Matt Smith
Welcome to Asia Rising a podcast of La Trobe Asia, where we discuss the news, views and general happenings of Asian States and Societies. I’m your host Matt Smith.

Australian Studies is a well-established area of learning in China and today's guest is a leading authority on the study of Australian perceptions in Asia. David Walker is a Professor of Australian Studies at Deakin University, he was previously the inaugural BHP Billiton Chair of Australian Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University and continues to teach a master's course there. He's found that students in China are eager to learn more about Australia.

Professor David Walker
The network of Australia studies centres and programs is really quite a large one in China. I used to say, and still say, that there are more Australian study centres in China than there are in the rest of the world combined. The number varies a little bit depending on how you count them but there are about 40, upwards of 40 Australian study centres across China. Some of them are quite substantial, so Beijing Foreign Studies University has a fully made program, undergraduate courses, PhD students in Australian studies.

Renmin University has a strong program, Peking University hosts the Chair of Australian studies, East China Normal University where you've been recently, has a very strong Australian studies program. So there are probably maybe 12 to 15 that you'd put in the really quite strong, well established, ongoing centres with significant research and teaching interests in Australia, and there'd be another group that are more recently established but have a quite strong presence in their institutions. So broadly speaking it's a pretty strong program and should be better understood in Australia I think, given that we have this quite worthwhile, well established, Australian studies program in China.

Matt Smith
What sort of topics are Chinese students interested in when they want to learn about Australia?

David Walker
Well a very wide range of topics. I mean the programs began understandably around literature and linguistics. This centre was established in 1983 so it has a strong literature, linguistics origin, but it's now diversified into a MA program that has history, international relations. The MA that I'm teaching is on Australia as an Asia Pacific Nation.

So there's quite a broad range and it's now I think understood in China that you can move into those territories without getting into too much difficulty in a way, there used to be a sense I think that literature was a safer field, you could discuss literature and writing without getting into terribly contentious questions, but now I think there's a feeling that you can pretty well discuss any topic within that; politics, economics, history, international relations framework, along with the cultural studies, literature, linguistics fields as well.

Matt Smith
There's a lot of countries that are vying for China's attention and Australia thinks about China more and more for quite a fair few reasons. Can you give me some sort of sense of what China thinks about Australia, if at all?
David Walker

China does think about Australia, it might not be as much as Australia imagines that China thinks about us, but there's a recognition that Australia is an Asia Pacific Nation, so it's understood; particularly among students that I talk to of course, it's understood that Australia is part of the region.

It's understood that the Australian reliance on China economically is pretty strong, but Australian investment in China is also considerable and I had a Chinese colleague say to me very recently that 10 years ago Chinese students would not necessarily have thought of studying in Australia, that it wasn't really priority destination for them. But now Australian Universities were recognised as being worthwhile institutions. Australia was a good place to study, it was a safe place to study and as a country with quite large Chinese communities that they could fit into comfortably, so in the major cities; Melbourne in particular, I think there's a very strong sense that Australia is a friendly, congenial kind of place and a good place to study.

The number of Chinese people when you meet them who say they've got a cousin or a nephew or whatever, working in Australia or studying in Australia is considerable.

Matt Smith

I think the Australian perspective, there's considerable amount of fear of the unknown of what China could present though. What do you think about that?

David Walker

There's always been a measure of unease about what the rise of China might mean for Australia and of course a lot of people appreciate that the rise of China has been a very good thing for Australia because the economic relationship has been so strong and even those who are sometimes sceptical about the fact that there was a global financial crisis, will rush to recognise that it was China that was to a degree responsible for saving us from recession.

So I think there's pretty widespread recognition in Australia that China really matters to us. There have recently been; as you would know, some rather dissident notes added to that discourse which suggests that there's something dangerous or suspicious or troubling about China that we should be wary of and I think that's a concern because, the strength of the relationship maybe through the height of the boom was very considerable. Relations with China were very good, the diplomatic relationship was very strong, free trade agreement etc., but I think if the economic, it's not exactly a downturn in China, but if the slowdown in China continues there may be an opportunity there for those who wish to express some kind of scepticism about China or air their suspicions about China, might become emboldened to do so.

I think there's that potential in Australia for the naysayers to start speaking more loudly and airing their concerns, many of which are very, very old and have been around obviously since the late 19th Century in one form or another.

Matt Smith

Yeah, well China's got a long history with Australia going back probably to the goldfields, so 1840's or so. Do you teach that aspect of that here and the Chinese are they surprised at all to find out how far back Australia's relationship goes?

David Walker

There is an interest in the depth of the relationship because a lot of them don't have a good sense of that historical background and quite a few Chinese students said to me; and I've discussed this
in particular at Peking University, they were very interested in that history.

They are also less concerned about the racial prejudice that was exhibited towards the Chinese than I might have imagined, they kind of understood that it was a historically generated hostility that belonged to its period, that Australia had moved on from that but they were nonetheless interested in it expression of hostility and cultural animosity.

