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匯報中國 *China Report* is an annual publication produced by Kōmaru Kura | the New Zealand Contemporary China Research Centre based at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington. The title *Huibào* 匯報 means to *assemble information and compile a report*, in this case on China, one of the world's most diverse, vibrant and internationalised societies. China is the world's largest national economy, the foremost industrial power, a leading technological state, and a formidable military power. It is a non-liberal polity that is a protagonist in many of the international issues that have a direct bearing on New Zealand prosperity and security, including in the Pacific. *China Report* seeks to address these issues through Aotearoa | New Zealand-inflected research that takes seriously the Chinese world in its multiple dimensions. We encourage contributions that draw on the multi-disciplinary traditions of Sinology, New Sinology and China Studies. In this inaugural issue, leading Sinologists Duncan Campbell and Brian Moloughney assess the current state of Chinese studies across the New Zealand tertiary sector.

Jason Young, Director
Kōmaru Kura | New Zealand Contemporary China Research Centre
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The Study of China:
The Past, the Present, & Future Prospects
A Report

Aotearoa | New Zealand
(2025)

Duncan Campbell & Brian Moloughney

Over the course of the past half-century, since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries in December 1972, the place of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in all aspects of the life of Aotearoa | New Zealand (NZ) has become both fundamental and permanent. Increasingly, as history has given way to geographical reality as determinant of both our way of life as New Zealanders and our diverse and layered senses of identity, the PRC has acquired ever more importance; since 2017, the PRC has been our largest

trading partner (taking between a quarter to a third of our exports annually, and providing around a quarter of our imports), and one of our largest sources of migrants, tourists, and international students. At the same time, the major reconfiguring of the geo-political realities that has taken place during the last fifty years also presents our nation with new and complex geopolitical challenges of the sort we have not faced since World War II, particularly with respect to escalated tensions in the Taiwan Straits associated with the PRC insistence upon "reunification" of what it

regards to be its inalienable sovereign territory, and in the South China Sea associated with the PRC's Nine-dash Line claims. Domestically, the PRC has been identified as being the source of cyber-attacks and deliberate foreign interference efforts.¹ The challenges we face as a nation, and the opportunities offered us, are especial, given the permanent asymmetries of the relationship in terms of size and global heft—for the first time in NZ's history a major political and economic relationship is with a nation that is not English-speaking, which does not share the Judeo-Christian background that we believe provides the basis for the democratic norms and values we regard as being vital to our own sense of identity, and which questions the existing rules-based liberal international order we have relied upon as a small trading nation. Given the PRC's immense diversity and complexity, the extreme opacity of its political processes, its growing assertiveness abroad, and its increased repressiveness domestically over the course of the past decade, much increased investment in the cultural and linguistic skills and understanding will be necessary for us to meet such challenges and to inform our engagement with the PRC. Now, more than at any time since 1945, the well-being and long-term security of NZ will rely upon sovereign, New Zealand-inflected, knowledge and understanding of a rapidly changing PRC and the implications for us of these changes. "How to deal with China is a

pressing concern for New Zealand and indeed for many countries," Malcolm McKinnon argued in a speech he delivered in November 2021. "It is not a simple issue, indeed the sequence of distinct issues makes for a bewildering sense of events cascading to some as yet unknown sombre outcome. In 2021 alone: the Wuhan Lab; 'in the Five Eyes or not;' debate about Uyghur genocide; the Ardern-Morrison meeting; the centenary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP); cyber-hacking; AUKUS; a hypersonic missile test; bellicosity in the Taiwan Straits. In the background and ongoing, the US-China trade war and China's economic coercion of Australia."²

The purpose of the following report, commissioned by Associate Professor Jason Young, Director, Kōmaru Kura | New Zealand Contemporary China Research Centre (NZCCRC), is to provide a snapshot of the current state of the study of China throughout the tertiary sector, in terms both of available research expertise and existing teaching programmes; to assess the adequacy or otherwise of such expertise and programmes in meeting the nation's pressing needs for skills in the area; and to arrive at suggestions that might serve to enhance the existing provision of knowledge, expertise, and experience.

¹ Anne-Marie Brady's 2017 report "Magic weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping," Wilson Center (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>), and various follow-up reports, have been critical in alerting NZ to the threats posed to its sovereignty by deliberate Chinese Communist Party United Front Work Department (中國共產黨中央委員會統一戰線工作部) activities, aimed particularly at NZ's growing Chinese diaspora. See also, "New Zealand's Security Threat Environment 2023: An Assessment by the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service" (<https://www.nzsis.govt.nz/assets/NZSIS-Documents/New-Zealands-Security-Threat-Environment-2023.pdf>).

² "Rethinking New Zealand's China Dilemma," p.2 (<https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/chinaresearchcentre/home/homepage-assets/full-width-column-promo-rethinking-new-zealands-china-dilemma/Rethinking-New-Zealands-China-Dilemma.pdf>).

