

In conversation with Cheng Lei and Nick Coyle

Speakers: Ms Cheng Lei, presenter and columnist at *Sky News Australia*
Mr Nick Coyle, former CEO and Executive Director of the China-Australia Chamber of Commerce in Beijing (2013-2021)

Moderator: Ms Glenda Korporaal OAM, Adjunct Industry Fellow at UTS:ACRI; columnist for *The Australian*

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Professor James Laurenceson:

Good evening. Good evening, all.

My name is James Laurenceson and I am the Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute here at UTS. Before we begin proceedings, and on behalf of all those present, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, upon whose ancestral lands the beautiful city UTS campus stands. I'd like to pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledging them as custodians of knowledge for this land.

Welcome, especially to our special guests tonight, Cheng Lei and Nick Coyle, as well as our invited guests in the room and several hundred people joining us online. It's wonderful to have you with us this evening.

Look, my academic home is the study of the Chinese economy, and the last decade I've spent looking at the Australia-China economic and broader relationship, observing the ups and downs in the official relationship, as well as the extraordinary resilience of the non-government side of the relationship, business-to-business relationships and people-to-people ties. But look, that's been from the perspective of a researcher and a sometimes commentator. Well, tonight's guests have done their fair share of researching and commentating and reporting as well, but they've also lived the bilateral relationship in a way that someone like I, and I guess most of the people in the room, have not lived it, experienced it, deep in their bones. So I'm very grateful for you both joining us and sharing your thoughts with us tonight.

I'll keep their bios brief.

Cheng Lei is a Chinese-Australian journalist who worked in China and Singapore for 18 years, including with major American and Chinese media outlets, such as *CNBC* and *CGTN*. In August 2020, she was detained by China's Ministry of State Security on espionage charges and held for three years and two months. She was

finally released in October last year and since then has been rebuilding her life in Melbourne. She now works as an anchor and presenter for *Sky News Australia*. Lei, great to have you with us tonight. Thank you for coming.

Lei, I also noticed you're an alumni of the University of Queensland, as am I, and in fact, we were there at the same time. Because I see you started your commerce degree in 1992. I started my economics degree in 1991, so you and I probably crossed each other's paths in the Great – yeah, that's right, in the Great Court several times.

Nick Coyle was the longstanding CEO of AustCham in China, based in Beijing – the Australian Chamber of Commerce, I should lay out the full name – in Beijing, from 2013 to 2021. And in total, Nick, you spent 14 years in China. I think that pretty much qualifies you as a local.

Now look, in 2020, Nick took on the role of leading the advocacy for Cheng Lei's release. These days, Nick is back where he grew up, in PNG [Papua New Guinea]. And Nick, I see you are leading two businesses, one in health, one in renewable energy. So once you're a business person, we just can't get you out of the business space. Welcome, Nick. Great to have you with us.

Let me now hand proceedings over to my friend and colleague, Glenda Korporaal. Glenda is an Adjunct Fellow with us here at UTS:ACRI, and also a well-known journalist; you would all know her at *The Australian* newspaper. Glenda has her own long association with China, including serving as *The Australian's* China correspondent in 2018 and 2019, when Lei and Nick were both there, in Brisbane. So the three of these folks were all in Beijing together at the same time. Nowadays, I can't think of a journalist who more consistently and more deeply reports on Australia-China business and economic relations than Glenda. So, Glenda, thank you for joining us tonight. It's great to have you with us.

Glenda will be in conversation with Lei and Nick for a time. And then following that there will be, hopefully, plenty of time for questions from our audience tonight, and also for those of you online. For those of you online, can I just remind you, please send in your questions using the Q&A tab on the screen in front of you in the Zoom app.

Okay, Glenda, it's over to you.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Thank you very much for coming. And Lei, we've been trying to get Lei to come and be involved in an event at ACRI for some time. And it was her that suggested that the event be with you and Nick. And of course, I knew Nick quite well as *The Australian's* correspondent in China with my own interest in business. And in fact, when I moved up to China in 2018, I went to a function and met Nick there, and my husband and I said, 'Oh, let's have dinner.' And he did spend a lot of time talking about you; how wonderful you were and how I should pay attention to who you were. Now, perhaps we can say, just to set the scene, how did you two meet? How both become to be in China at the same time? Start with you, Lei.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Well, I had always wanted to work in China because I felt it was growing and so interesting, and I wanted to use my bilingual advantage. So when I was seconded as an expat to China at the end of the year 2000, I discovered the wonderful world called Australian-Chinese joint ventures, where the Australian company held a minority share, where the easily-impressed CEO had gone over to China and been wooed by these banquets and signed a contract that promised 30 years of annual returns at 30 percent, and believed it. To cut a long story short, it was a year of starting the joint venture and then trying to end the joint venture for the Australian

company. But that really ignited my China lust, if you like. And I had wanted to be a journalist, so I became an intern at then-CCTV-9, which is the English arm, at the start of 2002 in February. In March, I was made a reporter, and in May they gave me a 15-minute weekly show to host. So that sort of career trajectory, it was only back then. And in 2003 I was approached by *CNBC*, and of course they're the world's biggest business TV channel. So I jumped at the chance to be more professional, and spent nine years covering China's meteoric rise. And after that, having had children, I moved to Beijing from Singapore to work at what from *CCTV-9* became then-*CCTV News*, and then now it's called *CGTN*, but it's all just the English arm of the state broadcaster. And that was partly because I wanted to – I guess I was grateful that that gave me my start in TV journalism, and I wanted to make it more professional, armed with my nine years' experience. And up until my arrest, I felt I had the best job in the world, because I got to explain China to the rest of the world, and also the other way around.