I think it's also, going back to that earlier point about Australian studies in China, it always seems to me now that the depth of that relationship in ways that are often not terribly clear, help create those connections, help enable all of those Australian study centres in one form or another. And the comparison for me is South Korea where we have a very strong economic relationship up there, number three in the hierarchy or whatever of trading partners, but there's no significant history of interconnection between Australia and South Korea. So South Korea has one Australian studies centre and one Australian studies program.

Matt Smith
Where's that at?

David Walker
At Yonsei University in Seoul. And in fact it’s really quite interesting because I think the difficulty of building that connective tissue if you like, is so much harder in a society that has no history to look back upon, no shared history.

Even if that history has had its very difficult moments, even if there is prejudice, hostility and nastiness, it's still a shared history it's still something we can talk about and examine and analyse. Whereas in the South Korean situation, there's a kind of vacuum and that's pretty hard to do much with a vacuum, it's clear that program which I've visited, really struggles to establish a presence and particularly so as South Korea is so focussed on the US. So for us to get a toe hold there is both very important and very difficult. We've got one here and it really matters to us I think.

Matt Smith
You had a book out a few years ago that you had some challenges while you were getting it translated. Is that true?

David Walker
That is right.

Matt Smith
The content?

David Walker
Yeah that’s right. I mean it was Anxious Nation: Australia and the Rise of Asia.

Matt Smith
So that made this nation anxious?

David Walker
It did in a way, I mean the source of anxiety was not so much the people doing the translation, the concern was when it reached the publisher. All universities have publishing houses, all the big ones do and the people in the publishing houses are often very sensitive to anything they know might get them into trouble, so they're aware of the things they should not mention. And in this
instance it was the people in the publishing house who spoke to the translator about some of the images in the book which were clearly anti-Chinese.

They were examples of 19th Century anti-Chinese prejudice and the translator had to explain two things: a) these are not the sentiments of the author, these are historical examples of the kind of prejudice that existed in that period and b) we need to see what those kinds of prejudice were in order to properly analyse that relationship to Asia.

So, it took a bit of discussion to establish that I wasn't endorsing or in some ways promoting anti-Chinese sentiment.

Matt Smith
Can I ask you where your interest in this aspect of Australian history came from?

David Walker
Yes you can. I was conscripted for service in the Vietnam War, I often say that I'm extremely unlucky in lotteries but the only one I won was the conscription lottery, that my marble came up.

That of course got me thinking a little bit about South East Asia/Vietnam, not a topic and not a country that had come to my attention very much growing up in Adelaide in South Australia. The other factor which sat there in the background in a way was, one of my uncles served in the air force and was sent to Ambon in the Netherlands East Indies and was captured by the Japanese and beheaded. The family wasn't, they weren't raging bigots at all but they were certainly troubled by this episode understandably so, and that understanding growing up in that family and understanding that somehow this place called Japan had had a quite significant impact on our family was also a kind of drip feed into the imagination.

And then when I did the PhD at ANU and went there in 1968, that was the point at which there was a growing interest in the Asian connection and discussions like 'Is Australia a Part of Asia', were beginning to emerge at that stage.

And while my PhD didn't address those subjects, I became aware in the course of researching that subject that a lot of the writers that I was interested in had a point of view about Asia of one kind or another, so I was aware that there was a topic around the edge of my PhD that I wasn't addressing and in a sense I came back to the missing link; if you like, when the opportunity to do so arose.

Matt Smith
Do you think if everybody in Australia came to visit China, what do you think that perspective would do?

David Walker
I think if everyone came to China they would get a better perspective on China, if only because a kind of abstract understanding of a place like China can so easily turn to some of the darker stereotypes about what the Chinese are up to and there is something menacing lurking there.

Whereas actually, knowing the people; and of course the people aren't the same as the State, so you can't conflate the two but, knowing Chinese people helps to humanise and normalise China.

And I think the other thing that was really important in the previous position was, that I was actually working at the university alongside my Chinese colleagues, so I wasn't in the sense a drop in visiting academic, who was doing the things that the institution permitted me to do and
allowed me to do, I was involved with my Chinese colleagues in shaping the program in building a presence for Australian studies at Peking University and they'd been working alongside me, working with them.

And when you do that you get a much better sense of the constraints that they're working with, the logic that they bring to a situation. You get out of the habit, which I think is a fairly deeply embedded one of thinking that if anything is done differently or goes wrong in the way you're dealing with China that it's their fault. They've mucked it up somehow or they've not understood, they've somehow messed it up, whereas when you work here for a time, you just realise there is often a very different logic about how you might do something and a different pace about how you might do something and a different consultative process about how you might do something.

It might not be entirely to your liking in every respect but, you have to understand that, you have to pause before judging and you have to listen before speaking in order to get a better sense of how things are done in that place.

Matt Smith
That's David Walker, Professor of Australian Studies at Deakin University, currently teaching a master’s course at Beijing Foreign Studies University.

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