The Past | 過去

A survey conducted in 2003 found that there were some 140 Asia specialists employed throughout the NZ tertiary sector, spread widely across a range of disciplines but heavily concentrated (82.05) in Language, Literature, or Linguistics departments. There was a similar heavy North Asian concentration in terms of geographical specialization also, with 42.05 of these academics listing China as their primary research and teaching focus, and 48 listing Japan. This survey, commissioned by the New Zealand Asian Studies Society (NZASIA)³ and funded by the Asia 2000 Foundation (now, Asia New Zealand Foundation | Te Whītau Tūhono), informed the report that Pauline Keating wrote on behalf of the society, *Knowing Asia: The Challenge for New Zealand's Tertiary Education Sector*, issued the following year and, in turn, informed the Foundation's own subsequent *Seriously Asia* project. As well as bemoaning these regional and disciplinary imbalances, the report noted that: (i) this total number of academics with expertise in the Asia region represented in fact a decline in total resource from the time of the previous such survey,

conducted five years earlier in 1997; (ii) that there was an alarming thinness of coverage of South and Southeast Asia, in the latter case once a major strength in the NZ tertiary sector; and (iii) that there existed a glaring weakness in terms of postgraduate enrolments.⁴

Despite the caveats noted in the *Knowing Asia: The Challenge for New Zealand's Tertiary Education Sector* report, as outlined above, the 2003 survey did show however that three-year BA programmes in Chinese were then available at seven of NZ's eight universities, whilst the Auckland Institute of Studies, too, offered a degree-level programme in Chinese. Within the schools or departments that taught these programmes, the language courses were supplemented by contextual courses (in aspects of Chinese history, culture, literature, and philosophy, and, in two cases, by courses in Classical Chinese), whilst beyond these schools or departments, China-related material was covered in a range of disciplinary courses taught either within the faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences or beyond. At the time, EFT's enrolments in these degree

³ As both a learned society and an advocate for the study of and engagement with Asia, NZASIA, founded in 1973, has played a vital role in the development of Asian Studies in New Zealand, holding biannual conferences since 1974 and, since 1999, publishing the *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*. On the formation of the society, see Nicholas Tarling and Richard Phillips, "The Founding of NZASIA," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (2005): 5-14.

⁴ The appendices attached to a report published the following year on the basis of the 1997 survey, *Studying Asia: The Challenge for Tertiary Educators*, also written by Pauline Keating, provide a useful listing of all the Asian Studies Cross-disciplinary programmes then available in the tertiary sector in NZ, as well as a partial listing of such courses available in Australia. What is remarkable about this listing of undergraduate courses given in this table, all of which needed to have between 50-60% Asia-related content to be counted, is not just the total (some 360 courses, not all of which were being taught each year), but the range of disciplines that had begun to engage seriously with Asia. The major recommendation of this report offers the eminently sensible (indeed, vital) suggestion that something by way of a "national strategy" be devised to define, among other things, the foci and future directions for Asian Studies in New Zealand's schools and tertiary institutions" (x). This "national strategy" was to be jointly commissioned and overseen by the (then) Asia 2000 Foundation and the New Zealand Asian Studies Society. Sadly, this "national strategy" appears never to have been developed.

programmes, although in most cases slightly less than enrolments in the corresponding Japanese-language courses, were sufficient to warrant staffing levels of 3-4 permanent academics in each programme or department, many of whom were also active in a variety of cross-disciplinary or Asian Studies courses then also on offer. In the history of the development of Asian Studies in NZ, it is important to note that at different times and with differing degrees of success, both the “centre” approach (bringing Asian specialists together into a separate unit within a humanities and/or social sciences faculty) and the “mainstream” approach (seeking to encourage the various disciplines within the humanities and/or social sciences faculties and beyond to appoint academics with a research and teaching focus on one or other part of Asia) have been attempted.

The Present | 現在

It might be useful to detail something of the present economic relationship between NZ and the PRC, and the change that has taken place in this relationship over time. In 2004, at the time that the *Knowing Asia* report was published, the PRC was NZ’s fourth largest overseas market, with exports worth US\$850 million (approx. 1.2B NZ) and imports US\$800 million (approx. 1.1B NZ).⁵ In that year, NZ became the first country to recognise the PRC as a market economy and in November 2004, the two nations commenced negotiations towards a free trade agreement, signed in April 2008 and upgraded in April 2022, aligning the agreement with the latest trade policies and business practices, and further eliminating