And how I met Nick was at an AustCham function. And in fact, those couple of years were probably the highlight of the relationship, where we had a lot of visits and I got to interview all the visiting ministers, and really felt – and of course my good friend Geoff [Raby] often gave me lots of insights about the bilateral relationship, and just felt that things were improving all the time, until they didn't.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah, no, I think it was a First Families of Wine dinner. That was when we first met, so – well, there's some good wineries there, but at Michelle Garnaut's old restaurant, Capital M, in Beijing. So yeah, that's when we first met. I think maybe we'd crossed paths briefly beforehand, but hadn't chatted much, and then got to know each other better and better over the next few months.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

So, say 2019, 2020, what was it like in China then? What did you think of the Australia-China relationship? And also what was your view of China then? Obviously under the ruling of Xi Jinping, but was it a successful economy making its way in the world?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Well, from a journalistic point of view, we felt things were getting tighter from, say, 2015 onwards. And from a bilateral point of view, the visits were less frequent until the very last event I did for AustCham, and also the embassy, was in July of 2020, where one of the online questions was, 'You are now advising Australian citizens working and studying in China to be prepared to be detained, and is that likely? Should we be getting out of China, Ambassador?' This is to Ambassador Graham Fletcher, and sitting in detention for 1,184 days, I just kept thinking of that question and how eerie it was one month before my arrest.

Mr Nick Coyle:

And I think, Glenda, by the time 2019 came along, certainly from a business perspective, the rot had already set in well and truly by then. At a political level, there was certainly tension. The embassy at that time was really struggling to meet their counterparts in the Chinese system, and business was pretty pessimistic. We certainly didn't see much new business coming in. Businesses that were already established and had their business, if you like, were still there and doing okay. But by then it'd certainly slowed down, that's for sure. And politically it was tough.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

So, obviously we want to talk about quite a few issues, many issues, but can we just go back to, as you said, you thought you had the best job in the world, you thought you knew how to navigate the media and life in China, and then you didn't. Can you take us back to that time when your life changed?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Well, going from *CNBC* to *CGTN*, I was quite ambitious. I wanted *CGTN* to look better. I wanted it to be more professional. I wanted to be more hard-hitting and to be more watchable. And I went to work every day with that goal in mind. It was very difficult, especially after 2015. There were all sorts of silly restrictions. One of the funniest was when the seven o'clock Mandarin news presenter, Li Xuming, had probably worn a pair of funny earrings, which someone didn't like, and then out came the edict: 'Nobody shall wear earrings at *CCTV*,' the entire 16 channels, 20,000 – on air, that is. It has 20,000 employees, but not all of them on air.

And it's that sort of thing, and also, at the same time that China was spending billions of dollars to fund *CGTN*, all of the other channels have to use advertising or other ways to break even. But *CGTN* had its own funding from the propaganda department, and there was a global push, setting up, that the DC bureau was running, and then they were setting up the London bureau, and they had all these correspondents around the world. And some of the news was quite good, I felt. It did have probably a more balanced mix of global news than some of the other privately funded channels around the world. But it was also trying to always, for example, put Xi in the headlines, which I would secretly delete. And I felt that being there, and I think on the first Q&A show ever filmed in Shanghai, Geoff and I were on this panel, and there was someone from the audience asking, 'Why are you working for this state media organisation?'

And I answered, honestly; I thought I was affecting change from within, and I thought being able to explain how global viewers would see things to my Chinese producers, being able to sound more credible, I felt I was doing a good thing. And given my experience at *CNBC* and going to international conferences, I would always try to get more contacts for the show, better guests, guests who had wide-ranging views rather than the usual on the Chinese guest booker's roster.

Mr Nick Coyle:

I'll add to that, too, that I think if I look at the media landscape in China back then, when I first started doing Chinese media back in '13, '14, that sort of period, I guess the only sort of no-go areas, as it were, the three T's: Taiwan, Tibet –

Ms Cheng Lei:

Taiwan, Tibet, Tiananmen. And now it's gone to a whole list. There's Xinjiang – well, Falun Gong was the original.

Mr Nick Coyle:

But there were only a handful of things that were no-go areas. And I could come on, or I could talk to a newspaper or whatever, and you could have an opinion, you could have a view on economic policy, what was happening with the RMB, on foreign investment laws, cyber security, that was all fairly contested space, as it were. But fast-forward a few years afterwards, and it had changed completely. So I think by the time we got to 2017, '18, around that period, Chinese media became far more – it wasn't a contest of ideas in any way, shape, or form anymore. Whereas earlier it was, there was just some no-go areas.

Ms Cheng Lei:

The censorship would've been tighter in Chinese media versus English media.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

So, just to cover a little bit of the period when you were in detention, we were having a discussion outside, and you said one of the things that happened to you was you were naked in a cage. This was one of the treatments of your –

Ms Cheng Lei:

And later, I would – I made up a little bit of prose for the embassy to relate to my family, and it was, they put us in cages, but they're the animals.

That sounds attention-grabbing, but it's more complicated than that. I think the Chinese would always say, 'We fed you, you were clothed, you didn't feel the cold. This detention center is state of the art compared to the PSB detention centers. What are you complaining about?' And different standards of humanity.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

So, what communication did you have with the outside world? I think you got books from Nick, and you got letters from other people? How much did that make a difference?

