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JAMES LEIBOLD

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Party Time: It's About Values, Not Race

Over the last year we have been engaged in a frank, and at times contentious, debate over 'Chinese influence' in Australia. Some would have us believe that 'Chinese values' are different from those espoused by most Australians. In other words, that race and culture predetermines our beliefs, opening the way for a unique 'China model'.

This model will be on display next month when delegates of the 86 million-member Chinese Communist Party gather in Beijing for its 19th Party Congress. Here Xi Jinping, the leader of this authoritarian Party-state system, will remind his citizens that the Party's dream is China's dream, and call on people of Chinese ancestry, regardless of where they live, to work towards the great revival of the Chinese race.

Xi and other Chinese Communist Party leaders frequently appeal to racial ties when calling on the overseas Chinese to actively contribute to this venerable mission. In June, Premier Li Keqiang told overseas Chinese business leaders that 'the Chinese race is a big family, with the sentimental attachment to one's country, motherland and ancestral home surging through the veins of every descendant of the Fiery Emperor and Yellow Emperor'.

The Communist Party speaks of a strong and wealthy China, one where the authority of the party is beyond question. In Xi's China, citizens are prohibited from discussing seven 'false ideological positions,' including universal values such as freedom, democracy and basic human rights. The media is told they must 'reflect the Party's will and

safeguard the Party's authority,' while citizens are blocked from freely surfing the internet for ideas and values that might contradict the Party's view, or threaten its rule.

Yet the desire for freedom, equality and justice are not limited to a single country or race. In 1948, the Chinese educator Chang Peng-chun helped to draft a core set of universal values, which were debated and then endorsed by forty-eight countries across the globe, including culturally and racially diverse countries like Australia, Egypt and China, in the form of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Many of these values – such as freedom of speech, assembly, and religion – are enshrined in the Constitution of the People's Republic of China. Yet, in Xi's China, these rights are frequently violated, with constitutionalism now defined as one of the seven forbidden topics.

The values of the Chinese Communist Party – not its people – are incompatible with these universal truths. There are many Chinese supporters and defenders of these rights, including Australian academic Feng Chongyi, jailed Hong Kong student leader Joshua Wong, Taiwanese activist Lee Ming-cheh, and the over 360 human rights lawyers and activists detained or imprisoned on the Chinese mainland over the past two years.

The Australian National University strategist, Professor Hugh White, claims, 'China's values are very different from ours,' while suggesting that Australia might need to negotiate its own rather 'vague' values if we want to live

peacefully with an increasingly powerful China. Others, such as the wealthy businessmen Huang Xiangmo feel 'malignant tumors' of racism and McCarthyism runs throughout Australian society, making it hard for Australians of Chinese descent to contribute to the political process.

When discussing 'Chinese influence' in Australia, the race issue is always lurking in the background, and needs to be addressed head-on.

First, we need to acknowledge the long history of racism in Australia as it relates to people of Chinese heritage and other non-whites. The White Australia policy continues to cast a long shadow despite the successes of our multicultural society today. We must openly acknowledge this past and work to ameliorate the structural racism and inequalities that still mars our society today.

Second, we need to include more Chinese voices in our conversation about the changes re-shaping Australia, and many of the serious issues our country currently faces. At present, white male voices (like my own) still dominate the public discourse. We must actively encourage, even legislate for, more participation by women and non-white men in our public life. If we really espouse a universal set of values, all elements of Australian society need to help articulate them.

Finally, we need to stop speaking about 'Chinese influence' in Australia. The over one million residents of Chinese ancestry are part of the rich fabric of Australian life. They have long made significant contributions to our growth and prosperity. Our

focus, in contrast, should be on any meddling by the Chinese Communist Party and its often shadowy organs in our society. Our small democracy can ill afford to have Party operatives and their allies tell us how to think and act.

Our economic dependence on China and the growing economic clout of the Chinese Communist Party puts Australia in a tight spot. We cannot turn our back on China. Rather, we need to work closely with those who desire a more open, free and tolerant China, regardless of where they reside.

At the same time, we must be willing to say no: to stand up for these universal values even if it hurts our economic bottom-line; to defend those values that Nobel Laureate Liu Xiaobo was willing to die for. Moral relativism can end in a cul-de-sac of delusion and tyranny.

The alternative is life in a place like Xi's China where freedoms are circumscribed in the name of stability, and one's dreams are monitored by an authoritarian Party-state.

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James Leibold is Associate Professor in Politics and Asian Studies at La Trobe University. These are his personal views and do not represent those of his university. Dr Leibold's work can be accessed at: goo.gl/ZY7Tt3