tariffs and reducing compliance measures. Between the signing of the agreement and its upgrade, the economic relationship changed dramatically, in both scale and complexity. In 2023, statistics showed that NZ exported over NZ\$18 billion worth of goods to the PRC (year to December 2023), over double that of our next biggest export markets the USA (NZ\$8 billion) and Australia (NZ\$7.8 billion), and the PRC is our largest source of imported goods, at over NZ\$16 billion (year to December 2023), followed by Australia (NZ\$8.4 billion), USA (NZ\$7.6 billion). In 2023 also, the PRC was the largest source economy for international students enrolled at NZ education institutions, at 23,907 students (35% of total enrolments). Sub-sector totals for Chinese students in 2023 were: universities 14,675, schools 4,271, Te Pūkenga 2,135, private training establishments (PTEs) 2023, English language schools 951. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted inbound tourism as well, of course; prior to the pandemic, the PRC was New Zealand’s second-largest source of visitors behind Australia. Doubtless reflecting something of both the increased costs associated with travelling to and within NZ and the headwinds faced presently by the domestic economy in the PRC, in January 2024, the PRC ranked 3rd with 158,000 visitors (Australia 505,000, USA 317,000), although further market recovery is hoped for.⁶

As Jason Young has argued recently, however, peak NZ-PRC export trade was in 2022 at NZ\$20.1 billion and by 2024 the value of this trade had dropped further, to NZ\$17.8 billion, a decline of some 3.2 percent from the 2023 total. Similarly, Young

⁵ “A Joint Study Report On A Free Trade Agreement Between China And New Zealand,” (<https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Trade-agreements/China-NZ-FTA/NZ-China-FTA-chinanzftastudy-November-2004.pdf>)

⁶ See <https://nzchinacouncil.org.nz/statistics/>

argues, imports from the PRC have also declined over the course of the past two years, to NZ\$16.9 billion in 2024.⁷ The drivers of this trend are more than likely both economic and political. When discussing what it describes as the three megatrends determining geopolitical realities presently, the shifts from rules to power, from economics to security, and from efficiency to resilience, the most recent Strategic Foreign Policy Assessment produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Manatū Aorere), “Navigating a Shifting World | Te whakaterere i tētahi ao Hurihuri,” notes that: “The Chinese Government has more assertively pursued diplomatic, trade, security, and development initiatives aimed at enhancing China’s influence, shaping international approaches, challenging existing international rules and norms, and promoting China’s vision in these areas.” A prerequisite to responding effectively and in a timely fashion to such shifts in the geopolitical world NZ is required to engage with for social, cultural, political, and economic purposes is enhanced levels of cultural and linguistic knowledge within the NZ population generally, and the Public Sector particularly, about, and experience of working with, the various peoples and nations that comprise our Indo-Pacific world. Critical in this respect, given its size, economic and political heft, much enhanced military capability, and the opacity of its non-democratic political processes is the PRC.

While the economic importance of China for New Zealand has increased significantly since the beginning of the century, the ability of our universities to equip students with even a basic

understanding of Chinese history, culture and politics has declined dramatically. As the earlier generation of China specialists have retired, they have either not been replaced, as is the case in a discipline like history, or, as is common across language and culture programmes, staffing levels have been greatly reduced. Without the necessary staffing and institutional support, these language and culture programmes have been forced to confine their offerings to language acquisition courses only, and in some cases the reduced staffing levels mean that these courses do not enable students to attain the same level of language competency that was common at the time the 2003 survey was conducted.⁸

At the same time, offerings in other areas, beyond the language and culture programmes, have been significantly reduced. For instance, whereas in 2003 five universities had China specialists in their history programmes, twenty years later there is not a single China historian left in any NZ university. Several universities still offer courses in Chinese politics, but for most part specialist China-related courses have largely disappeared from our universities. This decline in the provision of China-related knowledge is primarily a result of the general reduction in staffing levels across all areas of the humanities and social sciences over the past twenty years but is also due to the fact that members of these disciplines often believe that knowledge about China is of secondary importance rather than something that is essential for NZ students.

NZ is not alone, of course, in facing this particular challenge of a declining

⁷ Jason Young, “NZ Should be worried about China’s trade statistics,” *Newsroom*, 10 February 2025.

⁸ The issue outlined here is not confined to the teaching of Chinese; it affects the teaching of all foreign languages. The decline in the study of second languages noted here is compounded by the global shift away from the humanities at the tertiary level, and, within the humanities, the shift away from area studies towards thematically defined disciplinary courses.

commitment, on the part of the tertiary sector, to research and teaching about the Sinosphere generally, and the PRC specifically, in the overall context of the alarming downturn in enrolments in the humanities throughout the Anglophone world, and in second language programmes particularly. In a recent speech Penny Wong, the Australian Minister for foreign Affairs, delivered as the inaugural annual lecture of the newly-established Centre for Asian-Australian Leadership at the Australian National University in Canberra, noted that although there were now some 700,000 native speakers of Mandarin living in Australia, the total of Mandarin-speaking Australians of non-Chinese origins numbered in the “low hundreds,” and that the numbers of university students studying any Asian language in Australia had declined by 30 percent over the course of the decade to 2022. Similarly, and thinking of the vital in-country dimension of language learning, whereas in 2014 there were over 15,000 university students from the United States of America studying in the PRC, that number is now less than 1,100. In NZ, the percentage of university students studying a second language declined by 39.6% during the years 2010-2017. By 2019, only 2.25% of tertiary students were studying a second language, and Chinese, with a total of 310 enrolments, had become the fourth most studied second language (after Spanish, Japanese, and

