like, but also why things are the way they are."

All three reviewers had specific comments on different episodes, some of them critical.

JUNE 1st:
 The series began with an in-depth profile of Xi Jinping. The episode then went on to lay out what was coming next – an examination of the Australia-China

relationship. One clear point it foreshadowed was that China's treatment of Australia was unlikely to be all about us – "Kill 1 to warn 100".

Chen felt that this episode, at times, presented material as fact when it was more open to debate. For example, Chen argued that it was incorrect to depict Bo Xilai as Xi Jinping's clear rival for the top leadership, as "before Bo's fall it was already clear that he wasn't considered for the top position by the Party elders." She also said there was no evidence that Xi himself had purged Bo. Similarly, Chen felt there were others apart from Xi who could lay claim to being the most powerful leader since Mao – Deng Xiaoping being an obvious one. In the discussion of Xi's rise to power, Chen also felt that other key elements could have been included, such as his anti-corruption campaign.

JUNE 8TH:

A piece that compared Tiananmen Square with the Uighur situation in Xinjiang and used the latest situation as a way of pointing to the current dilemma Australia faces in getting the balance right between calling out Chinese human rights abuses and maintaining trade.

McGregor had some detailed criticisms and concerns over the decision to compare Tiananmen with Xinjiang. He wrote that he found the comparison jarring: "Bevan says Beijing used the same playbook to cover up details about both atrocities. To quote: 'The cover (of 1989) was so successful that it encouraged the Chinese to try it again.'

In truth, the two events, and the way the world learnt about them, are starkly different. Bevan says: 'When Tiananmen Square happened in 1989, the western world knew very little about it.' In fact, the military crackdown on protesters in Beijing happened live on CNN. This was preceded by months of on-the-ground reporting of the mass protests which led up to it. By contrast, knowledge of Xinjiang's re-education camps emerged slowly and gradually, the result of painstaking reporting by journalists and human rights activists, helped by Uighurs who were the target of the campaign. To be sure, Beijing attempted to erase history in both cases, but that's really where the comparison begins and ends. Also, it is stretch to say that the current phase of the oppression of the Uighurs began with Xi's coming to power in late 2012 and 2013. The reeducation camps didn't start until 2017. Finally, why does much of the media – including Bevan here – keep talking about the 'Tiananmen Square massacre'? It has been well documented for years that few if any protesters were killed in the square. The 'Beijing massacre' is the accurate shorthand for 1989."

Chen said there was a risk of over-simplification in this episode, as it appeared to present Hu Yaobang's death as the cause of the Tiananmen Square protests,

when the issue was more complex and included factors such as "inequality, economic stagnation, corruption and so on".

In relation to Xinjiang, **Chen** said there was a need for more historical background to explain the issue. She wrote "there is a sentence that 'the Uyghurs spent the first half of the 20th Century trying to gain independence'. This is the only historical background provided about the Uyghur-Han ethnic tensions in China in the whole episode. Behind this simple sentence there is a much complicated history of the Qing Empire and the Republic of China governments' territorial claims and weak control of the country's peripheries. To describe it this way is not just oversimplistic, but it gives the wrong impression that the current tensions are caused by the Chinese government's illegitimate territorial claims. There is no analysis of the Chinese government's unsuccessful ethnic policies since 1949."

JUNE 11th:

This was a 'bonus' episode dealing in depth with Bob Hawke's Tiananmen cable.

JUNE 15th:

This episode was all about trade and, in particular, iron ore.

It used a handful of key incidents, anecdotes and examples (Tieling New City, Stern Hu, the worst and most lurid moments of the Great Leap Forward) to spell out the importance of steel to China's economic and social future, the importance of Australian iron ore to that, and the size and significance of the trade to our relationship.

Sunderland expressed one reservation about this episode, which was the reliance on the views of Dinny McMahon to drive the economic analysis. He commented that "out of interest, I spent a little time looking at some of the online reviews of his book. One of the criticisms is that he focuses a great deal on the unproductive used China puts steel to, without too much countering discussion of the many productive uses they put it too. In my view, others (particularly economists) may well have a different view on the extent to which China's growth is unsustainably debt-fuelled, and it might have helped to hear some more diverse views in this episode."

