

Submission to the Senate Inquiry into Issues Facing Diaspora Communities in Australia

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About the author

Yun Jiang has worked in government, academia and think tank roles across a range of China issues, including Australia-China relations, foreign interference, and the Chinese diaspora.

The Chinese diaspora

Australia's Chinese diaspora communities constitute a sizable and important part of Australian society, and these communities face challenges that are perhaps unique to them, due to the deteriorating state of the Australia-China relationship, and debates around foreign interference.

The Chinese diaspora is an amorphous term. It can include Australian citizens with Chinese ancestry or Chinese citizens living in Australia. It can include families with Chinese ancestry that have been in Australia since before the Federation or those that have recently arrived. It can include people with Chinese ancestry that are from the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Southeast Asian countries.

Not everyone who is in the above categories would identify with the term "Chinese diaspora". Some may prefer to identify only on citizenship basis, while others may prefer to identify on ethnicity basis. People with similar backgrounds or experiences can have different identities.

Foreign interference: freedom of speech

The recent government focus on foreign interference from the PRC and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has put the Chinese diaspora under the spotlight. Many members of the Chinese diaspora welcome this focus on foreign interference. They were among the first to raise the alarm about this issue, as they are often the targets of foreign interference.

Groups vulnerable to PRC coercion include ethnic minorities and dissidents who vocally speak out against the Chinese government. There are documented cases of PRC authorities going after families of dissidents in China, with the aim to silence these dissidents who live in Australia.

This form of foreign interference severely impedes the freedom of speech of people with close connections to the PRC. The Australian Government, working with people at-risk from PRC coercion, should look for more effective ways to protect these individuals' freedom of speech, which is one of the central tenets of democracy in Australia.

Foreign interference: freedom of association

On the other hand, media reporting in recent years has portrayed some Chinese-Australians as possible agents or perpetrators of foreign interference, due mostly to alleged associations and links between them and the CCP's United Front system or even simply due to their political views. The focus on these, rather than actual improper or illegal actions, is concerning — especially as the implications of these alleged associations and links are often misrepresented or not properly contextualised. In the absence of direct evidence of wrongdoing, allegations of guilt based only on associations and links should be treated with a high degree of caution.

These types of media reports can have real-world consequences, especially for people in the Chinese diaspora. Some members of the Chinese diaspora may have joined an organisation “linked” to the CCP's United Front efforts, such as one of the hometown associations, business associations or dance troupes for social and economic reasons, rather than out of political conviction. But they are now seen as part of CCP's foreign interference effort in Australia. Their loyalties to Australia are being questioned simply for embracing the “Chinese” part of their identity.

The general suspicion towards people with Chinese heritage in the context of foreign interference means that any political activities by Chinese-Australians are viewed with extra scrutiny. Whenever a Chinese-Australian is engaging in politics or advocating policies, questions will be raised about their association with the CCP, especially if they are advocating a pro-engagement position. This makes them less willing to advocate publicly for one political view (engagement), lest their loyalties come under question. It can also increase the feeling of alienation and contribute to cynicism towards Australian politics among Chinese-Australians.

In addition, organisations may prefer to mitigate risks by preferring someone who is not of Chinese background. This will worsen the under-representation of Chinese-Australians in politics, as they need to overcome a higher standard of proof of innocence — by proving their “non-association” with something that is not clearly defined and little understood.

Valuing skills in Chinese diaspora

There are frequent laments in public debate about the difficulty of the Chinese language and the lack of Chinese speakers in Australia. While it is true that Australia needs to have more China-literate people, these types of laments usually ignore the skills that exist in the Chinese diaspora.

Many Australian businesses have recognised that Chinese-Australians bring valuable language and cultural skills. Yet despite the importance of China to public policy in Australia, the Australian Public Service is not in a rush to take advantage of these valuable skills. Chinese-Australians are under-represented in policy advising roles in Canberra, and the result is worse in defence and national security portfolios — portfolios most in need of greater understanding of China.

One of the reasons for the under-representation of Chinese-Australians in policy advising is the difficulty in gaining security clearance when someone has connections to the PRC. The policy areas that benefit the most from the skills that Chinese-Australians bring — foreign policy and national security — are also the areas that require the highest level of security clearance. Obtaining this is much more difficult for those born outside Australia or with family connections to foreign countries, especially China.