Ms Cheng Lei:

That came after my trial, so more than a year after my actual arrest. And no period was easy, but I would say the first six months were probably the hardest, because the contrast is so stark. And if you want to see what it was like, the artist Ai Weiwei did a series of sculptures called 'Sacred' that – that's exactly what it was like. Except he got the deluxe suite, because he's a princeling, and his cell had a desk and had a wardrobe. But the people watching you shit, shower and sleep are the same.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Nick, can you tell us how it was for you? You were living in Beijing thinking everything's fine, then it wasn't.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Ironically, it was my birthday. August 14 was when I figured out what had happened. One of Lei's friends phoned me and said she hadn't turned up to work. And, actually, then Geoff had called me as well. So, I guess it wasn't until the next day that that confirmed what had happened. And at the start, frankly, you're just trying to crisis manage, try to be practical. What can we do? Is there a way to help? What do we need to do at that point in time to help as much as possible? That's sort of all you're concerned about at that time. I didn't really think of anything else.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

And there is this debate about quiet diplomacy and how much you should be outspoken, even as journalists, people saying, 'Well, maybe you better be careful what you write. Could you cause problems?' I mean, from your situation, Nick, where do you see that argument?

Mr Nick Coyle:

Oh, there's no one-size-fits-all to start with. I think in Lei's case, I mean, there was quiet diplomacy for a long time, and I think that's the right way to go, initially. But I think there's probably a time to, if things aren't progressing, to make a little bit more noise. But it's got to be done in a very calculated, carefully managed way. And in Lei's case, it certainly was, there was no surprises to anybody. And it was done in a particular way for a particular reason. It wasn't random, it wasn't an expression of frustration, because that's not helpful for the person being detained. So it's got to be done the right way.

So, in summary, there's not a one-size-fits-all. The only thing that I would say, is that I've had it confirmed by enough people that when there's really serious mistreatment going on, public, if you like, that can help. And there were at times where that can help. But at the end of the day, it took the officials on our end and our political leaders to help to solve the problem. So you've got to work with them.

Ms Cheng Lei:

One of the things that I want to point out is that for the Chinese cellmates, it's much worse, because they don't have an outlet. They don't have a way to communicate to the outside world. And so there isn't that fear of embarrassment. And to this day, I feel a lot of grief that I cannot do more to help them. And the, what's the word? And the anger that China treats its own people worse.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

At some point there was the change of government, and I gather you felt that there was a change in the treatment of you?

Ms Cheng Lei:

I would say there were lots of little things, not just the treatment of me, but how friends and letters sounded, in terms of how they engaged with the government in terms of at the consular visits, the frequency of mentioning – Penny Wong would always tweet about me, and it brought a lot of solace. Here's this one woman who can help me and she does on a regular basis.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

And at what point did you learn that you were about to be released?

Ms Cheng Lei:

September 27 at the sentencing.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah, I knew about it a little bit earlier, but not much earlier.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Anyway, when you arrived back in Australia, I don't want to necessarily go into your personal situation, you hadn't lived in Australia for a long time. What kind of Australia did you see in October last year?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Let's just say being released was like being reborn. And it's like for three years I didn't have my name used. I was a number. I could only speak English for 30 minutes a month at the visits. So everything was coming at me. There was elation, there was almost being overwhelmed, emotionally, physically. And all throughout the past eight months, I've been trying to fill that crater. What have I missed in those three years? What are the things I wanted to know about the people I haven't seen, including some friends here tonight? And go into a library, start crying. I used to pray for one book, and there's thousands of them and people are blasé about it. Go to a supermarket, stand there for half an hour looking at dairy, the stuff of my dreams, hungry dreams.

Ms Glenda Korpelaar:

Too many options, yeah?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Yeah. But the Australia, yes, back to your question, so, so familiar, and yet in many ways very different. For example, on air I didn't know that the word Māori is now pronounced the Māori way. So I apologised on air for that. And I came back and days later it was the referendum, the Voice, so getting up to speed with that. What people were wearing. Yeah.

Ms Glenda Korpelaar:

Could I ask you to comment on the Albanese government's policy on China? I'll get you both to comment on that. I mean, how do you see Penny Wong as a foreign minister? And do you think the Albanese government is conducting its policy with China in the right way? If you were advising, what would you say?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Well, I love the fact that Penny Wong's tone is straight and respectful. She doesn't do attacks with anyone, and that is very rare in Aussie politics now.

Mr Nick Coyle:

I think it's a contrast, and I think it's a bit more measured than what came before. I mean, in fairness, if you look at some of the decisions that the Morrison government had beforehand took, in isolation, they might've been reasonable. I think where it was particularly problematic was how they were done and the timing. And there was very little thought put into, well, it seemed to me anyway, what the impact would be. It wasn't very nuanced, it wasn't very professional in lots of ways. I can remember the call for the investigation into COVID, for example, was just handled so badly.

Whereas I think the current government, and in vague fairness, I think the opposition that are there now, wouldn't do things how they were done before when it comes to the engagement and communication in the bilateral relationship. So whilst there's probably not been substantive policy differences, there's definitely a change in tone. And it's been made easier, because of course, the Chinese side has wanted to repair relations. And there was a circuit break, as it were, with the new government for them to do that. So I think in general it's been good, but still got a way to go.

Ms Glenda Korpelaar:

Do you have a view?

Ms Cheng Lei:

I've only seen what I've been able to see in the past eight months. And I think Penny Wong is a fantastic foreign minister. I would agree that what we've heard from Simon Birmingham is also in the right direction and the right tone. But as to strategic vision in how to deal with China, I think we're not there yet, or we're still confused. And it is still very reactive. Yeah, that's what I see.

Ms Glenda Korpelaar:

I mean, Australia has a very strong trade relationship with China, as you both know. And the net exports were in fact a hundred billion ahead in terms of our selling iron ore, beef. But obviously, the other face of China is its expanding military presence and the concern about that. I mean, how do we navigate these two sides of China and what kind of strategic vision perhaps, would it be good for Australia to adopt?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Read Geoff's book.

