

**10th Australia-China Transcultural Studies Symposium & 9th Foundation
for Australian Studies in China Conference**

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Venue: Parramatta City Campus, Western Sydney University, Australia

OPENING ADDRESS

**Famous Last Words
Australian Studies in China, 1984-2064**

Emeritus Professor Nicholas Jose

It is an honour to be asked to speak on this occasion and I'm just so pleased—not that I'm speaking, but that this occasion is happening. The 9th Foundation for Australian Studies in China Conference and the 10th Australia-China Transcultural Studies Symposium: those numbers—9th and 10th—record show something started 10 or more years ago is continuing. Despite difficulties of many kinds, we-you-together have managed to keep things going. It is being done differently, with two separate strands combining and one happening in Australia for the first time. In that way the organisers and participants have adapted to changing circumstances. I congratulate the many organisers, thank our hosts and commend you all for being here.

I was on the ground when these twin initiatives got going a decade or more ago. I remember speaking at the book launch of *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian Century* (edited by David Walker and Agnieszka Sobocinska) at the

University of Melbourne late in 2012 when we heard the news that David Walker would be the inaugural BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies in China at Peking University, with the first FASIC conference in sight. The following year I was at Beijing Foreign Studies University for the inaugural CATS/ACTS meeting, after an agreement was signed with the University of Adelaide to run joint symposia alternately in Beijing and Australia with a focus on ‘transcultural studies’. The title reflected BeiWai’s strength in intercultural studies over many years and a feeling among researchers in Australian Studies in China that it was time to move beyond the inside/outside binary in favour of something more dynamic and more porous, as befitted those globally more expansive, more mobile times. It was clear that Australian Studies in China attracted not only students of Australia in both countries but also those in Australia engaged with China, whether as academics or in a professional capacity, and many others besides. The Australian Studies in China community encompassed journalists, translators, artists, writers, teachers, diplomats, business people and more, some of whom were part of a Chinese diaspora with connections to Australia, some of whom were Australianists from other countries, including Japan and the United States. It made sense to think broadly and innovatively about the possibilities for Australian Studies in China.

That was ten years ago. Since then things have changed in ways that have surprised—and disappointed—many of us. More on that in a moment.

When Prof Jing Han invited me to be one of the speakers at this event she told me that her symposium theme would be ‘Past. Present. Future.’ I liked the theme. I said I assumed I would be there to represent the Past and that was ok. Actually the direction of my talk tonight is the future, but I want to get there from the past.

My own introduction to Australian Studies in China came forty years ago when I first approached the Australia-China Council about the possibility of going to China to teach. I had visited the People’s Republic of China in 1983 and seen the future, or at least a different future for myself then. With the help of Dr Jocelyn Chey at the ACC and Prof Hu Wenzhong, founder of the Australian Studies Centre at BFSU, and Prof Huang Yuanshen, founder of the Australian Studies Centre at East China Normal University Shanghai, I went to China in 1986 where I taught Australian literature and other things. In 1988, by then working as Cultural Counsellor at the Australian Embassy in Beijing, I helped Prof Hu and the newly formed Association for Australian Studies in China organize the first Australian Studies Conference in China, at BeiWai, attended by an impressive array of Chinese and Australian delegates, many of whom are still around. It got off to a good start.

That wasn’t the absolute beginning of Australian Studies in China either. The Oceanian Studies Center (OSC) at Anhui University had already been active in

the field from 1979. Other Chinese organisations under various ministries had resources allocated to understanding Australia and the region better and Australia reciprocated in its way. This was part of China's massive century-long commitment to acquiring knowledge of the outside world: a commitment to education and research, including language study, which continues to this day and in which Australia plays its part. The interest in Australia was an exception but the rule. And China's concept of Oceania extended to New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and other parts of the Pacific, so there was a context to Australian Studies in China and China's educational and cultural interaction with the region that you don't always find in Australian Studies in Australia.