French). Between the years 2014-2023, the number of students studying Chinese at university declined steadily year by year nationally, dropping from 480 in 2014 to 210 in 2023 (EFTS from 175 to 75).⁹ In the primary and secondary sectors, a similar, if more complicated, story of recent decline can be told. Between 2010-2020, NZ experienced a surge in the study of Chinese within the school system. At the secondary level, enrolments peaked in 2020 at a total of 6368 students. Since then, in keeping with the overall downward trend of second language learners at the secondary level, there has been a steady decline, with a total of 5415 students taking Chinese courses in 2024. As provided for under the terms of the Free Trade Agreement (and its upgrade) between NZ and the PRC, and as managed locally through NZ’s three Confucius Institutes (at the University of Auckland, Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington, and the University of Canterbury), the Office of Chinese Language Council International (國家漢語國際推廣領導小組辦公室), commonly referred to as Hanban, from 2010 onwards posted an increasing number of Mandarin Language Assistants to NZ to assist with the teaching of Chinese at the primary level. The surge in the study of Chinese at this primary level was remarkable. Whereas in 2000, 2335 pupils were undertaking some degree of study of the language (and aspects of the culture), by 2010,

⁹ By way of heart-warming contrast, during this period university enrolments in Te reo Māori have grown from 2635 to 3925 (EFTS 845-1300), and Samoan from 85 to 120 (EFTS 40-65), for which, see www.educationcounts.govt.nz. Obviously, the issues at play here in terms of the motivation for embarking on language study are very different, nonetheless this increase in enrolments is perhaps in part illustrative of what can be achieved with coordination and focus.

this total had risen to 8453, and by 2017, the last year in which the Ministry of Education collects primary level language learning, the number had skyrocketed to reach 64874 (as contrasted to the 50231 pupils studying one or other of the four European languages offered.¹⁰ Quite apart from questions about the advisability or otherwise of outsourcing the teaching of Chinese in NZ to party-state authorities in the PRC (and the issue of what topics might or might not be discussed in classrooms), little coherent thought appears to have been given to how pathways could be established and sustained whereby this surge might lead to advanced study of the language at the secondary and tertiary levels.¹¹ With the COVID-19 pandemic and a more recent and growing awareness of some of the implications of such an arrangement, enrolments in Chinese at the primary level appear to have declined precipitously, with little lasting impact of this initiative. Mandarin Language Assistants are again coming to NZ, but it is very unlikely that we will see a return to such unsustainable levels of primary level study of the language.

Over time numerous attempts have been made to address the low and declining second language study in NZ. In 2016, for

instance, the Asia New Zealand Foundation and the New Zealand Association of Language Teachers jointly issued a report entitled “Five Key Recommendations for Learning Languages to Thrive in New Zealand Schools,” picking up previous work undertaken through the Auckland Languages Strategy (COMET Auckland—Te Hononga Akoranga, 2015). And in 2018, the Auckland Language Strategy Working Group developed a “Strategy for Languages in Education in Aotearoa New Zealand, 2019-2033.” In all these reports, the case has been made for the critical need for something by way of a National Languages Policy. Sadly, although in 1992 Jeffrey Waite was commissioned to start work towards such a policy, producing his (still useful) report *Aotearoa: Speaking for Ourselves*, NZ remains without any coherent plan for the development and sustaining of second language training for personal, family and community, and national needs.¹²

The Future | 未來

The *Knowing Asia: The Challenge for New Zealand's Tertiary Education Sector* report advanced a number (25) of recommendations to do with how the sector could best be both better funded and better coordinated. The major recommendation offered, however, around which all the others were to be

¹⁰ See the Education Counts website: www.educationcounts.govt.nz.

¹¹ On the wider and political dimension of the Confucius Institutes, many of which in both Europe and the United States of America have now been closed, see Michael Churchman, “Confucius Institutes and Controlling Chinese Languages,” *China Heritage Quarterly*, No. 26 (2011) (http://www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?search-term=026_confucius.inc&issue=026); and Marshall Sahlins, *Confucius Institutes: Academic Malware* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2015).