Mr Nick Coyle:

We've got to become adept at walking and chewing gum. And not overreact when issues and problems come up, in terms of, I mean, the obvious complementarity with the economies isn't going anywhere. And despite talk of trade diversification, that's not straightforward, it's not easy to do.

Ms Glenda Korpelaar:

Yes.

Mr Nick Coyle:

So some economists –

Ms Cheng Lei:

I've read comments, like when I was blocked from view at the Canberra Press event, people saying, 'We should stop trade with China because Cheng Lei was blocked.' And, yeah, the extreme views that are held about China, the fearmongering, the laziness to think and to read and really understand and engage with people whose views you don't agree with. That's really worrying.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Well, I think not trying to score political points out of every issue is going to help.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Before coming back to Australia to live, I hadn't realised that the media landscape was so polarised. When I tell people I work at *Sky*, sometimes it skips a beat, there's a pause.

Ms Glenda Korpelaar:

Yes.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Like, 'What's a nice girl like you doing there?' And I hate it, because it's obvious they've just made that judgment without watching the news. They might have heard some of the commentary, but both sides are just looking at headlines and making judgment calls on that.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah. And I think our security agencies have got a job to do. They need to be well-funded. There's valid concerns. Make sure you've got good people, do their job and do it quietly, which is what I thought they were designed to do. And not make everything a political issue. And I think at times that's been problematic over the years. We've got good diplomats, good people in our security agencies, let's not politicise it and let them get on with their job.

Ms Cheng Lei:

The other thing I'm thinking of is that, yes, coercion exists, interference exists. It's existed since my dad's time. I remember during the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests when we went on the streets in Melbourne to protest, there would be people from the Chinese consulate taking photos or people from the student associations taking photos, and that's still happening.

So can we reverse interfere? Can we export our soft power? Can each person who lives in Australia, whether they're Chinese, Malaysian, whatever heritage, can we be confident in our values? Can we embrace the best that this country has to offer, our value system, that got me freed, the decency of Aussies? And can we tell that to people who have grown up under different value systems, to tell the Australian story as it were?

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Would you like to make a comment on how you see the media landscape both here in China and the coverage of China that you see in the media here? Obviously, two very different regimes and two very different media.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Well, it still saddens me that because of what happened to me, we now don't have any Aussie journalists working for Aussie outlets in China. And I was joking to Peter Greste yesterday, that if China wanted to show it was improving its journalistic freedom, it should invite me back to work there, and I would.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

So Nick, how do you see the Australian media coverage of China and vice versa?

Mr Nick Coyle:

I'd make the same criticism of many topics, that it's far too binary, it's not very nuanced, and everything's good or bad, where everything's Darth Vader or Luke Skywalker.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Hug the panda or mug the panda.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Correct. And that's a frustration, right? I mean, but it's not easy to, if you like, bring nuance into these difficult conversations. It's just not straightforward, right? So I'm not proposing that there's a magic solution to this problem either. I think it's –

Ms Cheng Lei:

If you go onto WeChat. Sorry to –

Mr Nick Coyle:

No, no, I was just going to say, I think it's up to all of us to try and if you bring some nuance into those conversations.

Ms Cheng Lei:

If you go onto the Chinese internet, you think that China is going to take over the world. And if you go onto X, you think that the CCP is going to collapse any minute now. Except for citizen journalism in China, the rest of Chinese journalism is so heavily censored. That's definitely not the case 20, 15 years ago.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Well, I wanted to make one point too, Glenda, sorry, with the previous point we were talking about, with things like foreign interference. One thing I wanted to say too, and some people in here will remember this, but if you go back to, if you like, the good old days, free trade negotiations, that sort of period, right? '12, '13, '14. Australian politicians were over in China. Half of them lived there, for God's sake. And in the Chinese system, getting a meeting with a senior minister was nigh on impossible. But if you were willing to donate a few dollars and buy a table at a fundraiser in Sydney, you could meet whoever you wanted to meet, right? And so we were awfully open to our politicians, our senior public servants to a degree, who were a bit naive, were enormously open to influence, right? Put it this way, we contributed to a degree as to how open we were and how easy it was to access our senior leaders. And, sorry if there's any politicians in the room, they're rather open to the odd bit of flattery.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

I don't think that's illegal.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Oh, and other things.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah. And a well-placed person who could help fund your party and was very good at flattery could get a long way.

Ms Cheng Lei:

A promise of entrepreneurial opportunities in China after your retirement?

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah. So we were all of the above, I could name names and people. No.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

No.

Mr Nick Coyle:

No, joking. But we were enormously open to, right? So when things started, when foreign interference became a thing, as it were, I'm sure people in the system were concerned about it. But back in those days it was like, 'Ah, another Chinese business person coming and buying a table at my fundraiser and wanting a few photos.' And, 'Oh, Mr Wang was a nice chap, got plenty of cash, that one.' That was all happening all the time.

Ms Cheng Lei:

And in China, of course, pictures with officials or access to officials is so restricted that they think it's the same all over the world.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

So I'd like to discuss the role of the Chinese diaspora in Australia. We have six percent of our population is of Chinese descent. How do you see its role? And I think you were expressing in some of our conversations before, a concern at the pressure on the Chinese diaspora, in the sense of the pressure that we put on them to perhaps choose?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Yeah. From schools to universities to workplaces, if you're from Hong Kong, if you're from Taiwan, if you're from the mainland, you might hold rather different views on China. Whereas I think 10, 15 years ago, they wouldn't be that different. You'd still cheer every Chinese athlete on at the Olympics. But now the taste has soured on that sort of broad patriotism, if you like. And when it comes to issues, if you want to be friends, it's best not to go touch those issues. And even with, I'd ask my daughter, and her school has a lot of people who are of Chinese heritage and they have groups.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Do you have any thoughts on the role of the Chinese diaspora in Australia?