Fast forward to today and we read recently in *The Australian* newspaper that 'China has the largest Australian Studies program outside Australia, with almost forty studies centres and about 250 "Australianist" scholars'. According to the authors of a new book *How Australia is Studied in China*, edited by Prof Richard Hu and Diane Hu, this development is regarded as 'a very successful example of cultural diplomacy'.¹ That may be true, but it is as much due to the curiosity and determination of many Chinese scholars as to Australian efforts. Australian Studies in China has a life of its own, even as it must manage its

¹ 'Despite tensions, Australian studies thrive in China – but not the other way round', *The Australian*, 4 September 2024.

existence in an ever-changing environment of policy, funding and institutional support arrangements on both sides.

When I look at the speakers and their topics at this joint symposium, I'm struck by the extraordinary variety and innovation on display. Yet I also see continuity—of participants (many friends whom it's good to see) and thematic concerns—where the present grows from the achievements of the past.

Australian Studies in China has evolved in distinctive ways which are continuing and being redefined by what's happening now. Australian Studies in China has not only a life of its own but an identity of its own. Can we say what that is?

Looking back from 2024 I am aware how relationships—institutional, intellectual, personal—have been maintained from one generation to the next. We see continuity in the areas of interest—literature, for example. We see change, with the new attention given to First Nations research and the concern with the experience and representation of Chinese in Australia. When we look into the future, I can only guess. What do we imagine for 2064, for example, if we get that far—if we manage to avoid catastrophe? In speaking of what I personally hope for, I can only be gradualist. Perhaps that's predictable. For 2064 can only speak in generalities. I trust that China and Australia will both survive in recognisable form, although no doubt much changed. To get there I

hope for peace, achieved through the harmony and balance that comes with good management and the good relations that come with dialogue and exchange. That we'll be well-informed about each other. It may sound utopian, but really it's not much more than a continuation of what we're trying to do in the present. It's about maintenance, about keeping things going for the common good in an unpredictable and threatening world.

I put my faith in that, in the continuance of gatherings such as this, talkfests if you like, small steps maybe, so there can be a 20th conference of Australian Studies in China and a 30th and a 40th and a 50th, when some of you will be in charge. 2064 may seem a long way off, but as I learn when I look back to 1984, I can reliably say of 2064 that it will come round soon enough, hopefully bearing the fruits of our efforts today.

Chinese civilisation has survived for thousands of years, even in the face of existential crisis. There are lessons to be learned there, including perhaps taking a long view of ups and downs. In Australia, Indigenous civilisation has survived against the odds over many millennia into the twenty-first century. There are lessons to be learned here too. Yet I would suggest that continuance has become a source of anxiety in contemporary Australia, where the future is not clear or certain. That is particularly so following the rejection of the Indigenous Voice to Parliament in the referendum last year. It stopped a forward-looking process

of recognition in its tracks. Now people are asking where do we go from here. For many Australians that failure related to history—a refusal to recognise the truth of the past and how it persists into the society we are today. For some people that failure is folded into the damage done to the environment too, within the larger dangers of climate emergency, precarity and extinction. These are concerns of Alexis Wright’s novel *Praiseworthy* (2023, winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award for 2024), for example, as hopes and fears for her people’s future play out, and China appears as a refuge in the dreams of one character.

Continuance is necessary but difficult. That’s why I call this talk ‘Famous Last Words’. Because whatever I say, it’s likely to go another way.

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It has been a turbulent few years for Australia-China relations. In Australia an anti-China rhetoric spread through sectors of government and the media to universities, arts organisations and opinion- and decision-makers of all kinds. China was once again outside Australia’s comfort zone, beyond understanding. Some of us were surprised that the change of attitude could happen so quickly and so completely. There had been resistance, I knew, fatigue, pushback—what I would call stupidity in some cases. I felt it at an event at Sydney University to

mark the 45th anniversary of diplomatic relations in 2017 when Malcolm Turnbull as Prime Minister was quoted as saying to Linda Jakobsen, director of the now defunct China Matters thinktank, ‘China’s just too hard.’ Before we knew it, China was not only in the too hard basket, China was in the deep freeze. Australia had reverted to another comfort zone, insular and too easy.

