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## Rudd rewrites the rules of engagement

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On Wednesday, the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, made a speech to an audience at Peking University, China's pre-eminent tertiary institution. Given the tensions over Tibet and the Olympic torch relay, as a practised diplomat Rudd could have taken the easy path by speaking in platitudes about the strength of the bilateral relationship and any number of mutually acceptable and anodyne topics.

Instead, with finesse and skill, he chose to address the students on the broad basis for a truly sustainable relationship with the economically booming yet politically autocratic state that is China. In doing so, he rewrote the rules of engagement in a way that can only benefit Australia and our relationship with this important country.

First Rudd acknowledged where he was: at a university that, more than any other educational institution in China, has helped shaped that country's modern history, one known for its contributions to Chinese intellectual debate, political activism and cultural experimentation. He mentioned some of China's 20th-century intellectual heroes whose careers were entwined with Peking University. Some were involved in reshaping Chinese into a modern language capable of carrying urgently needed political, cultural and historical debate. One was a leading democratic thinker.

He also made three references to Lu Xun (1881-1936), China's literary hero, unyielding critic of authoritarianism and principled dissenter, noting that Lu Xun personally designed Peking University's crest. It would not have been lost on his audience that the Prime Minister's choice of intellectual exemplars acknowledged China's dominant communist ideology while pointing to the traditions of free speech and debate that have made Peking University so important.

Rudd's strategy was thus first to honour the place where he was speaking and its connection to significant, complex historical and cultural figures. He went on to speak more personally of his own educational and political trajectory, and about Australia's national interest. Appealing to his youthful audience to consider what positive role they could play in China's rise as a world power, he evoked the concept of harmony (hexie), embraced by the present Chinese leadership, before making a canny digression. This was to note that 2008 is the 110th anniversary of the Hundred Days Reform movement, during which an enlightened emperor struggled to enact a process of political reform and modernisation similar to the Meiji Restoration in Japan that had taken place not long before. Rudd



Illustration: Simon Bosch

didn't need to say that this movement failed and its leaders were beheaded; his audience would know that. Instead he noted that one of the leading lights of the reforms, the thinker Kang Youwei, who survived by fleeing into exile, went on to write about "the Great Harmony" (datong), "a utopian world free of political boundaries". Thus, in a manner both subtle and eminently clear to a Chinese intellectual audience, he linked the officially approved concept of harmony to the broader course of political reform, change and openness.

Rudd then spoke about China joining the rest of humanity as "a responsible global stakeholder" - a lead-in to addressing the pressing issue of Tibet. By framing his comments in such a manner, he established his right - and by extension the right of others - to disagree with both Chinese official and mainstream opinion on matters of international concern. There is a venerable Chinese expression for this position: "A true friend," Rudd went on, "is one who can be a zhengyou, that is a partner who sees beyond immediate benefit to the broader and firm basis for continuing, profound and sincere friendship."

The subsequent Chinese media discussion of Rudd's use of the powerful and meaning-laden term zhengyou - the true friend who dares to disagree - has been considerable. That is because the more common word "friendship" (youyi) has been a cornerstone of China's post-1949 diplomacy. Mao Zedong once observed, "The first and foremost question of the revolution is: who is our friend and who is our foe."

To be a friend of China, the Chinese people, the party-state or, in the reform period, even a mainland business partner, the foreigner is often expected to stomach unpalatable situations, and keep silent in the face of egregious behaviour. A friend of China might enjoy the privilege of offering the occasional word of caution in private; in the public arena he or she is expected to have the good sense and courtesy to be "objective", that is to toe the line, whatever that happens to be. The concept of "friendship" thus degenerates into little more than an effective tool for emotional blackmail and enforced complicity.

Rudd's tactic was to deftly sidestep the vice-like embrace of that model of friendship 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. The official newsagency Xinhua reported: "Eyes lit up when [Rudd] used this expression ... it means friendship based on speaking the truth, speaking responsibly. It is evident that to be a zhengyou first thing one needs is the magnanimity of pluralism." 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 may simply become another way for allowing pesky foreigners to let off steam.

Of course, there are dangers, not mentioned in the Chinese media. Perhaps the most famous zhengyou relationship of modern times was that between Mao and Liang Shuming, a Confucian thinker and agrarian reformer. Mao declared that although their politics were different, Liang was a true zhengyou. Liang advised Mao on rural policy from the 1940s into the early '50s. But, in 1953, Liang dared to venture that class struggle was having a calamitous effect on rural life. He asked Mao whether he had the "magnanimity" to accept his views. The Chairman shot back, "No, I don't have that magnanimity!" Shortly thereafter, Liang was denounced and silenced.

On the other hand, there are examples from Chinese history where a zhengyou has played a key role in bringing about good governance and prosperity.

The most famous zhengyou was Wei Zheng, a friend and critic of the Emperor Taizong of the 7th-century Tang dynasty. Wei told the ruler that "if you listen to wise counsel all is brightness; if, however, you give in to bias darkness falls". When Wei died, some years later, the emperor bitterly mourned his death. He offered this tribute: "One looks at a reflection in a mirror to see if one's dress is in order. One studies history to understand the changing fortunes of time. And one seeks wise counsel to avoid mistakes. Wei Zheng has died, and I have lost my mirror. To have a zhengyou is to be fortunate indeed." The metaphor is used by China's leaders and the media even today. One can only hope that when they look in the mirror they do not do so with eyes wide shut.

By introducing the term zhengyou with all of its liberating connotations into our dealings with China, Kevin Rudd has achieved something of considerable significance.

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