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Australians are routinely urged to understand China better. What understanding China means is being able to form an informed view about its history, its current policies, and its future direction. Understanding does not mean sympathetic agreement nor is it simply about amassing facts and learning the language – true understanding ultimately depends on the quality of one’s judgment.

The failure to provide judgment is the central problem with Rudd’s recent speech entitled “Australia and China in the World”. At its heart it calls for: “A New Sinology capable of opening up new ways of understanding this great and ancient civilization, and what it might offer again in the future”. But the speech then studiously – frustratingly even for those genuinely interested in his views - avoids stating clearly where he stands on the larger questions.

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