

BY SALVATORE BABONES

Chinese Students Enrich Western Universities in More Ways Than One

China-bashing is back on the agenda in Australia, with controversies raging over Chinese contributions to Australian [political parties](#), Chinese investments in Australian [real estate](#), and Chinese attempts to buy strategic Australian [infrastructure](#) assets. There are also fears over Chinese [surveillance](#) of Australian military exercises. Now even Chinese students are caught in the crosshairs of suspicion.

In a July 31, 2017 op-ed in the *New York Times*, China expert [Merriden Varrall](#) of Sydney's Lowy Institute [accused Chinese students](#) of "importing a pro-Beijing approach ... that is stifling debate and openness." Dr. Varrall suggests that "Chinese students self-censor or monitor and report on their peers," not because they will get in trouble if they stray from the Party line, but because they "believe that speaking out against the officially approved view ... is inappropriate."

Varrall's article is symptomatic of a rising moral panic in Australia about the political activities of Chinese students, both on and off campus. One Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) [video](#) warps a Chinese student activist's sincere, straightforward account of Chinese government support for student organizations into a scary movie, complete with ominous music and inflammatory headlines.

Another [ABC report](#) tells the stories of Chinese students and recent graduates in Australia who keep in touch with their local consulate, who are skeptical of Falun Gong allegations of Chinese atrocities, and who support the ruling Communist Party of China. It implies that these students are agents of Chinese government "soft power."

A report in the *Australian Financial Review* [decries](#) a Chinese student's threat to boycott a pharmacy that had a stand offering free newspapers linked to the Falun Gong and the decision of some Chinese students not to sublet a room in their apartment to a political dissident. The Australian press has also run several reports [expressing concern](#) over a nationalist video published by a Chinese PhD student in Australia.

Similar concerns are expressed by media outlets in the [United States](#) and [United Kingdom](#), but Australia is Ground Zero for the new red scare. That may be because Australian universities are so dependent on Chinese students to make ends meet. Chinese student tuition fees contribute roughly [10 percent of the total revenue](#) of Australia's universities, and up to 30 percent of all tuition paid at top institutions.

In effect, Chinese students float the entire Australian university system, subsidizing Australian students, professors, and administrators with their high international student

tuition fees. In return they are [often excluded](#) from participation in campus activities, criticized for struggling to master formal academic English, and confronted with blatant racism in their host communities. It's no wonder that many Chinese students turn to their local consulates and government-supported Chinese Students and Scholars Associations for help. They may have nowhere else to turn.

No Crime to be Patriotic

China is not a democracy, and the Chinese government routinely denies many of its people basic human rights that the citizens of Western countries take for granted. The Chinese government likes to highlight human rights abuses in the [United States](#) and other countries, but these abuses do not make up for its own shortcomings. China falls far short of twenty-first century human rights norms.

That said, it is not a crime to be Chinese, for Chinese students to take pride in their country, or for Chinese students to agree with the positions taken by their own government. It is just as acceptable for Chinese students to engage in political speech at a Western university as it is for anyone else. Western universities should be proud that their Chinese students are politically engaged, whether or not most Westerners agree with their opinions.

The greatest wealth that Chinese students have to offer Western universities is not in their wallets or their parents' bank accounts. It is in their minds. And they are eager to share it.

Student demonstrations can be unruly and sometimes get out of hand. But shout-down tactics like those used by some [Chinese students](#) to oppose "Free Tibet" demonstrations are also widely used by [American students](#) to exclude conservatives from speaking at US universities. They are also used on [Australian campuses](#) by anti-Israel demonstrators.

And can ordinary Chinese students be blamed for not wanting to share their private living space with people who are dedicated to overthrowing their government? If fellow students ever demand to have Chinese democracy activists expelled from school, universities should stand firm. But all people have the freedom to choose their housemates.

In a world where Western governments routinely encourage their citizens to report potential "extremists" to the police, and even set up [special hotlines](#) for that purpose, it should not be surprising that some Chinese students think they should report anti-regime activity among their fellow students. There is little evidence that the Chinese government actually encourages this kind of spying, and no evidence that it systematically cultivates it.

Ultimately, Australian and other Western universities must ask themselves whether they prefer quiet students who sit in the back of the classroom hoping not to be called on, or actively engaged students who have strongly-held opinions. In a liberal society, the answer can't be "actively engaged students who have the right opinions." The relative merits of Chinese and Western models of society are actively debated in the global intellectual space. They should be actively debated on campus as well.

Educating the Whole Person

Debates over how society should best be governed are becoming increasingly open on Chinese university campuses, if not in the classroom then at least in the lunchroom. It would be a shame if Western universities were to start moving in the opposite direction. Large class sizes and the push for more vocationally-focused education are steadily silencing classroom debates in many Western countries. Let's hope that university campuses at least remain open.

If Australian and other Western universities want to encourage Chinese students to share Western values, they should work harder to integrate Chinese students into these vibrant campus spaces. This means encouraging Chinese student organizations, not stifling them. It also means engaging Chinese students in campus society more broadly.

For example, most Western universities are teeming with student theatrical productions, but it is rare to see a Chinese student on stage. It might be too difficult to teach an English language learner to play Hamlet, but anyone can play Polonius. Campus societies and clubs make little effort to integrate Chinese students into their programs. They can do much more.

People don't learn values in the classroom. They learn values from their peers. The more Chinese students interact with Western students, the more they will learn from them. And the more Western students will learn in return. The Western students may even get the better of the bargain.

Chinese students at Western universities are already very aware of Western values, whether or not they share them. Most Western students know woefully little about China. As a result, the greatest wealth that Chinese students have to offer Western universities is not in their wallets or their parents' bank accounts. It is in their minds. And they are eager to share it.

About The Author

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