Mr Nick Coyle:

Well, it's just to continue building bridges, right? I think from a people-to-people perspective, from a business perspective, but helping to keep driving that understanding, I think it's very, very important.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Some – Sorry.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Yeah, but I'm just slightly worried that sometimes because our media can be so simplistic that –

Mr Nick Coyle:

That's your fault.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Yeah, yeah, it's all my fault. China becomes a dirty word. And that might sometimes affect people who live here, people who have family and business interests, and a great affection for China. And I just wish people would be less extreme.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah. Look, we've got to acknowledge there's some wholly unsatisfactory things that China's been doing of recent times, but that doesn't have to color everything and that's something that gets lost here too.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Yeah, like for the media, they'll have their go-to persons. This person is anti-China, I'll just interview this person. This person is pro-China, and you don't always get the full picture if you don't talk to people who can be quite holistic in their views on China.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Everyone loves a bit of outrage.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

One of the things that seems to be, that was recognised, obviously you were not here in the last election, was that the Morrison government's, I think, anti-China rhetoric cost it votes in Australia from the Chinese community here. I think there were a few seats that could have changed hands, and I feel that the Liberal party now, and I think they did a postmortem, and I think they recognise that some of their rhetoric was costing them votes. So it'd be interesting to see perhaps how they approach the next election. And I think Peter Dutton in some of his comments has become a bit more nuanced.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Yeah, we were remarking on that the day of Li Qiang's visit.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Well, and I think there was also a realisation that for all of the bluff and bluster and we stared them down type rhetoric that that government was on about, what did they achieve? Not much. And then the current governments had to spend time trying to get things back to where they were. So yeah, okay, stood up for yourselves, that's great, but what did it actually achieve? And for all of the, if you like – Yeah, so I think not only the, yes, the numbers people working out, hey, probably pissing off a fairly large part of the community's not great electoral strategy. Also, it just wasn't very good policy in the end. It didn't work to achieve a great deal.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

How important do you think that Li Qiang's visit was recently?

Mr Nick Coyle:

She couldn't see him.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Very funny. As Nick said, we got things back to where they were. It's not exactly a great leap forward. Yeah, they were at pains to make this a diplomatic success. But I guess what happened to me was probably symbolic of the relationship. You can cover some of it up, but the facts remain. We have differences, but we will still engage and understand each other. And I wish more people knew about or more Australians understood China because right now you'd have just such an asymmetry. China knows a lot more about Australia, a lot more Chinese people know about Australia than the other way round. And we were talking about the New Colombo Plan, which I actually hosted a function in Beijing for Julie Bishop, foreign minister at the time, to announce, and then it all fizzled out, unfortunately.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah, Glenda, I don't think it means anything more than an indication that the relations are back to somewhat of a normal level. I wouldn't overstate the importance of the visit or anything that came out of it, other than it's hopefully an indication that it's more a normalised relationship. That's about all it means, I think.

Ms Cheng Lei:

I was talking to John Garnaut and he said, 'What does Li Qiang mean by shelving the differences? Differences are the relationship.'

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

So how was it for you that day? We all saw you, you handled the situation with a lot of grace, but were you surprised at what happened to you?

Ms Cheng Lei:

I expected them to be concerned. I did not expect them to throw caution to the wind in a room full of journalists and do what they did at such a serious formal event. But then going back, going over that day, is not that shocking either. Yeah, as Geoff's great quote puts it beautifully, 'it's all about face, but often there's no shame.'

Mr Nick Coyle:

I can remember we were chatting the night before about if you got a question, what would the question be? And Lei and I were chatting the night before about it, and neither of us, it's not like they said, 'Oh, I wonder if there'll be any issues with me being there tomorrow or anything like that.' It never, didn't cross our minds really.

Ms Cheng Lei:

But I did think of one angle which prompted them to not want me to appear in the shot, which is if I can be at such an event, because to the Chinese, for a journalist to cover such an event you have to be vetted. And it's quite a privilege. And maybe it would give off the signal that – what does it say about my crime, my supposed crime, and the system that convicted me?

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

We'll go to questions in about five minutes time. Can I just ask you, Nick, about the Australian trade with China? There was a lot of discussion about should we be trading with China? There's obviously a lot of benefits, but how do you reconcile that with the other faces of China, and how do you see also the Chinese sanctions on some of the trade and then the unwinding of it, and where do you see, perhaps, things going from here in terms of the trade?

Mr Nick Coyle:

Hopefully it's more normalised. I think to a degree we will get into diminishing returns in terms of how many more businesses could, if you like, get into the China market. I think even by the time we got to '17, '18, '19, that sort of period, I would probably have discouraged more Australian companies from coming into the Chinese market than encouraged in some ways, because you've got to be ready. It's not an easy market. It's hugely competitive. So I think from a trade perspective, I would've thought we're just going to see it continue. Whether there's any – I wouldn't imagine – yeah, some companies are going to be concerned that the rug can get pulled out from underneath them again. Some of the wine companies, for example, might be a little bit more cautious than they were.

Ms Cheng Lei:

They also try to diversify into other markets and found that wasn't so easy and China is still very lucrative.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Well, I remember talking to some wine companies years ago saying, 'Why aren't you investing into the local wine market?' The French were and that's a pretty good hedge as well against these sorts of things. But why our industry didn't also look at those things, I don't quite know because I think –

Ms Cheng Lei:

More difficult.

Mr Nick Coyle:

What's that?

