Beijing’s role in the Chinese community media in Australia is increasingly in conflict with its own demand for respect.

The world must accept China as it is, says Beijing’s former ambassador to Australia, Fu Ying. Wong Maye-E/AP Photo

Beijing is tired of foreign analysts criticising China simply for being what it is. A former Chinese ambassador to Australia, Fu Ying, made the point succinctly in her current role as vice–foreign minister: “The West is too arrogant and must stop lecturing us and trying to change China. Unless you can accept China as it is, there is no basis for a relationship.”

But what is China, exactly? Is it getting its message across overseas? In the case of Australia, what does China’s engagement with Chinese community and social media tell us about the Chinese party-state? If Australians were to take up Fu Ying’s challenge and accept her country for what it is, would China welcome a little more plain-speaking about what it is up to in Australian community media?

I raise these questions in the hope that a frank conversation about Chinese propaganda operations in Australia will help to build a more solid foundation for Australia–China relations into the future – a relationship that Australians need to get right if they are to ensure their national prosperity, security and way of life over the decades ahead.

China is what it is

There is a Chinese term for “China as it is” – guoqing. It refers to the unique historical condition of a wealthy and powerful Communist Party-governed state that lacks democratic accountable government; that allows no independent courts, security or media, and very few independent corporations or social and civic institutions; that denies universal adult political participation; and that offers no protection for the exercise of fundamental rights of freedom of speech, religion or assembly. The Communist Party governs everything and everyone, and answers to nothing but itself. It stands above the law. There is no constitutional or institutional restraint on its exercise of power. That’s guoqing.

China’s guoqing partly accounts for its heft as a state capable of achieving goals in areas where so many other developing states have failed: in economic development, in social policy, in educating its citizens, and in other important respects. The guoqing state’s capacity to deliver also gives it the capacity to act brutally, without regard to civic rights, and it does so every day, continent-wide, in a variety of ways. China, or rather, the Chinese party-state, is what it is: massive, capable, authoritarian, indifferent to the rights of individuals, resentful of the liberal West, jealous of its own standing, and here to stay.

Over the past seven or eight years, Beijing has embraced the idea that China’s special national culture and value system needs to be spread more widely abroad. The party’s Central Propaganda Bureau director, Liu Yunshan, noted in 2009 that “in this modern era, those who gain advanced communications skills, powerful communication capabilities, and whose culture and values are more widely spread, [are] able to effectively influence the world [emphasis added]” Since then, Liu has risen to one of the top seven positions in president Xi Jinping’s party-
state, and today he oversees China's entire propaganda and education apparatus.

It is Liu Yunshan who ultimately oversees propaganda operations in Australia, including the visit to Sydney in May this year of his replacement as party propaganda bureau director, Liu Qibao, to preside over formal signing ceremonies with Fairfax Media, Sky, the Australia-China Relations Institute, and three other Australian media outfits. The two Lius are keen to ensure that China's guoqing is widely disseminated in Australia.

I propose to show that as part of China's extension of guoqing abroad, Beijing seeks to penetrate and influence Australia's small, open and inclusive society. It seeks to restrict Australians' freedoms of speech, religion and assembly. It threatens social harmony. Where it succeeds, it breaches Australian sovereignty and security.

My main measure of Beijing's role in Chinese community media in Australia is not media content or impact – subjects best left to media experts – but the extent to which people are prevented from communicating by a growing awareness that the propaganda and security systems they knew in China, China's guoqing, have migrated and settled comfortably in Australia.

Propaganda or publicity?

The word “propaganda” has a quaint and antiquated ring about it in English conversation. Historically, the Vatican and Leninist vanguard parties like the Communist Party of China have used the term comfortably, the first because it invented the term when it created the Propaganda Fide – the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith – and the second because Propaganda is one of the core bureaus Lenin set down for a vanguard party.

In 1982 Pope John Paul II tweaked the Latin to remove reference to propaganda in the Vatican office of that name, although the renamed evangelisation unit is still located in the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide. In China, the Communist Party retains the term Propaganda Bureau (xuanchuanbu) for domestic use, although in its foreign dealings it often translates this as “Publicity Office,” and calls the Party's Central Propaganda Bureau director the “minister for information,” out of deference to foreign liberal democratic sensibilities. This is airbrushing. The offices of Propaganda Fide in Rome were formerly known as the Office of the Inquisition; the connection between propaganda and terror in Communist China is historically much closer.