Chen felt that the rubber chops example that opened the episode was an unnecessary form of "othering", depicting China as different to Westerners in ways that showed their "business culture and practices lagging behind". As a matter of fact, the seizure of the rubber chops has kickstarted a lengthy legal process and the dispute over the control of Dangdang continues. The situation is much more complicated than presented in the program, that whoever has the chop would be rightfully in control of the e-commerce platform. Also, it is inadequate to compare China's current economic growth with the Great Leap

Forward and reduce it to an "irrational push for infrastructure building". This is a superficial and oversimplistic understanding of China's economy. Infrastructure building is only one of the many factors of China's growth, others including manufacturing and exportation, the size and scale of China's domestic market, the Chinese government's experimental policy making, etc. These two issues combined begged the question of how and why China had become such a rising power that a whole program was devoted to it.

• JUNE 22nd:

This episode explored the role companies in China under Xi Jinping play in helping to make the country great, and the impact this has had in the Huawei saga. Using Huawei as the example, it discussed the Australian decision to ban Huawei completely from 5G development, the impact this had on other countries, and the ongoing ramifications in terms of a growing technological cold war.

JUNE 29TH:

This episode looked at Chinese students. It traced the history from the 1960's onwards, dealt comprehensively with Australian racism and its impact since the end of the White Australia Policy, and also teased out the impact on Chinese students of political pressure both here and at home.

Chen felt that the issues raised in this episode needed to be separated out and dealt with in more depth – students as "commodities", racism in Australia, and Hong Kong protests. By combining them, **Chen** felt that "it almost suggests that the Chinese students deserve such a treatment."

JULY 6th:

The final episode in the series considered whether the US and China might go to war over Taiwan.

It began by teasing out the South China Sea impasse and then went on to explain the history behind the Taiwan dispute. Finally, it speculated on whether recent more aggressive behaviour by China over Taiwan has the potential to spark a war.

McGregor had some concerns about the way Taiwan and its constitution was depicted in this episode. He wrote: "Bevan's account of the Republic of China (Taiwan's) constitution is misleading. He makes great show of the RoC constitution and the fact that it claims to encompass all of China. This is scarcely technically true any longer – the constitution has been revised several times since the 1990s. But it also misses the bigger point. The RoC constitution's claims are all but meaningless. They do not reflect any significant political constituency in Taiwan. The constitution survives because it provides the government in Taipei a convenient fig leaf by which to keep Beijing at bay. In other words, if

Taipei – especially with the anti-unification party now in government – were to ditch the constitution, it would be tantamount to a declaration of independence, and a thus a trigger for Beijing to declare war. For the same reason, the US also supports the maintenance of the current RoC constitution. This may sound like nitpicking, but it is at the core of the status quo which has preserved the peace across the Taiwan Straits for decades. Hence, it is strange to hear Bevan describe the current situation as "nonsensical." It is perfectly logical once the political context is clear."

China Tonight

Overall comments from the reviewers:

McGregor praised the format and style of the show, feeling it filled a much needed gap. He said "Much of the reporting on China in Australia resembles a blood sport which is not unfair, as it accurately reflects the deep mutual antagonism between Canberra and Beijing. But there is more to the China story. In this environment, China Tonight is refreshing. The program is chaired by an anchor with extensive journalistic credentials, and with experience on the ground in China, Stan Grant, so it can handle big issues like Xinjiang, and interviews with Chinese diplomats like Wang Xining. Commendably, it also features lots of fresh voices, mainly smart, young Chinese-Australians who are otherwise missing from most of the Australian media.

By focusing on how issues are debated inside China itself, on social media and the Internet more generally, viewers can get a glimpse of the world beyond day-to-day censorship into all manner of social phenomena, like male beauty vloggers and gaming. As much as the CCP might try to persuade us otherwise, 1.4 billion Chinese do not live their lives solely as instruments of the party-state.