Ms Cheng Lei:

More difficult.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah. But for example, a company like Treasury [Wine Estates] was such a big part of their market, why they weren't more invested in there, other than just selling vino? I don't quite understand, to be honest. They should have been, frankly. So yeah, I see positive, certainly positive signs, but we won't go back to where it was in terms of business being as optimistic, because there will be caution. But as I said, there's a big part of this diminishing returns. It's a hard market. I still go back to that all the time. I still go it's hugely competitive. It's every good company in the world is trying to bring whatever they're good at to China and sell it and market it.

Ms Cheng Lei:

And I wonder what role China will be allowed to play in our Future Made in Australia plan, given green energy is China's forte at the moment.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

I'm just going to ask a few more questions then throw it open to people in the room. Taiwan, what do you think will happen there?

Ms Cheng Lei:

I've heard Xi wants to attack by '27. I've heard the Taiwanese, the local Taiwanese who aren't in politics, are pretty defeatist about it. And yeah, I've also heard that the glorious ambiguity may continue. So all these are moving pieces.

Mr Nick Coyle:

I don't know. Others will have good opinions on this, but I just sort of look at it and go, unless there's some existential crisis in China where it threatens the legitimacy of the party, then I would've thought the option of doing something forcefully, the calculation is it's just far too risky. Let's assume for a moment they tried to launch some sort of forceful action and it didn't work, where does that leave the leadership? Where does that leave the party? Nowhere very good. So I don't know. I don't think the chances are very high that anything will happen in the near term.

Ms Cheng Lei:

And the word about what's happening in China's defence forces is it's a mess. And if you ask ordinary Chinese people who have been brainwashed, including myself when I was in primary school in China, is Taiwan part of China? I think most will probably say yes. But if you ask should China overtake or take over Taiwan by military means, I think you'll get a much smaller number.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Okay. I'd just like to open the floor up for questions. I've got many more, but anyone like to ask a question? If you could just wait for the microphone. Thank you.

Audience question:

Eryk, here from the *SMH*. Good to see you both.

It strikes me that both of you, out of most anyone in Australia would have cause to feel aggrieved by what the Chinese government has done to you. And yet I don't get a sense of that from your comments. And indeed that bitterness, if there is any, is mostly reserved for the Ministry of State Security, your treatment by particular officials, but not for the Chinese government as a whole, or perhaps, rather, Chinese, sorry, the Chinese people and the country as a whole. How hard was that to maintain, I guess, a sense of optimism in the face of extraordinary challenges that I imagine many in Australia could not even comprehend?

Ms Cheng Lei:

I was asked if I would go back to China two months after I came back, and nowadays, my stock answer is yes, if I felt safe enough, and yes, if I felt welcome enough, and those two conditions have to be met. But when it comes to China, it just evokes so many feelings in me because I'm a very sentimental person and China represents so much, and we all have hopes for people to get along, for beauty to be appreciated. And the whole concept of nations is fiction anyway.

So what is China? And I can only, I guess, separate them into different parts. For example, when I first came back, Nick tried to buy onions and I said, 'Oh no, I've got PTSD,' because there would be this awful onion stew on Wednesday nights that would just, the whole cell would wreck. But what I'm trying to say is that at any given point in time, anything that represents China, you might feel differently about.

So it's a very complicated, and ask any Chinese person living in Australia, there are things that they miss intensely, that they long for, that they try to replicate here. And there are things that they hate and want to escape, and it's all a matter of calculus. But I used to be, I guess, branded as part of the China – I didn't agree with it, but anyone who works for the state media is branded as a China cheerleader. But I thought I saw the other side as well. But the past three years, I have felt the other side and it's not good. So in fact, when I found out I would be coming back to Australia, I said to Ambassador Fletcher something like, 'If there was a war on right now, I'd go and fight for Australia', and every day I'm reminded of the differences and how we should speak up and be proud of those differences in freedom. Because if we don't, if we start to, we are all seduced by the glossier parts of China, then one day we'll be in prison, prisons of the mind without even knowing it.

Mr Nick Coyle:

I'll be far less profound. But I think from my perspective, I don't find it difficult to separate it. Purely because I think in the context of what I used to do over there, I would deal with people from various government departments. And to be honest with you those conversations, whether it was talking about economic policy and opening up, and what the government could be doing on tax policy or movement of people, or crapping on about the NBA or the EPL, or whatever, I could be having a normal conversation as if I was talking to a bureaucrat from Canberra about policy here. And so I guess I got to know people within the government system who were just people doing their job. And we had a pretty similar outlook on things. So when horribly unfair things happened, from me –

Ms Cheng Lei:

Doesn't change all that.

Mr Nick Coyle:

No, well this –

Ms Cheng Lei:

People are still people.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Correct. And autocratic systems who have a need to control everything, there's going to be victims in that process, and that's exactly what Lei was. But at an individual level, there's just people trying to live their life and do their job to the best of their ability and feed their family and have a holiday every year and get on with life as much as any of us here in the room would try and do. And I guess –

Ms Cheng Lei:

I think demonising is not the way to go.

Mr Nick Coyle:

No, and I think – Look, I grew up in a place like PNG where – I'm back there now – and 40 years later you've still got 80 percent of the population that don't have access to power. And it teaches you when you grow up in different countries to realise that we all kind of want the same thing. And there's relatively equal parts, good people, arseholes, funny people, whatever. Wherever you go, they seem to be in roughly the same proportion, not in this room, of course.

Ms Cheng Lei:

And my motto is, be better, not bitter.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

That's amazing. Any other questions from the floor?