In broad terms, the key tasks of China's state propaganda apparatus are not to inform or persuade but to monopolise and control all flows of information; to police ideological and civic conformity; and to censor all media in the country consistent with these functions. A proper English translation would reflect this. In Chinese, Beijing keeps the original term xuanchuanbu because it has no plans whatever to limit its scope of action to mere publicity.

It follows that the claim that China, in taking its values and national culture abroad, is simply trying to emulate the success of Britain's BBC World Service is misleading. The BBC doesn't seek monopoly control of information, it doesn't intimidate, extort, or silence critics, and it doesn't operate clandestinely through deception and subterfuge. The international media services of Western governments are designed to operate in free and open media environments. Their reputation rests or falls on the quality of their work, not on their capacity to silence criticism and dissent.

The salient feature of China's propaganda apparatus is not its content production or its information dissemination but rather its efforts at content control and suppression, managed through relations with the state censorship and policing apparatus, including the United Front Department in dealing with Chinese overseas. A primary task of the Propaganda Bureau is to tell China's media what cannot be uttered. Some perennial topics – democracy, freedom of the press, universal values, civil society – are policed to ensure they never receive favourable mention. Needless to say, not a hint of criticism of the party or its leadership is permitted. And the apparatus also issues lists of temporary taboo topics to guide media operations from day to day, and mandates the official Xinhua news agency as the source for every major item of news outside a media platform's local jurisdiction. These prohibitions apply with equal rigour to those media organisations outside China with which Beijing enters into agreements, offering a useful guide to which media outlets in Australia are under Beijing's thumb.
To perform its roles, the propaganda apparatus doesn’t need to inform or persuade anyone through the quality of its programming. It merely needs to indicate what may be said on any given day so that alternative viewpoints can be silenced. Others do the actual silencing. In this sense, the propaganda apparatus acts as the infra-red spotter for public security agencies, helping them identify who in the world of print, sound and visual media has stepped out of line, so that state security services can move in and remove them: think of jailed Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo, and many others. Hundreds of thousands of honest citizens have suffered a similar fate in China, most spectacularly in the early months of the Cultural Revolution, which started out as a struggle for control of China’s official messaging system, the party-state’s propaganda apparatus. If nothing else, the Cultural Revolution showed that control of the propaganda apparatus in China signals control of the party-state.

Aside from formally restricting what can be said or printed in public, the propaganda apparatus resorts to intimidation and extortion to maintain control of information flows. In 2014 one of China’s most influential bloggers, Charles Xue, was publicly arrested and humiliated for “soliciting prostitutes” in a ploy designed to deny him the right to blog on topics the party found irritating. At the time, he is said to have had twelve million Weibo followers. Visiting prostitutes is such a commonplace practice among men in China that Xue’s humiliation sent a message to the male blogging community that they were vulnerable if they crossed the propaganda line.

The same propaganda apparatus enables extortion at scale, compelling firms and individuals to pay for favourable stories, and threatening to publish unfavourable stories if they fail to pay up. For illustration, I commend a report aired on SBS TV earlier this month in which journalist Wu Junmei presented a plausible account of a massive extortion effort by a provincial bureau of People’s Daily in return for covering up a pollution scandal.

A further function of the state propaganda apparatus is agitprop – agitation and mobilisation. A local Australian illustration is the Sydney consulate’s organising and funding of loyalist rallies in Canberra during the 2008 Beijing Olympic Torch relay, to drown out local protesters. By any account, this did considerable harm to the public standing of Chinese communities in Australia. But Beijing considers those counter-demonstrations not as a disgraceful display of extraterritorial hubris but as a successful endorsement of its strategy of harnessing Chinese residents of other countries to its national propaganda objectives.

**Chinese-Australian media**

None of these examples has any connection with actual information dissemination or publicity – to propaganda content in the ordinary sense. Content is relatively inconsequential. People in China take official propaganda with a grain of salt.

So do Chinese Australians. In a recent report on Chinese-language media in Australia, the University of Technology Sydney’s Sun Wanning lays to rest the suggestion that Chinese-Australian communities are putty in the hands of Chinese propaganda messaging through Chinese-Australian media. More than most, Chinese Australians are wary of state propaganda, and they consult a variety of media sources.

Nevertheless, Professor Sun’s report confirms that the reach of China’s state propaganda apparatus, through exclusive content placements and other arrangements in Australian Chinese-language media, is very extensive. The news, current affairs and editorial pages of well over half of all Chinese newspapers in Australia and all but a few Chinese-language radio stations are basically outsourced to Beijing. Many of the remainder have been brought into the fold to a greater or lesser degree. Irrespective of the impact of Beijing’s efforts at content manipulation, the risk for Australia is that the extensive reach of the Chinese party-state silences and intimidates alternative voices and commentaries.