The program often treads a narrow path between relaying Chinese propaganda and uncritically regurgitating it, but I think it manages to pull this balancing act off. I also believe it is worth listening to official Chinese narratives. Only by internalizing such language can Australians start to get a sense of political and media themes in China and the significance of how they change over time. If you want to understand the PRC, then you need to grasp its official language and propaganda."

Sunderland agreed, saying he really liked "the idea of a softer, more magazine-style program that focuses less on the big geo-political challenges and controversies about Australia and China and instead looks for quirky, light-hearted and informative ways of exploring Chinese culture, economy and society. The use of local Chinese Australian reporters is excellent, the trialling of a number of lighter and more engaging presentation techniques is to be welcomed, and the range of unusual and unexpected topics provides a richer and more nuanced understanding of China." At the same time, he expressed some reservations about whether one of the drawbacks

of the approach is that more serious and substantial issues were not given the time they needed to explore them in depth. **Sunderland** wrote that the program "recognises that it cannot completely ignore a range of big and troubling issues, and so most weeks it will touch on these as well. The resulting mix can feel underdone and unsatisfying. The key interviews are short, the serious packages are often relegated to the end, and they sometimes feel very superficial and at times even perfunctory (one question on a key sensitive issue, with no in depth follow up)."

For **Sunderland**, one example of this was the interview with Deputy Head of Mission at the Chinese Embassy, Wang Xining. The interview, he said "canvassed a large number of issues in a small amount of time – Australia/China tensions, trade bans, Huawei and Uighurs – and the format did not allow any of those issues to be covered beyond one or two initial and very broad questions."

Like Sunderland, Chen had reservations about the program mix, saying "entertainment and politics don't mix well, not when discussing China...the program tries to cover too many topics at the same time, and consequently we don't get an in-depth analysis on each one. Although leading scholars are interviewed, they really don't get to say much at all." Despite that, Chen praised the overall intent and style of the program, saying "China Tonight is trying very hard to present a balanced view on China and discuss China's broad social and political issues. It covers a vast range of topics, from rural-urban divide, to animal rights, from censorship to technological development. It includes voices from China. It often involves academics who provide the crucial background information of and a necessary analytical approach to the topics discussed. And some of these academics are the world's leading expertise in the field-- for example, Louise Edwards on feminism and Anita Chan on labour relations. It makes a genuine effort to show the nuance and complication of these issues. For example, in Episode 3, Jinghua Qian talked about how despite the censorship, it was still possible for a Chinese reporter to cover sensitive social issues and it was important to distinguish censorship and self-censorship. And Stan Grant often facilitates the discussion, without turning it into a moral judgement and/or rushing into any quick conclusions. All these are to be congratulated."

One final specific issue raised by **Chen** was the choice of Wang Xining and Liu Xin to "present the other side of the story". As official spokespeople for the state, they were very restricted in what they could say, and the types of questions asked to them clearly would not be able to generate more in-depth discussions and innovative insights.

Discussion of individual episodes:

• June 1 episode:

The premise behind this program is to provide insights into China's thinking, what is happening inside China, and how China is viewing world events. Although

Australia's relationship with China is clearly an important part of this, it is not the only factor, and the issues canvassed range from the trivial to the serious. It is pitched as an accessible, engaging and entertaining magazine-style program. Accordingly, the program usually begins with a wrap of the issues Chinese citizens are talking about on social media, in this case ranging from the introduction of a three-child policy to a group of wandering elephants and the reunion of the TV show 'Friends'.

More seriously, the news-style summary at the head of the show also briefly discussed tensions in the China/Australia/New Zealand relationships, the new Hong Kong Bill dealing with political candidates, and the Chinese space station. The first item after these brief summaries was a piece on the emerging stand-up comedy scene in China.

The next piece was an examination of population trends in China in the context of the new "three child" policy.

That was followed by an interview with Deputy Head of Mission at the Chinese Embassy, Wang Xining. The interview canvassed a large number of issues in a small amount of time – Australia/China tensions, trade bans, Huawei and Uighurs.