Audience question:

Andrew Jakubowicz from UTS, I guess. One of the things that I tried to work out when all that stuff happened to you, because you described it as everything was going fine, you were on the top of the world, and then suddenly you weren't. Do you have a sense of what the logic was of what happened to you from the other side? Was it like – is there a narrative, a cohesive, coherent, and comprehensible narrative of the Chinese side that you could go – what happened to you, you said, 'Oh, I get that,' or was this just, This is nuts. This is horrific.'

Ms Cheng Lei:

Nobody's going to tell you the logic. You can only try to figure it out yourself. And nobody's going to admit or deny anything. Laws are being weaponised in autocratic regimes to legitimise anything. And there's a Chinese saying that says, 'if the emperor says you have a crime, you have a crime.'

Mr Nick Coyle:

I know all I know is that, no, there was never any indication given as to why, and what, from the outside either. So it was a guessing game and it remained that for a long time to try and put certain strands together to come up with perhaps an explanation, which is probably something we can talk about another time. But yeah, there wasn't any indication given, no.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

James?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Suffice to say some of my posts about what was happening during COVID, while not the reason, wouldn't have gone down well.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

I think you were quite critical of the handling of COVID.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Who wasn't.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

James, are there any questions coming in from the online audience?

Professor James Laurenceson:

Yeah, thanks Glenda. There are a couple and I should also just encourage our online audience to keep submitting questions. I understand, I think some of my introduction, there was a technical issue, so our online audience may not have heard it all. So please send in your questions. Here's one, it's a bit of an unfair question, but I'll put it to you anyway because I'm sure you both often get asked it. And essentially the question is, look, given more recent changes in China's national security legislation and their incredibly broad definition of national security, what advice do you think universities should be giving to academic staff traveling to China around the risks of arbitrary detention? Now I know no one can give a black or white answer to that, but any thoughts on that?

Mr Nick Coyle:

I'd always go back to it. If it was a business, the same thing, the Boy Scout, be prepared, get good advice and approach it like anything else, you've got risk to manage, manage those risks and make a judgment call. I don't think it's super complicated in that sense, but yeah, good advice and make a sound decision based on the best information you can get.

Ms Cheng Lei:

I mean, who's going to believe advice from me, right? But having seen what can be classified as a state secret, I'm not super confident in saying where the red lines are anymore. I used to be, but I was devastatingly wrong. And I mean one can only hope that because relations are back on track and because of the huge disincentive of locking me up, maybe there'll be more caution going forward.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Just one more question, Glenda.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Sorry, just to, and in fact, that is what some recent – what we're trying to do with AWADA, the Australian Wrongful Arbitrary Detention Alliance are trying to do, is ultimately to deter, to make it clear it is not worth your while to play human chess.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Lei, one of the things you wrote recently that really struck me, if I can just quote you here, you wrote an op-ed for *Sky News* recently and you said, quote, 'I'm very much a shades of grey person.' And you went on to say, 'I do not like the feeling I'm fodder for China hawks or an unfortunate existence for China Doves', close quote.

Now of course there are folks on ends of the spectrum who see things very much in black and white terms. Do you engage with those folks and if so, how? And I'm probably asking a broader question. What's your advice for all of us who are engaged in Australia's public debate on China? Do you see value in taking on those voices at the extreme or are they best just ignored?

Ms Cheng Lei:

I think we should discuss our differences rationally. I think we should first agree on the facts. I think a China hawk would still agree that China is our biggest customer. I think a China dove would still agree that some of China's behaviour is belligerent. And instead of labelling and cancelling people and the whole echo chamber phenomenon, why can't we have more intelligent discourse on what we disagree on? I'd like to see newspapers not labeled as left or right. I'd like to see commentators who are not always about the same view and get the same guests on.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Yeah, I think it's just about – it's pretty hard to have a rational conversation with people who are lazy and stupid when it comes to these issues where you're completely extreme on one side or the other and that you start to get into what's the point, right? It's a bit like I'm a West Tigers fan and we suck and I'm completely one eyed and I'll never believe anything other than, 'Yes, next year's our year.' It's okay to be like that with your footy team, but when it comes to these sorts of issues, I think if you're completely one eyed and you're extreme on either end, it's a combination of being pretty lazy and then also probably just spoiling for a fight half the time, right?

Professor James Laurenceson:

Glenda, back to you. I've got a couple more questions, but I'll go back to you first.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

Okay. Are there any questions from the floor? No. Okay. You sure? No. Okay.

Well, I've got some more questions for you. What is the mood inside China in terms of economically, but also we hear about this phenomenon of lying flat. We hear a very high unemployment rate with the youth and maybe it suits us externally to think that the youth of China is disaffected. What do you think of the discussion about lying flat and what do you think is the views of perhaps young people in China today?

Ms Cheng Lei:

Well, I had a new cellmate who was fairly young and because she came in rather late and we were so desperate for information, we asked her what was happening and she was definitely echoing the lying flat and the pessimism. And that's mostly out of COVID and also out of the trade war and out of extreme regulatory restrictions. And it's very hard to actually understand exactly what's going on in China because it's so huge and multifaceted and depending on who you talk to, it can be any of a number of things. You can talk it up or down any a number of notches, but definitely compared to a few years ago, there's a lot more pessimism and hence property sales being very low in turnover and people not spending money, not splashing as much as they used to and just not really understanding where China is going. I think that's where the lying flat comes from. Whereas I think 10, 15 years ago it was very clear, you became a civil servant or you went overseas to study or you joined a multinational or you founded your own tech company and they were sort of the four main roads to a good life. And now all those four routes all have question marks on them.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

What do you get the sense of the mood in China at the moment?