Do we have evidence that this is happening?

My own sample-based research on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Beijing Massacre showed that eight of fourteen newspapers available in Melbourne made no mention of the anniversary, in compliance with Beijing’s wishes. Similar silences play out daily across the suite of papers and radio stations that have contractual or commercial relations with Beijing.
Media compliance comes about chiefly as a result of commercial pressures – not on Beijing’s side, of course, where national strategy is paramount, but on the Australian side. A successful Chinese community media operation in Australia is typically a broadly based commercial operation with interests extending beyond the media. With Beijing’s blessing, a local media arm gains entrée to business opportunities in real estate, education and professional services, and in international trade and investment with China. The cost of business connections is compliance – agreeing to host Beijing material exclusively and dumping other sources of news and commentary.

Local compliance is monitored by local agents acting on behalf of Beijing authorities. When necessary, it is enforced by threats that China-based firms will withdraw their advertising accounts. Fairfax journalists Kelsey Munro and Philip Wen recently reported that a local editor conceded that “Chinese-owned firms or businesses which rely on good relations with the Chinese government, are told by consulate officials to pull advertising from non-compliant media outlets, and are directed instead to divert their dollars to those who toe the party line.”

Chinese-language media that hold out against these blandishments are punished severely. Since the turn of this century, Chinese-Australian shopkeepers and religious believers have been on notice that their families and friends in China would suffer if they stocked publications critical of the Chinese leadership in Australia, especially publications linked to the Falun Gong religious movement. I asked one shopkeeper in my inner-Melbourne neighbourhood why he had removed all Falun Gong texts and discs from the shelves. “You know,” he told me, “sometimes they can threaten people’s families.”

Early last year, Munro and Wen report, pressure from Beijing is reported to have compelled the Sofitel Sydney Wentworth to stop making the Falun Gong newspaper Epoch Times available to guests. And in August this year, the ANU campus pharmacy felt compelled to remove stocks of the Epoch Times after a local student leader from the People’s Republic appeared at the counter and yelled, “Who authorised you to distribute this?” According to a report by student journalist Alexander Joske, “As the student was aggressive in his body language and the shop was busy, the pharmacist on duty at the time said that she felt intimidated, and allowed him to throw out the newspapers.”

This style of ad hoc civic enforcement by scholarly associations and civil organisations linked to the Chinese embassy and consulates in Australia is reinforced by systematic monitoring and censorship by agents of China Radio International, or CRI, China’s premier overseas media agency. A Reuters investigation last year identified at least thirty-three radio stations in fourteen countries that are part of a global radio network structured to obscure majority CRI shareholding. These “independent” stations are managed through three Chinese expatriate businessmen, one of whom, Tommy Jiang, is based in Melbourne. According to Reuters, the men have “each created a domestic media company that is 60 per cent owned by a Beijing-based group called Guoguang Century Media Consultancy. Guoguang, in turn, is wholly owned by a subsidiary of CRI, according to Chinese company filings.” On behalf of CRI, Tommy Jiang’s Austar Media Group, or CAMG, runs a national network of radio stations, websites and newspapers with exclusive placement contracts for Beijing programming, successfully recreating within the Australian network the propaganda cocoon that envelops media in China.

CRI has an office in Melbourne, separate from CAMG and other local contracted media platforms, to ensure compliance with contracts and to work with other figures in government, universities and business to secure wider national objectives. CRI works with the consulate-general in Sydney, for example, to vet guests invited to appear on its contracted Chinese-language radio programs to assess whether they are acceptable to Beijing. Those not approved by the consulate-general are denied access to the Australian networks’ airwaves. In Melbourne, according to one source, a CRI staff member from Beijing sits in the background on radio talkback programs and intervenes if callers start veering in a wayward political direction.