The last segment, "The Century of Humiliation", was a brief outline of China's sense that it suffered international humiliation and intimidation for over 170 years, and its determination that it would never happen again.

• June 8 episode:

After the usual summary of issues and events making the news on social and mainstream platforms (Tiananmen anniversary, Gaokao student exams, covid, the city/rural divide, the first item was about video gaming and how it is handled in China.

This was followed by an interview with former Hong Kong legislator Ted Hui about the state of political freedom in Hong Kong.

A short item about Chinese propaganda cartoons was followed by a final piece looking at gender equality inside China. This was a good example of the program's extensive use of Chinese Australian reporters.

• June 15 episode:

The "what's making news" section this week covered protests over college mergers, dragon boat festivals, and the dispute between NATO and China.

The first story covered house prices in China, where the main pressure comes from the Government in trying to prevent people from buying too many houses and pushing up prices.

The second item dealt with the media in China, and how censorship and restrictions affect state media, local informal reporting, and foreign outlets. The next piece looked at Uighurs in Xinjiang. A comprehensive summary of the situation was followed by an interview with Surya Deva from the UN, who talked about the call for serious allegations against China to be investigated by independent experts.

The program finished with a short visual piece looking at male beauty vloggers in China, and leadership concerns over this.

• June 22 episode:

The usual news wrap (which included brief coverage of the raids and arrests involving Apple News and the Dong Jingwei defection) was followed by a light story about dog ownership in Chinese households.

An interview with Ai Wei Wei followed, which canvassed both his art and the political problems that led to his exile from China.

There was a brief interstitial looking at Jack Ma's controversial banking comments and subsequent temporary disappearance, and then a package about 6G mobile technology. Finally, another video brief on the People's Liberation Army.

• June 29 episode:

The news summary at the head was dominated by the 100th Anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party.

The next item was an interview with Liu Xin, one of the key presenters on China's CGTN English language network,

The interview was followed by the usual "what's trending" summary, and then a little piece about Hollywood films vs. Chinese films. It was particularly illuminating in terms of revealing the amount of self-censorship and editing Hollywood does in order to get its films in front of the lucrative Chinese market A video interstitial on the Great Wall of China followed, and then the final story, which dealt with attempts to continue to promote local manufacturing inside China.

Other Long Form Programming

Q&A 15th April

This was a program that dealt with a range of topics, as Q&A always does. Australia's relationship with China was one topic, as was covid vaccination and assorted other topical issues.

The program, hosted by Hamish Macdonald, included two panellists with expertise on China:

- Journalist and researcher, Vicky Xu
- President of the Australia-China Business Council, David Olsson

Also on the program was James Paterson, Coalition senator and the Chair of Parliament's Intelligence and Security Committee.

The China issue emerged at about the halfway point of the program, with a question from student activist Drew Pavlou, who asked why Australian companies can in good conscience continue to do business with China given what is happening to the Uighur people in Xinjiang Province.

Olsson responded at some length, decrying the situation in Xinjiang and calling for independent international investigation, but he stopped short of embracing the term 'genocide', pointing out that the Australian Government had similarly stopped short of using this term. Xu claimed that only Australia and Turkey had 'had a vote' and decided against using the term genocide, and claimed we had done this for economic reasons. She went on to explain that she had personally been described as a 'female demon' for writing about forced labour in Xinjiang, and pointed out that businesses that wanted to continue to work in China but avoid the use of forced labour found it very difficult to do so. She went on to explain her personal experiences.

Macdonald threw straight to Paterson after that confronting and challenging testimony from Xu. He said it was hard to see what was happening in Xinjiang as anything other than genocide, but that the Australian Government's long-standing policy was that a declaration of genocide should come from a court not from a government.

Olsson was then asked to react and he joined Paterson in condemning the persecution of Xu.

The program moved on to a second question, which was essentially about how the West and Australia constantly focus on China's bad points instead of its good points.