¹² In 2013, the Royal Society of New Zealand reiterated the need for a National Languages Policy. The failure of the NZ education system as a whole to cater to both collective and individual needs is captured in the sad experiences of a student presently studying at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington. Having been one of the last students to have studied Chinese when her college briefly introduced the subject between 2016-2018, she was then in the last Classical Chinese class taught at that university and is presently enrolled in one of the last in-person Latin courses at the 200-level to be taught there. How impoverished a society we are building when we do not provide young New Zealanders with the opportunity to engage with the languages that have underpinned the development of civilisations, in both the east and the west.

advanced, was that a national body be established. The Tertiary Asia Action Group, as it was to be named, would be established within the New Zealand Asian Studies Society and would work closely with the (then) Asia 2000 Foundation's Knowledge Working Group. This body was to be "...commissioned to design and oversee a programme for strengthening and expanding the formal study of Asia in New Zealand's universities, colleges, and schools."¹³ Sadly, this recommendation appears never to have been either accepted or acted upon. At the tertiary level, the exigencies of the competitive model has seen the collapse or drastic shrinking of courses or programmes that address China in the broad and humanistic framework that should characterise a curriculum that is both bicultural and multicultural and which seeks to move beyond the Eurocentrism of the past; increasingly, and understandably, given the "Rise of China," the autocratic tendencies of the PRC over the past decade, and a growing concern with the PRC's involvement in transnational repression, those courses that do treat with China are often taught through a securitised Political Science or International Relations prism. At the secondary level, little effort appears to have been made to understand and reverse the year-on-year downward trend of students undertaking the (onerous and time-consuming) task of acquiring a second or third language. At the primary level, it is doubtful that with the return of Mandarin Language Assistants enrolment numbers in what were in any case mainly simply sampler type Chinese Language courses will return to pre COVID-19 levels, and indeed such growth would be undesirable without coherent thought being

given to the articulation between these courses and those offered at both the secondary and tertiary level. At the community level, heritage language course in both Mandarin and Cantonese are taught in various places and at various times, depending on demand and skilled teacher availability, but in the case of the Chinese languages (and, Japanese, too, one could argue), the additional difficulty associated with the writing system, to the extent that written Chinese features at all within these community-based course, means that maintaining appropriate levels of literacy proves a forlorn task and are seldom adequate to immediate work-place usage, without further training in some part of the Chinese-speaking world.

Recently, arguments have been made that, in order to preserve the teaching of second languages at the tertiary level particularly, universities will once again need to both coordinate and cooperate, as they were required to do in the past when the University Grants Committee (UGC) provided guidance on how the sector might best serve the national interest. The reforms that led to the disestablishment of the UGC emphasised the need for greater consumer choice in tertiary education, but, as Andrew Dean argues, "assuming that privileging consumer choice would best direct public funds toward areas of economic opportunity" perhaps "overestimated the economic rationality of eighteen-year-olds."¹⁴ This would seem to be particularly true with regard to China. The cultural and linguistic challenges that China provides are compounded by the parallel Sino-social media environment that is largely impenetrable to virtually all young New

¹³ *Knowing Asia: The Challenge for New Zealand's tertiary Education Sector*, p. 73.

¹⁴ Andrew Dean "Welcome to the Word Factory," *Sydney Review of Books*, 3 December, 2024 (<https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essays/welcome-to-the-word-factory>)

Zealanders, inhibiting the development of an interest in things Chinese. In the face of such challenges, some level of coordination and cooperation amongst universities seems essential to ensure the survival of tertiary-level teaching about China.

For the social, political, economic, and cultural purposes outlined above, it is critically important that NZ-based researchers continue to produce the levels of sovereign knowledge about the PRC and our evolving relationship with it, particularly as this pertains to our respective engagements throughout the Pacific region, and that new generations of New Zealanders are given the opportunity for the life-enhancing engagement with China, and the Indo-Pacific region more generally, that will underpin our collective and individual futures. The stark reality is that at the very moment when such engagement, and the knowledge and understanding that it generates, is needed more than ever, in the face of climate change and as the post-Second World War liberal democratic order appears less permanent than hitherto, we collectively are doing less in this respect than we were some forty years ago. Despite the growing importance of the PRC, and the extent of NZ's trading and other relationships with it, collectively we are investing less in the infrastructure of the knowledge base (in terms of courses, academic appointments, access to relevant research materials and databases, disciplinary scope, and so on) than we were two or three decades ago. As the late Professor Nicholas Tarling reflected more than a decade ago: "Sometimes it seems that, now that trade has developed, including a trade in students, we feel we need to know less, rather than more, about the people, the societies and politics, the languages and literatures of the countries

of Asia...The message of *Seriously Asia* seems to have got lost. The attempts to build expertise within New Zealand is being abandoned, rather than sustained. No doubt we shall be told that universities are autonomous, and government cannot interfere. I have always defended that autonomy and do so still. But they have a responsibility that extends beyond the bottom line."¹⁵

In terms of the future, a possible way of thinking about the skills and understanding required for NZ's future relationship with the PRC, and the Chinese-speaking world more generally, is to conceive of these needs in terms of a pyramid divided into three zones. In the smallest of these zones, the topmost triangle, are the high-level and specialist China knowledge, experience and skills, in language and cultural understanding, and political, economic, and social analysis and intelligence, that will be required for the upper levels of the public and business sectors, and which will also be found widespread amongst the staff and postgraduate students in the designated China-specific parts of the tertiary sector. Most of the relatively small number of people who will inhabit this zone will be bilingual in English and Chinese (written and spoken); many will either come from Chinese heritage backgrounds or will have spent many years living and working in Chinese-speaking parts of the world. A middle zone will comprise generalised China skills and understandings and will be found broadly spread throughout the public and business sectors and will be solidly grounded within the secondary school sector. A high proportion of the people in this zone will have some day-to-day command of the Chinese language. More importantly, they will in many cases have