One upside, though, was the belated recognition that Australia has its own China here at home, in the form of the broad and deep network of people-to-people relations, including many Australians with Chinese background and extending out across the Chinese world. China was not only not going away, it was here in ways we needed to understand better. We have had to think again about who we are and where we are and how to realise our potential more effectively. That is the message of the National Foundation for Australia-China Relations with its strategic pillars of ‘Improving China Capability’ and ‘Engaging and enabling our diverse communities’.² It builds on last year’s report for the Australian Academy of the Humanities on Australia’s China Knowledge Capability which showed pretty decisively that our China ‘capability’ has gone seriously backwards in recent years. What is ‘China knowledge capability’? The report, with its university focus, defines it as the ability to: ‘generate knowledge about China that meets our distinctive needs ...

² <https://www.australiachinafoundation.org.au/about>

and train enough graduates in foundational, specialised, and core China knowledge so that Australians are adequately informed as citizens and at work.’³ Note the emphasis on spreading the knowledge out widely. In her foreword to the report Frances Adamson, former DFAT Secretary and Australia’s Ambassador to the PRC, puts it in a nutshell: ‘China knowledge allows us to orient our relationship effectively towards positive outcomes.’ It involves everyone.

Reciprocally too, knowledge of Australia helps China orient relationships towards positive outcomes, large and small. Such knowledge helps us understand where the other is coming from, how we see each other, how we regard each other. It is an obvious and fundamental thing, yet often goes missing.

There’s a connection between Australian Studies in China and Chinese Studies in Australia, evident in this gathering, that continues through the Academy report and the National Foundation’s aims. The local context can also be writ large. I think, for example, of veteran political analyst Perry Anderson’s recent review of the new biography of Zhou Enlai by the Chinese historian Chen Jian’s in the *London Review of Books*, where Anderson quotes Chen Jian as calling on

³ <https://humanities.org.au/our-work/projects/australias-china-knowledge-capability/>

‘the West ...[to] make a serious, sustained effort to understand China’s perspectives and problems’ this century. (12 September 2024).

For Australia that should just be what we do and do well. Yet the Academy report concludes that at present ‘the whole adds up to so much less than the parts’. (p.86) Why is that? Perhaps it’s because there are more and more parts. The Chinese world is vast and various and connects with Australia today at so many different points. Its presence is dispersed—everywhere, yet disaggregated and not always visible or understood. In general we have failed to incorporate the Chinese dimension into Australian life as a whole, as part of our common narrative and purpose. This omission takes some doing, given the omnipresence of the trade relationship and all the human flows that contribute to it. This is a larger, more diffuse problem than the embattled Chinese studies programs can fix on their own. As the report states, ‘the capability build will succeed or fail depending on the actions taken in Universities’, as a starter. The solution must extend further, into society, even when politicians fail, with a sense of the enduring presence and value of the Chinese world for Australians, lived and absorbed every day.

Against that background the present gathering is a bright hope and WSU’s Institute for Arts and Culture is a shining light. The lens of arts and culture lets us see a variety of Chinese and Australian perspectives and creates the inclusive

spaces we need in which Australians with Chinese background become more readily part of the whole.

Let me quote a favourite passage from Eric Rolls's sprawling two-volume history of the Chinese in Australia: 'Without the Chinese,' he writes, 'Australia would be a lesser country.'

For one thing, it is unlikely that we would now hold the Northern Territory. Until Chinese diggers made gold mining pay, there were suggestions that this wondrous stretch of country should be sold to relieve the insupportable costs of upkeep.

Chinese vegetable growers saved the goldfields from a disaster of scurvy and later, by producing three-quarters of the vegetables eaten in Australia for the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, they probably saved the whole country. For years Chinese cooks and gardeners improved life on stations all over Australia, even in the remotest areas. Chinese fishermen introduced the first fresh fish to towns and cities both on the coast and inland; in Queensland Chinese farmers grew the first rice, maize, peanuts, pineapples and bananas and demonstrated what could be done with these crops. They received no thanks while they were doing it, and they have received no recognition since.⁴

This places the Chinese at the heart of Australian agriculture, pastoralism and mining, the industries that made Australia, making Chinese-background Australians integral to the society's survival and success, not an add on. Rolls was writing another sort of history for Australia, acknowledging other timeframes and geographies of travel and ways of doing things that we can retrospectively consider as continuous with where we are today. Since his time,

⁴ Eric Rolls, *Flowers and the Wide Sea: vol 2, Citizens* (UQP 1996), p.viii.

writers and researchers of Indigenous history have shown what is possible, reclaiming voice, overcoming racism.