Xu took strong issue with the question, saying Australia had been anything but overly critical, and the current situation had more to do with accelerating human rights abuses in China than anything the West has done.

Olsson pointed out that China had indeed done many great things and lifted its people out of poverty, and there was a lot of China-bashing going on. Gallagher was brought into the conversation at this point, and once again the issue of whether or not 'genocide' was the right word dominated.

Norman Swan made some good broad points about the difference between the Chinese regime and the Chinese people.

Another question came from a Chinese entrepreneur in the audience, Tony Tan, who described the way the Chinese Government invests heavily in new technology.

This shifted the conversation on to issues of industry support and R&D, and shortly afterwards the program moved on to another topic.

McGregor praised the program's handling of three key China-related issues – Xinjiang, the achievements of China, and the benefits of overseas students. He said that "It is hard to fault the host's handling of this segment. The questions about Xinjiang and genocide might have had an element of 'gotcha' about them, but the panelists should have been well prepared for that, and not all of them were. The representatives from the business community and the ALP were (rightly) pushed on this issue. Most of the panelists were given a reasonable opportunity to speak overall. "

Sunderland, on the other hand, felt that too often the understandably rapid nature of the format meant that some opportunities to explore issues more closely were lost. One example, for him, was the issue of the extent to which Australian companies should do business with China. He wrote: "The pointy end of the discussion was on how Australian businesses and the Australian Government could juggle their desire for economic engagement and trade with China with their need to condemn growing human rights abuses. This was covered in a superficial way, but the opportunity for more challenging and probing questioning was lost.

In my view, this was partly due to the format of a forum-style discussion program (the need to involve all panellists, the need to maximise the number of questions asked and topics covered) and partly because the search for a political gotcha moment over who was calling I genocide and who wasn't served to draw the discussion away from more meaningful issues."

Chen would have liked to hear more from Vicky Xu, saying: "obviously she is invited for her opinions about human rights in Xinjiang, but it's disappointing that the audience doesn't get to know what research she has conducted and findings her research has revealed, not least because foreigners currently don't have access to Xinjiang to review what is happening." **Chen** felt an opportunity was missed to move beyond the human rights issue to a broader discussion about the China-Australia relationship.

Four Corners 26th April

"Poking the Dragon" was a comprehensive deep dive into Australia's trade relationship with China.

Stephen Long's story focussed first and foremost on the real-life impact of China's trade bans and tariffs on businesses in the barley, red meat, wine, coal and lobster industries.

Having demonstrated the impact of the trade war, he then explored the reasons for it and how it was likely to proceed.

There was praise from the reviewers for the choice of talent for the program and the focus on the real world impact of the Chinese trade bans. In particular, the choice of Scott Waldron as an expert voice was a good one, and the tension and interplay between Metcalf and Golley worked well.

Overall, the program was seen as a good one, providing a comprehensive deep dive into an important issue.

Chen said "It good to see this program takes a human approach to reveal how the souring bilateral relationship has an impact on people. Foreign relations are not just about faceless states, it is also about people who have to bear the consequences of policies. This is often missing in public discussion of Sino-Australia relations. This program also does well to present two different academic opinions on how to deal with this relationship. Towards the end, the presenter has made a comment that many business owners had refused to be interviewed, some afraid of reprisal from China and others a backlash from home. This is an intriguing point. It's a pity it's not unpacked here."

However, both **McGregor** and **Sunderland** commented on the absence of any examination of Australia's political and trade actions leading up to the Chinese bans. Although praising the program overall, **McGregor** wrote "Well before the current tensions, the Chinese complained about the 100-plus Australian dumping cases against their producers. Should the program have talked more about Australian actions which led up to the Chinese sanctions?" **Sunderland** echoed this concern: "I note that there are other assessments that position China's actions as, at least in part, a response to Australia's extensive use of anti-dumping measures against China. This piece in The Conversation is an example. I would have liked a little more time and a little more diversity of opinion in exploring this issue."