¹⁵ Nicholas Tarling, *Imparting Asia: Five Decades of Asian Studies at the University of Auckland* (Auckland: New Zealand Asia Institute, 2010), p. 159.

direct personal experience of living in a Chinese environment and all will have the detailed knowledge base about aspects of China's history and culture that will allow them to engage easily and effectively both with China and Chinese people, and form sound and insightful views of evolving Chinese circumstances. The final and largest zone will provide for a basic understanding of China that will both underpin enhanced levels of social cohesion generally and which, in many instances, will provide a foundation (of sensitivity, awareness and motivation) that will encourage younger New Zealanders to seek to advance up the pyramid. This zone will be solidly grounded in the primary educational sector and will serve also to encourage greater levels of social cohesion through the overcoming of existing levels of prejudice and ignorance. Fundamental to enhancing the China-related skills and understanding of New Zealanders in all three zones of this pyramid will be an explicit recognition of the especial difficulties (and thus, additional time requirement) to be overcome in connection with the acquisition of Chinese linguistic and cultural skills. The proposals made below apply essentially to the uppermost of these zones, in the belief that it is this zone that most urgently requires attention, and that any enhancement of that zone will serve as something of a vanguard for the changes necessary if the second and third zones, too, are to serve the needs of future generations of New Zealanders inhabiting a world in which, in all likelihood, the PRC remains vital to our social and economic livelihoods but which continues to present us with a number of grave political and security challenges.

A Way Forward | 繼往開來

In 2006, in a covering letter accompanying the *Preparing for the Future with Asia* drafted by the Asia Knowledge Working Group, Pamela Barton, on behalf of the Asia New Zealand Foundation, and Gail Spence, on behalf of the Ministry of Education, described action needed to address what “Asia knowledge is required for New Zealanders to confidently and successfully participate in the Asian region now and in the future” as being “vital and urgent.” In a section entitled “What’s Wrong with Our Knowledge of Asia?” and focusing specifically on the education system, the report highlights the extent to which the school curriculum is “not always interpreted and delivered in ways that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse population,” and “New Zealanders see English as the international language and don’t see a need to learn Asian languages,” and notes that “there is little commitment to Asia in teacher education,” and that there are “relatively few Asia-related tertiary education courses.”¹⁶ If some improvement might be said to have taken place in the first of the reports concerns, that argument cannot be made about the other three areas. Writing in 2023, Jason Young returns to this glaring knowledge-deficit, arguing that: “Compared to only a decade ago, the management of diplomatic relations with the PRC appear more strained, the geopolitical environment less accommodating and New Zealand public opinion less favourable. The PRC has become one of New Zealand’s most important and complex diplomatic partnerships, making it one worth investing real expertise in. Over the next 50 years, New Zealand will need to build New Zealand-inflected expertise on China,

¹⁶ Bernard Steeds, *Preparing for a Future with Asia: How New Zealand can benefit from Asia’s growing influence* (Asia New Zealand Foundation and the Ministry of Education, 2006), p. 14.

addressing a great failing of the last 50 years, if it is to recognise the challenges of responding to the People's Republic and its changing place in the world.”¹⁷

A recent (2022) report by the Australian Academy of the Humanities, *Australia's China Knowledge Capability: University teaching, research, and future needs* makes useful but salutary reading. That report highlights the national reliance upon the university sector to both teach about China and train China experts, to conduct research that ensures that Australia might understand China both in Chinese terms and in Australia's own terms, and to help make this China knowledge available as national capability. The report's Executive Summary identifies issues that chime with our circumstances in NZ, but also one area of significant difference. Whereas the report argues that Australia has “distinctive interests in relations with China which require a sovereign China knowledge capability, balancing security, politics, economics, and relationship-building,” as indeed is the case with NZ as well, the report continues by noting that “Australia's universities generate prolific, diverse knowledge about China—this is a success story.”¹⁸ In the view of the report, the challenges facing Australian universities “...are serious questions around our ability to generate core capability for stakeholders: direct knowledge of China, informed by world-class understanding of how China operates, and engaged with Australia's national Interests.” A final point made by the report is that stakeholders, in both government and the university sector,

see benefit in greater levels of national coordination in teaching, research, “...and the translation of research into government and industry.” Sadly, as outlined above, although we in NZ face precisely the same set of challenges outlined in the Australian report, and despite the many remarkable contributions over the course of the past half century in the field of Chinese Studies on the part of NZ or NZ-based scholars, we presently have far less of a “success story” to talk about in terms of the generation of sovereign China knowledge.

