A CONTENTIOUS FRIENDSHIP

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IT IS FIFTEEN YEARS since I suggested to Kevin Rudd that he use the expression *zhengyou* 諍友 in a speech he was to give at Peking University (PKU) in April 2008. *Zhengyou* means a friend or an adviser who dares give voice to unpleasant truths, one who offers discomforting opinions and counsels caution. The expression has ancient origins, though today it might be glibly rendered as 'speaking truth to power'.

Rudd at the time was Australia's newly elected prime minister. The speech at PKU was on the itinerary of his first overseas trip in the office, which included courtesy calls on political leaders in Washington, London, Paris, and Berlin, as well as those in Beijing. The People's Republic of China (PRC) leg of the trip was particularly fraught because of controversies surrounding the international Olympic Torch Relay and the recent uprising in 'Tibetan China', which the Beijing media dubbed the '3.14 [14 March] Riots'.[1] These were mostly peaceful protests against Chinese rule that had broken out in March, not just in the official 'autonomous region' of Tibet, but also in other areas with sizeable numbers of Tibetans. The ban on foreign journalists visiting the region coupled with the draconian

repression of protesters had caused consternation around the world. Western political leaders were particularly anxious to see China's vaunted 'coming-out party' at the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing that August go off without a hitch. Hopeful international politicians, academics, media commentators, and China watchers speculated that China's further integration into the international community as symbolised by its hosting of the Olympics might be matched with a greater openness and relaxation within the People's Republic itself.

On 14 February 2008, Rudd had led a historic parliamentary apology for the devastating impact of past government policies on Australia's Indigenous peoples. In the fraught atmosphere of the country's racial politics, it was a moment of tremendous symbolism. Not long after, when the Tibet protests were rocking the international community, I saw him at a business forum in Sydney where he gave an after-dinner speech on East Asia and Australia's engagement with the region. As we chatted, he proudly told me that he had written the Apology himself. He also said he would soon be travelling overseas. Among other things, he would be addressing an audience at PKU. Would I be willing to offer some 'Sino-babble' that he could use in the speech? (Rudd was not being flippant; it was a jocular shorthand for cultural and historical colour that might impress his audience.)

Rudd felt that in his public PKU speech he had to address the question of the widely reported and egregious human rights abuses in Tibet. Relations between China and the West were fraught and, as the first Western leader to visit Beijing since the uprising, Rudd's words and actions would be under intense scrutiny.

Despite the care taken in composing it, Kevin Rudd's 8 April 2008 speech at PKU proved controversial.[2]

The subsequent Chinese media discussion of his use of *zhengyou* (the true friend who dares to disagree) was considerable. The phrase *zhengyou* radically departed from the milksop *pengyou* 朋友 ('friend') of official Communist Party of China (CPC) discourse. Mao Zedong observed in one of his most famous and oft-quoted writings: 'The first and foremost question of

Kevin Rudd addresses an audience in 2011
Source: DFAT, Flickr

the revolution is: who is our friend and who is our foe?' 誰是我們的敵人? 誰是我們的朋友? 這個問題是革命的首要問題. It is a question that has underpinned official Chinese attitudes to outsiders since 1949. 'Friendship' 友誼 was and remains the unmovable cornerstone of Chinese diplomacy and Sino-foreign exchange.

To be an official friend of China, the Chinese people, the party-state, or, in the reform period, even a business partner of a mainland enterprise, the foreigner is expected to stomach unpalatable situations as well as keep silent in the face of egregious behaviour. A 'friend of China' or an 'old friend' 中國的老朋友 might enjoy the privilege of offering the occasional word of caution in private; in the public arena, however, he or she is expected to have the strategic nous, good sense, and courtesy to be 'objective' 客觀 — that is, to toe the line, whatever the line happens to be. To be regarded and feted as *pengyou*, but to voice errant views about China, meant that you were 'not friend enough' 不夠朋友. The concept of 'friendship' had long degenerated into being little more than an effective tool employed by the party-state for emotional blackmail and enforced complicity. The Chinese authorities have their own formulation to accommodate disagreement, which is summed up in the four-word expression *qiu tong cun yi* 求同存異: 'to seek common ground while recognising

existing differences'. This provides a pragmatic rationale for dealing with ideological and strategic competitors, but really is little more than that: a verbal sleight of hand allowing for mutually beneficial accommodation.

Rudd's tactic was to sidestep the vice-like embrace of the model of friendship imposed by the Chinese authorities by substituting another. 'A strong relationship and a true friendship,' he told the students, 'are built on the ability to engage in a direct, frank, and ongoing dialogue about our fundamental interests and future vision.'

The distinction was not lost on the Chinese government. The official news agency *Xinhua* reported: 'Eyes lit up when [Rudd] used this expression … [I]t means friendship based on speaking the truth, speaking responsibly. It is evident that to be a *zhengyou* the first thing one needs is the magnanimity of pluralism.'[3] Of course, in the land of linguistic slippage, it is easy to see that while for some *zhengyou* means speaking out of turn, for others, it could simply become an updated and practical way to allow pesky foreigners to let off steam.

In many ways, 2008 was a year of great significance. During that year, the careful observer would also have noted evidence of Xi Jinping's heavy hand as he was the security tsar of the Olympic Games, overseeing the torch relay, stage-managing the politics behind the opening ceremony, coordinating security, limiting protests, and hamstringing internet access for foreigners and Chinese alike. The hints of China's unfolding 'assertiveness' were also increasingly evident at that time. For his part, Rudd, the prime minister of a not-insignificant liberal democracy in the Asia-Pacific, by introducing the term *zhengyou* with all its potential into dealings with the People's Republic, was attempting to do something of significance. Today, only those who are in constant engagement with China can gauge whether the term *zhengyou* and the demeanour of canny interaction with the People's Republic that it connotes still have a place in lived reality.

In *The Avoidable War: The Dangers of a Catastrophic Conflict between the US and Xi Jinping's China* (2022), Rudd continues his efforts as a *zhengyou*, but this time one who cautions both the People's Republic

and the United States.[4] He warns that cultural misunderstandings, historical grievances, and ideological incompatibilities, combined with geopolitical and commercial competition between the two powers, are now a matter of inescapable and global concern. For Australia, the pursuit of principled yet amicable disagreement with China appears even more distant than when he addressed that audience at PKU.

In an international environment in which borders, walls, and paranoia inform public opinion as well as political action, principled friendship may be nothing more than the nostalgic luxury for an imagined past. In Xi Jinping's China, there is no room for principled disagreement, let alone dissent; nurtured by decades of hypernationalistic propaganda and education, a vast army of online xenophobes cheers on official 'wolf-warrior' intransigence. As for Australia–China relations, both sides have abiding mutual interests but contradictory approaches to how those interests can be pursued in an era of 'strategic competition'. Now, as was the case in 2008, to be a principled friend who dares to disagree, one first and foremost needs principles, and not merely transactional tactics. The challenge for Australia, therefore, is twofold: to put its own house in order and to assume a role in dealing with China and with the US–China conflict. In this new age of extremes, in which red lines are readily drawn and offence is easily taken, marrying principles and pragmatism is a challenge. To be a *zhengyou* rather than merely a pliant *pengyou* to China is today well nigh impossible; nor is it particularly easy when dealing with the United States.

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