CRI’s remit extends beyond Chinese-language media to universities and English-language academic publications. One CRI staff member with limited academic credentials secured a visiting fellowship at an Australian university and then published an incendiary anti-US article straight out of the CRI copybook in the Conversation, under the university’s byline, without disclosing that he was a CRI operative. Employees from China’s propaganda apparatus abuse academic freedoms, and place academic trust at risk, when they mask their employment in this way.
These clumsy foreign interventions into domestic Australian radio and print media are dwarfed by Beijing’s sophisticated management of Australian social media accounts in Chinese. In her recent report, Sun Wanning offers the most detailed account to date of the reach and significance of social media messaging among Chinese-language communities. There are 1.2 million discrete Chinese social media accounts in Australia, primarily with WeChat. On the separate Weibo platform “around 2.1 million Weibo posts are published in Australia every month.” The report sounds an alarm on the risks to social cohesion of these newly emerging online media outlets in positioning the Chinese migrant community “at odds with mainstream Australian society” on patriotic hot-button issues, such as the South China Sea.

Others have pointed to how WeChat and other Beijing-controlled social media challenge rights and liberties implied in common law in Australia. Journalist Peter Cai recently alluded to this risk in the Lowy Interpreter. Australia’s public broadcasters, the ABC and SBS, rely on these China-based social media platforms to reach their Chinese-speaking audiences in Australia, Cai notes. Yet posts and articles from SBS and the ABC are “censored and deleted all the time – SBS’s Chinese-language social media editor has to deal with this issue every day… This is due to the Chinese government’s ability to control key information portals such as WeChat.”

Cai poses a thought experiment: would Australians allow any other foreign government, such as the US administration, to exercise complete editorial control over Australian entries on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn, prohibiting references to a host of taboo political topics or a hint of criticism of Washington?

Clearly not. What is it about China’s guoqing that compels Australians to surrender their most basic rights and freedoms in their own country when they would do so for no other? If this article were translated into Chinese, for example, and posted on Chinese Australians’ favourite media platforms, Beijing could simply prevent these Australians from accessing this conversation from within Australia.

**What is to be done?**

What can be done to limit Beijing’s exercise of extraterritorial authority over Australian conversations, among Australians, on Australian soil, about matters of moment to Australians?

Australia is a small, open and inclusive society that welcomes international engagement on an equal footing. Calling out blatant abuses of that welcome is one way forward, and the more often they are called out the better. And yet pointing to these abuses makes for an unedifying public conversation, and presents additional risks to social cohesion when protagonists accuse one another of racism.

In fact, social media censorship itself is discriminatory. Convoations among 1.2 million Chinese-language social media account holders in Australia are subject to restraints that do not apply to conversations among other Australians. This is arguably a form of discrimination against Chinese-speaking communities in Australia, directed from Beijing.

Sun Wanning offers one set of solutions that would bring ethnic media more broadly into the mainstream. The alienation of recent arrivals from China from mainstream media is exacerbated by the relentless monoculturalism of Australian media. She recommends that our media should come to reflect greater cultural diversity in staffing and programming, should provide cross-cultural training for all staff, and should encourage bilingual content production and exchange across mainstream and ethnic media platforms. Australia can no longer afford to allow ethnic media, including social media, to operate outside the regulatory framework governing mainstream media in this country.

Legal challenges to Chinese interference in Australian media would be difficult. Social media accounts operate through private companies, and users voluntarily enter into individual access contracts with WeChat and Weibo that imply curtailment of their freedom of speech and hence limit their individual avenues for redress. At the institutional level, however, Chinese social media firms are operating in Australia under Chinese laws and regulations that inhibit free and open critical inquiry, which is prima facie incompatible with basic rights implied in Australian law.

Legal redress requires a substantial body of evidence. To date, the evidence for large-scale censorship and
silencing of Australian conversations is anecdotal. Evidence needs to be amassed and tested. If large-scale
evidence supports the anecdotal findings, then a case may be made to government, to Australian rights activists,
and before the law, to test a potentially grievous challenge to Australian sovereignty by a foreign power.

On China’s part, authorities in Beijing could demonstrate goodwill by exploring ways of lifting restrictions on
freedom of speech among Australia’s 1.2 million social media account holders. It is not beyond imagining that a
technical solution could insulate conversations among Australian account holders from the prohibitions that apply
in China.

None of this will be easy. If we accept China’s guoqing, as Fu Ying demands we do, then we can hardly hold its
leadership to account for being the Marxist-Leninists they have all along proclaimed themselves to be.

Compared to China, the Leninists’ victories have come cheaply in Australia. And yet they could come at a heavy
cost to the bilateral relationship in the long term. Unless Beijing can adjust its behaviour to accommodate the
liberal values, public trust, and open and inclusive civic culture that together shape Australia’s national character,
there can be no basis for a relationship beyond transactional trade relations. •

This is an edited version of John Fitzgerald’s contribution to the Lowy–AMP China Series, presented in
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