What now is needed, then, for NZ to arrest and then reverse this decline in NZ-relevant and NZ-generated China knowledge, at a time when it seems more than ever necessary as tectonic geopolitical shifts alter long-held assumptions about our part in the world? As a matter of urgency, we believe that the following four areas will require further detailed consideration, and the appropriate levels of funding, in order to ensure that NZ is provided with the levels of China knowledge that will allow us to navigate the challenges of the future, particularly as they apply to a small, relatively isolated, nation state largely dependent for its collective livelihood on export trade.

Coordination:

Coordination, both within and between, NZ universities is a vital necessity if we are to make the most of what scarce China-focused resources presently exist. Coordination is also a critical dimension of any coherent attempt to address present and future national needs in this respect. Anecdotally,

¹⁷ “Recognising the People's Republic of China,” *New Zealand International Review* (March 2023).

¹⁸ In this context, one cannot overstate the importance for the topic of this report, Chinese Studies in NZ, historically and in terms of the flow to and fro between NZ and Australia of both students and academics, of the importance of the development of Chinese Studies within the Australian university sector in the post-WWII period. Fitfully, these are ongoing links that are maintained, but, sadly, at a time when, as this Australian Academy of the Humanities report makes clear, the study of China is experiencing the sorts of challenges there as are faced in NZ. The Chinese Studies links between NZ and Australia, historically again, is a topic worthy of further research.

on the one hand, all too often one or other section of one or another (competing) university develops often ad hoc and reactive engagements with institutions in the PRC, for either student recruitment or joint research purposes, with little thought given to either how such developments might cohere to something larger or what the inherent dangers might be in terms of security or the possibility of transnational repression. On the other, a sector-wide coordinated approach is needed to ensure the consolidation of at least one NZ-based centre of Chinese studies that can offer the range of undergraduate and postgraduate contextual courses, the advanced language training, and access to the appropriate library and database resources, necessary for well-informed, appropriately-focused China knowledge.¹⁹

Engagement:

Over the course of the past decade, academic, intellectual, and cultural engagements with PRC-based institutions, organisations, and agencies, have become increasingly fraught and constrained in terms of what can be discussed in an open and frank manner. Our

PRC-based colleagues face increasing surveillance and supervision of their engagements with us, and we for our part, understandably and for a range of considerations, tend often to take the path of least resistance by consciously avoiding controversial or taboo topics.²⁰ And yet, maintaining these links with PRC-based academics, intellectuals, and cultural figures, many of them built up over decades, is now more vital than ever given these circumstances, and existing channels of communication must be maintained and expanded wherever possible.²¹ Engagements of this sort are often unrewarding, however, and are always labour-intensive. They all require appropriate levels of funding to facilitate the comings and goings necessary to maintaining relationships. Picking up on the previous point made about coordination, with respect to our various relationships with the PRC there needs to be greater domestic levels of engagement and coordination between the various public and private sectors. At the same time, this level of coordination between universities, in particular, needs to apply also to our relationships with China-focused research

¹⁹ Pauline Keating documents the degree of cooperation within the tertiary sector, managed through the workings of the University Grants Committee, abolished in 1989, in the early history of the development of the teaching of Asia in the NZ tertiary sector. In 1963, for instance, four universities sought funding for Asian Studies initiatives, but the Universities of Canterbury and Otago withdrew their applications fearing lest there be a proliferation of such initiatives, it further being determined that whereas the University of Auckland would build upon then existing strengths in East Asia, Victoria University of Wellington would look to concentrate its Southeast Asian focus. See Pauline Keating, “China Studies in Aotearoa/New Zealand: Moving Beyond Postcolonialism,” in Chih-yu Shih, Prapin Manomaivibool, Mariko Tanigaki and Swaran Singh eds., *Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Studies of China and Chineseness* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2020), pp. 345-346.

²⁰ From somewhat different points of view, the possible hazards and pitfalls involved in engagements with PRC institutions and academics, and the perils of external funding, have been discussed in relation to Australian universities by (some time ago) John Fitzgerald, “Academic Freedom and the Contemporary University—Lessons from China,” Australian Academy of the Humanities Annual Lecture, 15 November 2016 (<https://www.humanities.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/AAH-Academy-Lect-Fitzgerald-2016.pdf>) and, most recently, Wanning Sun, Wanning Sun, “Australia’s Universities and Academics Are Under Siege,” *Crikey*, 21 March 2025 (<https://www.crikey.com.au/2025/03/21/australian-universities-donald-trump-china-usa-academic-freedom-antisemitism/>). Sun’s conclusion is germane to NZ’s circumstances as well: “Australia needs to design its own research agenda and adequately fund it to ensure it meets our current needs. Whether it be science, technology, medicine, social science or humanities, Australians need to be reassured that the work taking place in our universities is working to advance our national and global interests.”

