

15 August 2016

Re: ANU, Lei Xiyong and his Nationalist Online Video

To Brian Schmidt, ANU VC
Gareth Evans, ANU Chancellor

Dear Brian,

Thank you for your kind response to my message. I'm writing again regarding the report by Philip Wen, the Fairfax Beijing correspondent, on the video by the ANU PRC doctoral student Lei Xiyong (see: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/the-australian-connection-behind-chinas-ultranationalist-viral-video-20160803-gqkiki.html> ; for the video itself, see: <http://m.miaopai.com/show/channel/OLOPCsbhDiGRnFkn~DYv7A> . The video, produced by Miaopai Co., has been viewed by 15 million users since 1 August. The title of the work is 'If You Want to Change China, You'll Have to Get Past Me First'.) ANU's simple response was that Lei had 'the right to free speech' (see: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/anu-student-behind-chinas-ultranationalist-viral-video-has-right-to-free-speech-20160805-gqlork.html>)

I realise that ANU's response to the story correctly supported the freedom of speech of those studying at the university, and I wrote to you shortly thereafter to offer a few comments on this case and its wider historical context for your present and future reference.

Lei Xiyong has during his time at ANU also been an active ultra-nationalist who has steadily built via media activity and links to various state organs in China an impressive online presence. His 'Love the National Flag' movement a few years ago was particularly virulent and popular and led to state support for his future efforts. Note: ALL OF HIS WORK is in Chinese and very few anglophones and no ANU academics except for me and some students even follow it. As a result, along with my younger colleagues at CIW (when I was there) I followed his trajectory with some interest, and mounting concern.

During these years Mr Lei has shuttled between Australia and China building up a media company in Beijing that produces among other things extreme anti-Western online propaganda. His latest video is merely the most recent of these projects. Before saying more about the broader work of Lei, I would remark on the timing of this particular piece of propaganda (and make no mistake, it is officially sanctioned propaganda, not merely the utterance or work of 'individual opinion'). I can't comment on its sources of funding, but it would be an interesting exercise to investigate these.

The video, which warns of Western attempts to undermine China and overthrow the People's Republic, was timed to coincide with two things: the UNCLOS decision on China's presence in the South China Sea and the trial in Tianjin of Chinese rights lawyers (that is, independent lawyers who defend clients who have been jailed, beaten up, harassed or otherwise interfered with by the party-state authorities of China during the increasingly repressive reign of Xi Jinping and his colleagues since late 2012).

Lei's work in particular identifies the dangers of Western attempts to attack and undermine China and impinge on its (spurious) sovereignty in internationally disputed areas. It also identifies Western (i.e., US-led) attempts to support local political and social activism that led to the 'Colour Revolutions' in former Eastern European countries and in Ukraine.

The rights lawyers arraigned a few weeks ago in Tianjin were ridiculously accused, among other things, of being part of attempts in China to carry out 'Colour Revolutions' of the kind that threatened authoritarian regimes elsewhere. ANU's Australian Centre on China in the World has one of the leading experts on rights, Chinese law and such matters: Dr Elisa Nessosi (her work is important and so on the money that the Chinese authorities barred her from participation in a DFAT project with China: i.e., while ANU extols Lei's freedom of speech, the freedom of speech of

serious ANU scholars, even at such a high-profile event, is banned by the Chinese). Elisa can further elucidate these matters.

More broadly, Lei's work is appearing in the context of China's increased militarisation and the ongoing suppression of divergent views, free speech, academic debate, legal/ judicial independence and media variety that has been evident since Xi Jinping came to power. These matters are of profound concern, and the focus of much international comment among scholars, analysts and others over recent years. My colleagues in leading institutions in China, as well as independent writers and media figures in the PRC all express their profound concern about these developments. I would opine that Mr Lei is an agent for government opinion carving out a career in China's repressive media environment for political gain.

It might interest you to know that Mr Lei is pursuing doctoral studies at ANU focussing on Australian media misrepresentations of China, distorted public debates, anti-China activities at universities, in the public sphere and so on. I believe he has changed supervisor a number of times. I don't know who is supervising this work. Indeed, it is not insignificant that his information page has suddenly disappeared. The tenor of such work, I would observe, mitigates against the very kind of 'freedom of speech' that protects his own simplistic views and propagandistic extremism. In the 1990s we saw the rise of this kind of hardline Chinese nationalism in US universities and many of those scholars trained in the West now lead as mentors the anti-global norms, standards and freedoms in China and among their younger acolytes.

In the larger context, the kinds of views that Lei's video and other work reflects are those of the Chinese Communist party-state, and in particular the more vocal elements of the People's Liberation Army, the anti-international/ global propagandists and academics of China today. CIW should be on the job. Sadly, The Australia-China Story Archive and project that we established from 2009-2015 was allowed to die in July last year; The China Story site, formerly producing 2-3 piece a week with a broad international readership is languishing with one post every few months... . None of these matters is being taken up by a Centre based on the concept of 'zheng you': the friend who disagrees with the power-holders on matters of principle. In a benign mood, one may wish to argue that this is just what Mr Lei is doing, unless you recognize that he follows a party-state line of propaganda and profits from shrill, black-and-white caricatures.

These matters are of pressing relevance as both senior government analysts and the well-informed who follow closely current affairs have noted the building tension in Sino-Australian ties. This is particularly so since the Haag decision on the South China Sea (and the nasty, though comic, denunciation of Australia as a 'paper kitten' in the popular PRC media); the massive Chinese public and official outrage during the early days of the Rio Olympics at Australian champion swimmer Mark Houton's calling out the PRC's Sun Yang for past substance abuse; the decision last week by the Federal Government to block the sale of AusGrid to Chinese (and Hong Kong) buyers... . This trifecta reminds me and friends of nothing so much as the 2009 *annus horribilus* that led to a serious fracture in the bilateral relationship. That an ANU student/ propagandist is poised to profit from, as well as aid and abet such tension is noteworthy, both for the ANU community and more widely for the government and the public. Australia is often used as a bellwether for Chinese policy experiments: targeted harsh acupuncture is applied to disrupt relations, business and exchanges.

Anyway, CIW could well be providing an appropriate forum for these timely and important issues (I'm sure you are aware that Sino-Australian relations are teetering on crisis at the moment and ANU needs to play a role). An appropriate forum would be organised to screen Mr Lei's work, his virulent anti-Australian Weibo tweets and to discuss them in an open academic context so that true freedom of speech and academic freedom could be used by the university to help Chinese students and others at ANU understand exactly what is behind this huge media event (after all Lei's video has been viewed by many millions and all we have in Australia is a simplistic media report of its back ground and import). There will be more to come. Surely, ANU still has this mandate and role? Surely, the university still aspires to more than exercises in staff cuts and

shrinkage. If CIW is incapable of such activities, perhaps Richard Rigby and Michael Wesley could coordinate?

There is much more to be said on this subject, in particular in the context of Cold War era propaganda and politics, the events of 4 June 1989 (yes, still very relevant), the large network of China-funded student and community groups in Canberra alone (last time I checked there were some 35 of these), and China's global positioning in regard to the massively government funded One Belt One Road strategy (which provides the larger, immediate context to Lei's work). But, that is all for another time.

I hope this is of some help.

As ever,
Geremie

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