

China Studies in Australia: Associations and Centres

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China studies in Australia refer to a wide range of studies related to China, including those conducted by Australian research associations, China studies centres, especially in Australian universities, and by scholars and diplomats in Australia. This paper reviews the research associations and research centres focusing on China studies in Australia.

Keywords: China studies, associations, centres, Australia

Introduction

As the global landscape continues to evolve, the significance of China has surged to the forefront of international relations, trade, and cultural exchange. In Australia, a nation characterized by its multicultural fabric and strategic ties to the Asia-Pacific region, the study of China has gained increasing importance. The growing economic interdependence between China and Australia, along with shared challenges, such as climate change and regional security, has prompted a deeper exploration of China's historical, political, and social dynamics.

China studies in Australia encompass a multidisciplinary approach, integrating perspectives from history, politics, economics, education, and cultural studies (Golley, 2002; Golley & Ingle, 2018; Goodman, 2000, 2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2013; Hong, 2020; Laurenceson & Chai, 2001; 2003; Laurenceson & Rodgers, 2010; Lo, Xue, & Wang, 2016; Mackerras, 2001; 2013; Makeham, 2003, 2010; McCarthy & Song, 2018; Tomba, 2009, 2017). Universities across the country have responded to this demand by developing robust curricula that not only focus on the language and history of China but also on contemporary issues such as foreign policy, and environmental sustainability. Chinese diaspora studies further enrich this academic field, providing insights into the contributions of Chinese communities in Australia and their role in fostering bilateral relations.

By investing in China studies, Australia is not only preparing future leaders and policymakers to navigate a complex geopolitical arena but also fostering greater cultural understanding and collaboration. As both countries confront common challenges and opportunities, the study of China remains a vital component in shaping a more informed and interconnected future.

Research Associations on China Studies

One of the earliest and most important research associations focusing on China studies is the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA), founded in 1976. It has supported scholars' study of Asia in Australia, promoted relevant knowledge about Asia, and contributed to both federal and state government policies related to Asia. ASAA holds a conference every other year and publishes regularly through its key quarterly journal

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Asian Studies Review, and its bulletin, *Asian Currents*. It also has four book series covering Southeast Asia, South Asia, East Asia and Women in Asia, and reports occasionally on Asian Studies in Australia (ASAA, 2024a, p. ii).

ASAA has eight regional councils: Association of Mainland Southeast Asia Scholars; Chinese Studies Association of Australia (CSAA); Japanese Studies Association of Australia; Indonesia Council; Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia; South Asian Studies Association of Australia; Korean Studies Association of Australia; and Timor-Leste Studies Association (ASAA, 2024b).

The CSAA, established in 1989, is an association for scholars and postgraduate students specialising in China studies in Australia. Its members' research interests mainly lie in the fields of "anthropology, economics, geography, history, language, law, linguistics, political science, sociology, literature and other aspects of Chinese society and culture" (CSAA, 2024). The CSAA hosts a major conference every other year, attracting participants from Australia and abroad. It collaborates with government departments and other relevant official bodies at federal and state levels concerning the teaching of Chinese language and culture in primary and secondary schools and universities, and other issues related to China studies, such as research funding. The Association functions to ensure that it plays a constructive role in significant issues in China studies in Australia (CSAA, 2024).

Finally, an institute whose research scope covers China studies is the Lowy Institute. The institute was founded by Frank Lowy in 2003 to "bring the world to Australia and take Australia to the world". The Lowy Institute is an Australian think tank with "a global outlook" and "a special Asia-Pacific focus". It invites speakers from around the world to deliver speeches on "foreign policy, defence, politics, aid and development, journalism, sport, science and the arts", stimulating people to reflect on Australia's role in the world and the world's influence on Australia. Its annual poll of Australian public opinion is widely cited. Its experts are invited by the Australian media to give comments on significant events, and its research helps to "set the national agenda" (Lowy Institute, 2024).

All these research associations and institutes play an important role in rendering Australia to the world and bringing the world to Australia. Specifically, their research provides a window through which Australian people can perceive China, Asia, and the world. Knowing how they see and understand China sheds light not only on the relevant research, and but more importantly, on the China-Australia relationship.

Research Centres on China Studies

Besides ASAA and CSAA mentioned above, in Australia, there are also many China studies centres, most of which are in Australian universities, including the Australian National University, the University of Sydney, the University of Technology, Sydney, La Trobe University, and the University of Melbourne.

The Australian National University has attached great importance to the study of China since its establishment in 1946. Its highly regarded Research School of Pacific Studies was later changed in name to the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, with a wider remit. In 1952, the School of Oriental Languages was founded. The university also hosts annually one of the world's longest running public lectures on China, the George E. Morrison Lecture on Chinese Ethnology, which started in 1932 (paused during the Second World War, resumed in 1948), and has been delivered annually ever since then (Barmé, 2024).