²¹ Yanzhong Huang makes this point powerfully in an article published recently in the *New York Times* (2 March 2025) entitled: “America is Dangerously Ignorant of What is Going On in China.”

and teaching centres throughout the world. Again, many of these relationships are long-standing ones, erected often on the basis of personal connections between NZ-based China scholars and those elsewhere. As numbers of these China scholars dwindle, so too do such relationships tend to atrophy unless there is a nation-wide attempt to identify which relationships are critical, followed by committing to them the levels of human and financial resources necessary to ensure their continuance.

Research:

Increasingly, for political, economic, security, social, and cultural purposes, NZ requires NZ-focused PRC research of one sort or another into the various rapidly changing political, economic, strategic, and cultural dimensions of the PRC. Such research requires, as a prerequisite, many years intense study of the Chinese language, along with the immersive experience of living within a Chinese circumstance.²² If our continuing relationship with China is to develop in a healthy and mutually beneficial manner, then the NZ-based public and private sectors need to have continued access to timely, insightful, and research-based sovereign knowledge about the increasingly opaque workings of the PRC, particularly as it might pertain to NZ's own increasing and complex Chinese diaspora and issues of social cohesion. This often specifically focused, detailed knowledge frequently sought on commission from ministries, departments, and/or government agencies, as well as the private sector, needs to be generated within a larger knowledge ecosystem reliant upon curiosity-driven research into Chinese history, culture, and society.

Specialist Training:

More than a decade ago, the vital necessity of a rapid upskilling of the China-relevant skills and understanding of the public sector was recognised, given the increasing breadth and complexity of NZ's various engagements with the PRC. In recent years, in an exemplary fashion, the China Capable Public Sector programme (CCPS), led by MFAT in partnership with the NZCCRC, has sought to address the issue, through three five-day Masterclasses a year, regular Knowledge Transfer events, Leader's Forums, and Cross-Agency Forums (all of which serve also to showcase the very real range of China research excellence available in NZ), as part of a "whole-of-government initiative to develop a public sector with the awareness, knowledge, experience, and leadership to engage effectively with China, both internationally and domestically." The Masterclass remains the only public sector executive-level programme for developing public sector China capability, and thought needs to be given to the possibilities for either expanding aspects of this existing range of activities to include local government, (along with the China Council) business, and community sectors or undertaking the first-year intensive Chinese language training as required by government departments, agencies, and ministries.

Presently, the most important exception to the general decline in the tertiary sector's engagement with either the PRC or the Sinosphere more generally, as outlined in this report, has been the NZCCRC based at Te Herenga Waka | Victoria University of Wellington but supported by all eight NZ universities. Presently, the NZCCRC coordinates with China Studies scholars,

²² As circumstances pertain presently, structurally, many of those New Zealanders who are thus qualified to best inform the nation about the PRC are ruled ineligible in terms of the security clearances they may be eligible (or not) for. This, too, is a topic that would repay some further examination.

both domestically and internationally, in delivering both its various CCPS activities, hosting a Global China seminar series, and organises the occasional symposium and workshop. The NZCCRC engages with an important set of PRC-based institutions and agencies, on an annual basis, whilst also engaging with a range of China Studies institutions elsewhere, particularly in Australia, but increasingly also in South and Southeast Asia. To the extent possible, given current staffing levels (a Director and a Programme Manager, with some additional administrative support), the NZCCRC both undertakes and commissions NZ-focused research, either as public-good publications or as commissioned reports. Finally, as noted above, the NZCCRC has been instrumental in the development of the CCPS programme as it has developed and expanded over the years. As was also recommended some years ago, NZ needs a centre of excellence for China research and skills. Considering the range of activities presently undertaken by the NZCCRC, it would be logical, were we to seek to enhance our sovereign knowledge and understanding of the PRC (and the wider Sinosphere), to build on the firm foundation already established. Our recommendation is that, as a matter of urgency, the NZCCRC be tasked and funded to develop a business case outlining the level and nature of the funding required for the centre to be able to address the immediate needs of the upper level of the

pyramid as discussed above, in all four of the areas outlined, in each of which the NZCCRC has an existing track record of success. At the same time, the NZCCRC should be further charged (and enabled) to become a national advocate for the development of policies that will begin to address the middle and lower levels of the China knowledge and skills pyramid, whilst, with enhanced resources, it could explore further income-generating training programmes of one sort or another and, aware of all the potential pitfalls, pursue the possibilities of off-shore funding and support. Only when the issues of coordination, engagement, research, and specialist training are addressed in a coherent and nation-wide manner, as argued above, will NZ be better equipped to negotiate the complex challenges we face in our dealings with the PRC.

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About the Centre

The New Zealand Contemporary China Research Centre promotes knowledge and understanding of contemporary China in New Zealand through research, collaboration, and engagement. Based at Te Herenga Waka—Victoria University of Wellington, the China Centre partners with eight New Zealand universities to support research and courses on the political, economic, and social life of China today.

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