Sunderland also noted "the lack of any significant Chinese voices in the story. With the exception of the brief case study of the Chinese wine maker at Orchid Wines, there were no Chinese or Chinese Australians commenting in the story."

Counterpoint 10th May

This episode of Amanda Vanstone's program included a 15 minute discussion of the proposition that China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomacy was largely the cause of the deterioration in the Australia-China relationship.

The 'talent' was Wagas Adenwala, Asia analyst with the Economist Intelligence Unit.

This was a discussion that focussed very much on regional alliances and the ways in which different countries are reacting to China's show of power.

There was an extensive and useful discussion of the QUAD (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) involving Australia, India, Japan and the US. **Sunderland** commented that more of an explanation of QUAD and its history might have helped, but overall it was a rich and useful discussion.

McGregor noted, in passing and for the record, that "Confucius did not say: 'May you live in interesting times.' (In fact, the phrase itself is apocryphal.)" Similarly, **Chen** also noted that the correct Chinese expression is "kill a chicken to scare the monkeys", not "to scare the rabbits".

Chen also noted that the views of Peter Jennings appeared to be relied on heavily, being referred to several times in the program, but otherwise "the program is fine. The guest not just provides opinions on these issues on Sino-Australian relations, but he does a good job to explain the basis of these opinions. And he makes a good point about the wolf warrior approach of China's foreign policy is 'to actually pander to the local population', which is largely missing in media commentary."

Landline 23rd May

An exploration on the impact of the trade bans on Australia's agricultural industries, from Jon Daly. It came almost a month after Four Corners covered similar ground at greater length.

The differences in approach of the two programs were clear. While both did a good job in describing the impact the trade sanctions are having on Australian farmers and businesses, Four Corners spent much more time examining the root causes of the sanctions and bans.

Landline, on the other hand, focussed more on the sense from farmers that politics should have been kept out of trade, and leaders on both sides had made matters worse by their public comments.

McGregor described the episode as straightforward and informative, a good mix of voices and an accurate sense of the tensions in the debate. He noted that "the program also helpfully explained the phenomenon of "trade diversion" which is important to understanding why China's coercive measures against Australia have so far proved ineffective." **Sunderland** agreed

it was a solid program, but added that it might have been useful to explore in more detail with key farmers whether they thought there was any role for politics or human rights in trade issues. **Chen** liked the story, saying the "program tries to understand the bilateral relationship from the Australian perspective. It doesn't focus on the political elites, but ordinary people. It presents facts, rather than speculations."

Between the Lines 27th May

This Tom Switzer program focused on the view of the next generation of Chinese and Chinese Australians to the state of China-Australia relations.

The program spoke to two Chinese students who were studying or had studied in Australia – Yuki Cheng and Yidi Yan.

McGregor praised the program and the choice of guests, adding that it was a good idea to give younger Chinese-Australians, with opposing views, some airtime. He felt that it was an interesting interview with an impartial compere.

Chen's view was similar. She wrote the program "provides an interesting perspective, by putting two young students in a conversation/debate. The presenter facilitates the conversation without making any judgements, and leaves it to the audience to make their own conclusions. The guests are well chosen, both being very well spoken and able to make and defend their arguments. From the information revealed in the discussion in this episode, Between the Lines seems to be good at bringing together policy makers and academics from both sides to provide a balanced view."

Sunderland also felt the choice of guests and the theme for the program was excellent, and was pleased to see the time being given to young Chinese and Chinese Australians. However, he also felt that there were missed opportunities to dig deeper and the tone almost felt too polite. He wrote "the end result was that the two guests answered a series of fairly broad questions in a fairly broad way, and there was almost no interaction or dialogue between the two, despite them being chosen for having quite different perspectives (Cheng was a young Liberal with a family that settled in Hong Kong, and she was strongly opposed to the CCP, while Yan was a mainland China student currently in Australia, whose views were much more likely to be supportive of China, to the extent of dismissing 'freedom of speech' as essentially a Western concept. I think there were missed opportunities to explore their different views in a more personal and meaningful way."