In 2008, the China Institute (CI) was established at the Australian National University to include all the university scholars who conducted research, exclusively or primarily, on China. Its original plan was to set up a China Studies Centre of Excellence, to serve as the primary contact for external bodies, such as the Australian Government, other academic institutions, business, and media, and to provide advice on the China-Australia

relationship. CI was also centrally funded. However, instead of establishing a Centre of Excellence, the Australian National University in 2010 inaugurated the Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW), which took over a range of CI functions, including the PhD program, and the CI Director became an Associate Director of CIW. In 2018, with the reorganisation of CIW, CI was merged with CIW (Barmé, 2024).

The Australian Centre on China in the World (CIW) was founded in April 2010 after then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in his George E. Morrison Lecture on Australia and China in the World, called for

a place where scholars, thinkers and policy specialists can engage in an across-the-board approach that brings history, culture, literature, philosophy and cultural studies perspectives into active engagement with those working on public policy, the environment, social change, economics, trade, foreign policy, defence policy and strategic analysis. (CIW, 2016)

CIW operates in the College of Asia and the Pacific, Australian National University, and is funded by the Australian Government. Functioning as the platform for scholars, specialists, diplomats, and policymakers to engage and share their viewpoints about various aspects of both historical and contemporary China, CIW aims to become one of the most influential international institutions for China studies (CIW, 2016).

The China Studies Centre (CSC) at the University of Sydney was established in 2011, funded by the University. It is committed to nurturing knowledge and expertise on China and to conducting research on global issues related to China, such as climate change, health services, cultural heritage, and new technologies. Initiating collaboration among scholars from various disciplines, the Centre aims to inspire multidisciplinary studies of China, tackle China-related contemporary issues of significance, support university students and staff whose research contributes to further understanding of China and the Sinophone world (including diasporic Chinese), provide in-depth knowledge about China for government, industry, and communities, and finally, facilitate public debate about China and “increase outreach to Australian and Chinese societies” (The University of Sydney, 2020).

The Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies (CCCS) at the University of Melbourne was established in 2013. It is devoted to the study of contemporary China, its economy, society, and its place in the world in the 21st century. It provides research-based information about China to the public in Australia and develops cooperative relationships with leading Chinese universities and research institutions. The Centre also aims to inform and cultivate intellectual, political, and business talents who are making or will make China-related policies in the coming years (CCCS, 2020).

The Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) was established by the University of Technology Sydney in 2014. As an “independent, non-partisan research institute”, it is Australia’s “first and only research institute” devoted to specifically studying the Australia-China relationship (ACRI, 2015). With closer economic bonding through trade and investment, Australia-China relations have become increasingly important. However, these two countries differ greatly in governance, politics, culture, and values. Therefore, it is very important to study the opportunities and challenges that the rising of China may bring to Australia. ACRI provides insightful information concerning Australia’s engagement with China through scholarly research, evidence-based analysis and dialogues.

Initiated by La Trobe University, Peking University, and Beijing Foreign Studies University of China, the original Centre for China Studies at La Trobe was founded in 2007 to facilitate communication and cooperation with influential educational and research institutions in China. After nine years’ development, the Centre was relaunched as the China Studies Research Centre (CSRC) in 2016 and has played an important part in the University’s China strategy. CSRC aims to strengthen La Trobe’s China Studies and enhance the University’s

research expertise and reputation in China-related issues, and further the cooperation with partner universities and institutions in China (La Trobe University, 2020).

Those China studies centres constitute a major force in China studies in Australia. They provide research-based information about both historical and contemporary China for governments, industry, the academic world, as well as the public in Australia. They help to enhance cooperation between Australian universities, institutions, and their Chinese counterparts, and they contribute to the communication and bilateral relationships between China and Australia. In a world of rapid changes and great differences, these research centres have the capacity to facilitate understanding between nations.

Conclusion

In an era marked by rapid globalization and shifting geopolitical dynamics, China studies in Australia play a crucial role in fostering a nuanced understanding of one of the world's most influential nations. As Australia seeks to navigate its complex relationship with China—balancing economic ties with strategic interests—the insights gained from research associations and research centres are more valuable than ever. By emphasizing not only the language and historical context, but also contemporary socio-political dynamics and intercultural exchanges, Australia's China studies associations and centres are equipping students, professionals, and the public with what they need to engage effectively in an interconnected world.

Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of China studies encourages dialogues that transcend traditional boundaries, promoting mutual respect and understanding between peoples. As Australia continues to dialogue and cooperate with China across various sectors—from trade to environmental policies—the importance of informed scholarship cannot be overstated. Ultimately, investing in China studies is not merely an academic endeavor; it is a strategic imperative that underpins Australia's commitment to cultivating a prosperous and peaceful future in the Asia-Pacific region. The cultivation of expertise in China will remain essential to navigating the complexities of global interactions and ensuring that Australia remains an active and thoughtful participant in world affairs.

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