Australian Studies through a Chinese lens enhances the understanding of how this society was formed and how it continues to form. It brings into the frame the connection with Chinese histories and communities elsewhere. The work of organisations such as the Chinese Australian Historical Society, the Museum of Chinese Australian History in Melbourne and Sydney's new Museum of Chinese in Australia is having an impact. In creative interventions such as the adaptation of Wong Shee Ping's 1910 Chinese novel *The Poison of Polygamy* for the Sydney Theatre Company stage in 2023, or the revisiting of *The Burrangong Affray* on the gold fields by contemporary visual artists Jason Phu and John Young Zerunge at Gallery 4A, the Chinese history of Australia is becoming available for reinterpretation in the present.

It continues as recent history with the ongoing mobility of people in response to crisis and opportunity across a range of push-pull factors. One generation's present quickly becomes the next generation's past. Over time the line between Chinese migrant and Australian citizen disappears. Through interaction and relationship, one becomes the other, each in their own way. The hope is that the population as a whole appreciates the benefits, overcoming prejudice and discrimination. That is why China knowledge capability is needed across

Australian society, beyond the corralling that often occurs. Australian Studies in China can bring Chinese perspectives on Australia to the wider community, including academics and policy-makers, in a transcultural transfer.

China is there—here—in Australia’s past, present and future, just as Chinese civilisation is inseparably part of human achievement, for everyone. My own life has been immeasurably enriched by Chinese thought, practice, knowledge, arts—the arts of living that come with Chinese culture. A world of learning, an inheritance, a set of relationships that is, or should be, available to all Australians, I hope. To be cared for and supported—across the curriculum and across the board.

How do we get to that bigger picture, a relationship of value rather than transaction? Certainly education is part of the answer, and the arts and community activities. My message is continuity. But continuity does not mean repetition or sameness. It is rather about finding the pathway to something new that comes from understanding what has gone before and continuing the larger purpose. Continuity, continuation, continuance. Continuance is the less common word. It suggests a process and a result. I take it here from a poem by Rosemary Dobson that she published in 1984 for a poet friend when they were reading translations of classic Chinese poetry together, especially the work of Li Bai. Around that time Dobson visited China. In her mind the landscape of Tang

poetry merged with the landscape around Canberra. In ‘Translations under the trees’ she writes:

Pollen brushed from the table
Flies off to make forests
In faraway countries;
May change a landscape.

Poems blow away like pollen,
Find distant destinations,
Can seed new songs
In another language.

That’s what she calls *The Continuance of Poetry*.

To conclude, let me mention another anniversary from another part of the Chinese world. This one I came across in a visit to Tainan in Southern Taiwan earlier this year. The city is celebrating the 400 years since Dutch colonisation marked a new beginning there. A complex history of interaction between competing groups of Europeans, Indigenous Taiwanese, Chinese and others was on display in a fascinating exhibition called "Transcending 1624: Taiwan and the World". On loan from a private collection in the Netherlands was a painting known as “Junius Baptising the New Christians (Aboriginal Taiwanese) at Formosa” (1643) ⁵ It is attributed to a Dutch artist and a Chinese artist working together. It was a surprise to come across it in the National Museum of Taiwan History in Tainan and to be asked to contemplate the continuities it suggests,

⁵ It depicts Dutch missionary Robert Junius performing the religious rite on a group of Siraya people in the 17th century.

including parallels with Australian history, in another version of transcultural encounter. A long view can also be an alternative one.

I'll leave you with images of two happy outcomes from the more recent past: Writers Alai from China and Alexis Wright from Australia in conversation through translator Li Yao at the fourth China Australia Literary Forum (CALF) in Guangzhou in 2017, which had as its theme 'Other Worlds', and the publication of the double memoir by the same Li Yao and David Walker, with Karen Walker, under the title *Happy Together: Bridging the Australia-China Divide* (MUP 2022).



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HAPPY TOGETHER

Bridging the Australia-China Divide



David Walker *and* Li Yao
with Karen Walker

Thank you.