Conversations 31st May

This program, as is typical of its format, consisted of an extended conversation with one of the more well-known Chinese-Australians, Jason Yat-sen Li.

As is typical of Conversation interviews, this was primarily an opportunity for Jason to tell his own life story. But at the beginning and the end, there was some broader exploration of China and about the Australia-China relationship.

He began by outlining his framework of the "5 personalities" of China – the ancient civilisation, the PRC, the leader of the developing world, the financial juggernaut and the "herald of the high frontier" – the doer of good in the world.

At the heart of this was the notion that it makes no sense to relate to China as a giant monolith that acts in one way for one reason.

After the discussion of his own life, the interview returned to broader themes at the end. He discussed the resurgence of anti-Asian sentiment, explaining how it was different and more insidious to the more overt, cartoonish racism of Pauline Hanson. He teased out the risk of it creating alienation among the very Chinese Australians we should be working hardest to keep on side, and then finished with a proposal that in an ideal world, one thing we could do to improve relations with China was to establish a post-Covid travel bubble.

All reviewers found this to be a straightforward and engaging program that explored issues in a personal and insightful way. **Chen** particularly liked the way the program humanised the issue, saying the program made the important point that "when looking at China, we should avoid monolithism and black-and-white interpretations. And it differentiates between state-to-state and people-to-people relationships. There is a clear effort to understand why China acts the way it does and where it comes from. Jason Li's discussion of his family's experiences in the Sino-Japanese war has given China a human face. This is a genuine attempt to examine the Sino-Australian relationship from a human perspective."

Late Night Live 1st June

This explored the views of David Brophy, the author of "China Panic: Australia's alternative to paranoia and pandering".

Despite pointing to legitimate concern over China's human rights record, Brophy argues that the national security perspective has come to dominate the relationship over the past few years. The notion that China is "coming after our democracy" is over the top.

He argues that China is not really threatening Australia in the way that people talk about, but this is being played up in order to suit Australia's agenda in the region.

During the interview, Adams put the view that foreign policy is set by the 'elites' rather than by human rights activists or the people, and pointed out that business clearly wants to continue to trade with China, while the defence industry wants to keep the tensions up.

Brophy says there is an alternative to either viewing China as an economic saviour or an existential threat.

In the main, this seems to revolve around a decision to stop 'using' our relationship with China as a means of bolstering our relationship with the US.

He stands up for people's rights to protest and oppose China's behaviour in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, but question's whether China's relationship with Huawei is any different to the West's relationship with its tech companies.

At its heart, Brophy's approach is basically to question the national security obsessions we have about China, rather than the human rights concerns.

Chen admired the program's approach, saying "it is a real attempt to understand and unpack China-Australia relations, with a focus on understanding not just what things are like, but why things are the way they are. What makes it stand out is 1. it's critical, but not judgemental; 2. It offers as much an analysis as possible – which is the value of having a good academic as the guest and the presenter not having obvious bias and presumptions."

McGregor described the program as "An informative interview with a prominent critic of the government's China policy and mainstream views. A little cosy at times, but at a moment when the political debate over China policy is largely bi-partisan, it is important that the ABC feature criticism of the dominant narrative."

Sunderland felt it was "useful contribution to the debate, but the one obvious question that was not asked of him was whether he felt that, under Xi Jinping, China's approach had changed. The entire discussion looked solely at Australia's side of the relationship. To some extent, the rigour of the interview was undermined slightly by the clear sense that Adams and Brophy's views of the issue were closely aligned."

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Look for opportunities to provide more reporting and analysis of China itself, beyond the issues of international affairs and our bi-lateral relationship.
- 2. Seek out the broadest possible range of views and perspectives, particularly in online analysis.
- 3. In particular, devote more time to reporting and analysing the Chinese economy and political system and the policy announcements of the Chinese Government.
- 4. Maximise the use of diverse Chinese voices in ABC reporting, including Chinese-Australians.

order to better coordinate China coverage across programs and content areas.	

5. Provide a mechanism for ABC programs to share information, ideas and priorities in