Mr Nick Coyle:

It's hard because I've been away for a while, but I think there was a bit of a realisation through COVID and particularly how China opened back up after COVID that the government didn't have all the solutions. So I think that's something that's interesting to observe and I think – I mean the current situation, I mean, I would never in a million years discount China's capacity, its entrepreneurial ability to get through most things. And at the moment, yes, we've got this situation where you've got a government who's trying its best to reassert control and centralise and manage everything as tightly as possible. And that's going to be a tussle that's going to continue for some time. And either there's a new direction from the leadership, we'll see that entrepreneurial spirit and that engine restart and move pretty quickly again. But how long is that going to take? Don't know. What shape might it take? Don't know. And we're probably in for a relatively flat period I think for a while. It's not that and it won't be that. It'll probably be a bit flat for some time, I suspect.

Mrs Glenda Korporaal:

Geoff, I think you have a question.

Audience question:

Yeah, thanks Glenda. Congratulations on a fantastic talk, guys, it's really superb. I've just been in China not so long ago and my feeling is that the commentary from outside of China compared to what you see on the ground, and remembering, Lei, you haven't seen China on the ground for quite a long time now, it's almost like parallel universes. And to your point, Nick, about entrepreneurship, you don't go from nothing to dominating the world's EV market in five years, something's going on. I'm not sure I understand it necessarily, but something is really happening and there's a lot of very dynamic elements.

Ms Cheng Lei:

What was it about the Daimler CEO at the Shanghai Auto Show saying we've just had our Nokia moment?

Audience member 1:

Really? Yes. Well, and I think that's the intention. Absolutely. So my point really though is for nearly 40 years of involvement with China and working on the Chinese economy and trying to explain it to people, the big challenge is always to keep up with the contemporary reality of China. Because as you said, Lei, it's so big, it's so complex, it's so vast and it changes so quickly. And it is unbelievable to me that we do not have any journalists on the ground. It's only through a media presence on the ground that you can hope to begin to catch up with the contemporary reality. So the fact that so much public discussion here on China bears little resemblance to the reality of what's happening inside China. I don't know if you have any sense of when Australian journalists might return to China.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Eryk?

Mr Nick Coyle:

I was going to say.

Audience member 1:

I'm doing your pleading for you.

Audience member 2:

Yeah, as an exiled – I'm happy to help as an exiled journalist. Not anytime soon. And the reason is perhaps threefold. One is that despite, certainly my application, which was held up for many years and has never progressed and was finally denied on the Chinese side, not being interested in having Australian journalists, despite saying publicly that they are, that's the first hurdle.

The second hurdle is that if we're honest, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Australian security agencies are also not that keen on Australian journalists being in China. And without support from the Australian government saying, 'Yes, we think it's time to go', then publications are also reluctant to send journalists back into China. And of course the great case study and symbol of all this and the risk of it is right in front of us.

And I think that is a powerful reminder. So it's going to take time, and I think patience sort of from all sides, whether it's the publications, the government and readers unfortunately, for there to be a new normal in that situation where people feel comfortable. And I doubt very much, until we get sustained lobbying from the Australian government and it becomes a top order priority to get journalists back in, and maybe once the trade impediments are reduced then, then we might start to see some solutions. It was not until the US really started lobbying that we started to see some movement on their visas and even they are on the go-slow. The British have only just had another correspondent approved for the BBC. So everyone around the world is facing those hurdles, and Australia is right at the pointy end of those.

Ms Cheng Lei:

But didn't PM Albanese say two weeks ago in Canberra that there were no visa impediments?

Audience member 2:

I think that's on the advice of the Chinese government, which says, 'Yes, of course they're welcome to apply.' But then how long do you wait for your application to go through only for it to be denied? So everyone's saying, 'Yes, we'd love to have you.' But the reality is very different. And I think the first port of call there is on the Chinese side to get those applications through.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Well, and it's up there with sending some lowly ranked embassy officials to stand in front of journalists for own goals, right? I mean, it's so stupid to not want to encourage having Western journalists in China reporting. To Geoff's point, I mean, in my old role, I would see a lot of journalists come in. I remember Glenda when you first came, and you see their change over time as to what their preconceived ideas of what China was and then how their stories about the market changed over time with their perceptions. And the fact that whether it's yourself or Will, or Bill, for some time with ABC, and his replacement have got to do it from Singapore or Taiwan or whatever, there's no substitute, right? And it's just monumentally stupid from the Chinese side for it to allow this to continue. So if I'm the Chinese side, I'd be saying to the Australian government, 'What do you need? What assurances can we give? Let's get your people back there because it's good for everybody.' Yeah.

Ms Glenda Korporaal:

I think that we're out of time, in fact, a little bit over time, so I'll hand it back to you, James. But thank you so much. It's been a very interesting discussion and thank you for being so frank.

Mr Nick Coyle:

Can I just say very quickly, as somebody who used to do this sort of event all the time, thank you to ACRI, to James, to everyone coming. I know how much work goes into these things. So to your –

Ms Cheng Lei:

Thank you, Amy.

Mr Nick Coyle:

– staff and your volunteers and everybody, thank you.

Ms Cheng Lei:

Thanks to everyone for coming.

Professor James Laurenceson:

Thanks, Lei, Nick and Glenda, look, that was a real masterclass in Australia-China relations, and I really appreciate because I know, as I said to you before, when you folks speak about this, it's not just as an observer. It's from having been in the thick of it in both the highs and the very, very lows.

Folks, just a reminder that the recording and the transcript of tonight's event will be online and with our fabulous events' manager, Amy Ma, you can be sure that that will be up sooner rather than later. To our audience, thank you for coming to both our in-person and our online audience. We look forward to welcoming you back to another UTS:ACRI event in the near future, although it's going to be pretty hard to put on another event that's going to match this one in terms of the insight that's been delivered.

Thank you all once again, thank you, audience, for coming. Good night.