

# The Australian newspaper targets Chinese university students

By John Harris  
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The *Australian* began the year with an article attacking Chinese students and warning of Beijing's growing influence at university campuses.

The article, which did not provide any evidence for its claims, signals that 2019 will be marked by an intensification of a xenophobic anti-Chinese campaign. This is aimed at intimidating anti-war opposition and legitimising Australia's central role in a massive US military build-up throughout the Asia-Pacific region directed against China.

The stoking of anti-Chinese xenophobia over the past two years was invoked to justify the passage of draconian "foreign interference" laws by the federal Coalition government and the Labor Party opposition last June.

The legislation potentially criminalises internationally-coordinated political activity. Its passage followed unsubstantiated claims from the media and political establishment that the activities of Chinese businessmen, students and community organisations were part of a sinister plot hatched in Beijing. Australian politicians and corporate figures with interests in China have similarly been accused of advancing the interests of the Chinese regime.

The article in the *Australian* indicates that having secured the passage of the foreign interference laws, sections of the ruling elite are anxious for them to be tested out.

The January 7 opinion piece, titled "University's Panda Warriors cannot be lightly dismissed," was authored by Nick Cater, the executive director of the Menzies Research Centre, a Liberal Party aligned think tank.

Cater particularly highlights the fact that Jacky He, a Chinese-born student, won the presidency of the University of Sydney's Student Representative Council

(SRC) in elections last September. He stood on the "Panda Warriors" ticket, which was composed of students of Chinese descent.

Cater declares that "the rise of He is a sign that international students have become a formidable political force at Sydney and other Group of Eight universities." Cater wrote that while the "Pandas seem like a cuddly bunch," and "steer clear of overt politics," "nothing touching on China is simple these days and the influence of Beijing in Australian student politics should not be underestimated."

Cater's insinuation that the result of a routine student election should be the cause for alarm is another symptom of the McCarthyite character of the anti-China campaign. The sweeping, anti-democratic character of the "foreign interference" legislation could potentially make the Panda Warriors the subject of surveillance by Australian intelligence agencies and legal action.

The attack is all the more remarkable considering that the Panda Warriors are a conservative student group with relations to the Liberal Party. He also won the presidency after receiving the support of the Liberal club on campus as well as preferences from the Labor candidate.

The Panda Warriors won support by appealing to the legitimate grievances of international students, including the high up-front fees they are forced to pay, the fact that they are denied travel concessions and have only limited access to other essential services. The Panda Warriors secured eight of thirty-three seats in the student council.

Cater particularly warned of He's involvement in the China Development Society student club. Cater implied that the club is aimed at promoting the Chinese regime, and presenting an "understanding of China" but "with

the nasty bits left out.”

In reality, the China Development Society appears to be an organisation aimed at encouraging business and entrepreneurial activities and hosting cultural events. It is similar to a host of other clubs at campuses across the country which promote cultural and economic ties with other countries.

In an interview with the University of Sydney’s student paper *Honi Soit*, He explicitly denied that the China Development Society or any of its office-holding members were connected to the Chinese Communist Party.

In the absence of any evidence, the “case” against He and the Panda Warriors is simply based on the fact that they are of Chinese descent. He noted this in comments to the *Sydney Morning Herald* last year, after aspersions were first cast against the Panda Warriors. He said: “I feel like it’s quite unjust for people to say ‘Hey look, because there’s a lot of Chinese students, they must be Chinese spies.’”

The broader agenda underlying Cater’s article was underscored by warnings it made that the financial dependence of universities on Chinese fee-paying students was blinded them to supposed “foreign interference.” This made plain that Carter’s article was part of a push for a broader anti-Chinese offensive at university campuses.

Cater angrily referenced comments by senior university executives, opposing the “foreign interference” campaign. He drew attention to remarks made by the University of Sydney’s Vice-Chancellor Michael Spence, who denounced then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull for indulging in “Sinophobic blatherings” in the lead-up to the passage of the “foreign interference” laws.

Spence’s comments were undoubtedly motivated by concerns that the xenophobic rhetoric would jeopardise the lucrative international student market. Nevertheless what Spence highlighted was the anti-democratic character of the campaign, noting that “calling them [Chinese students] spies or whatever without any evidence is just not very welcoming.”

Cater declared that Spence’s remarks, and others like them, were a result of “sensitivity in terms of discussing Chinese infiltration into student ranks and other commentary that could reflect badly on the Chinese government suggests. Cater stated, without

any evidence, that this demonstrated “that the university is acutely influenced by the need to avoid upsetting the communist regime.”

Cater’s article is the latest in a series of media attempts to generate an atmosphere of fear and hysteria of “Chinese influence” at universities.

In September, 2016, for instance, Peter Hartcher, the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* international editor warned of “flies, rats, mosquitoes and sparrows” advancing China’s interests in Australia. In Hartcher’s list of pests to be eliminated, “sparrows” referred to Chinese student organisations that exist “specifically to spread Beijing’s influence.”

A 2018 book by Greens-linked academic Clive Hamilton, titled “Silent Invasion: China’s Influence in Australia” similarly warned of “‘patriotic’ students” from China, who had been “brainwashed from birth.”

The anti-China campaign is utterly hypocritical. In reality, universities are increasingly integrated into US and Australian military and intelligence networks.

Virtually every campus hosts think tanks, research institutes or “forums” which promote Washington’s geo-political line. This is particularly glaring at the University of Sydney, where a US Studies Centre was established in 2006 with funding from the American and Australian governments. Its explicit aim is to overcome mass opposition to Australian involvement in US-led wars.

Universities are also heavily implicated in the logistical preparations for war. Some 32 universities are involved in “Defence Science Partnerships” overseen by the Department of Defence. These are aimed at harnessing research capabilities for the development of new military and mass surveillance technologies. Notorious US arms contractors, including Lockheed Martin have also established research facilities at universities.

This anti-China campaign is a serious warning of the turn towards authoritarian forms of rule aimed at suppressing mass opposition to the escalating drive to war.

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