

Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee

By email: [FADT.SEN@aph.gov.au](mailto:FADT.SEN@aph.gov.au)

Dear Committee Chair,

**Re: Funding for public research into foreign policy issues**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a supplementary submission to the Senate inquiry into the funding for public research into foreign policy issues.

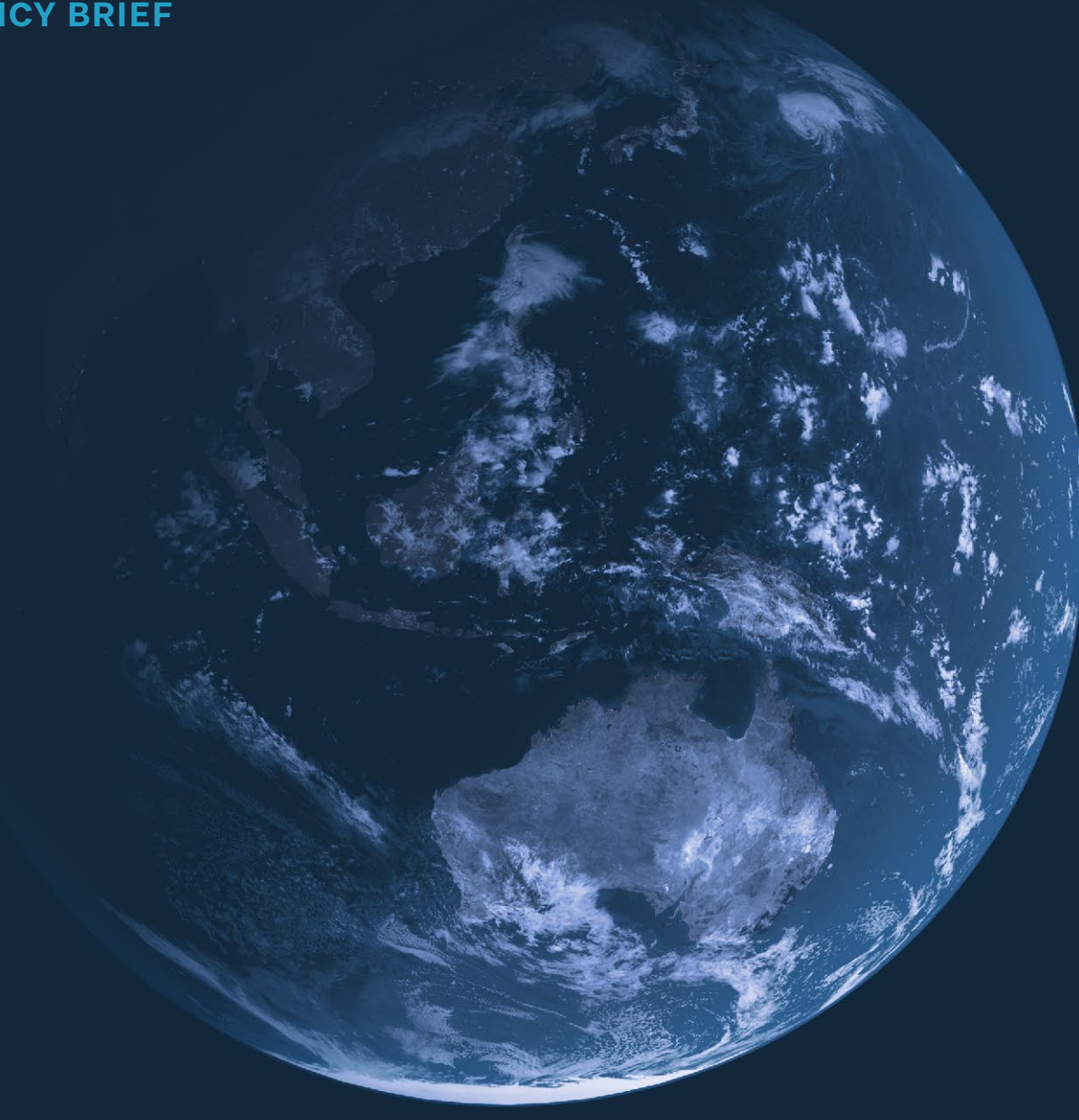
Please find attached a report I prepared for the Lowy Institute on Chinese-Australians in the APS.

Sincerely,

Yun Jiang



**LOWY  
INSTITUTE  
POLICY BRIEF**



# **Chinese-Australians in the Australian Public Service**

**YUN JIANG**  
APRIL 2021

## CHINESE AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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- produce distinctive research and fresh policy options for Australia's international policy and to contribute to the wider international debate
- promote discussion of Australia's role in the world by providing an accessible and high-quality forum for discussion of Australian international relations through debates, seminars, lectures, dialogues and conferences.

Lowy Institute Policy Briefs are designed to address a particular, current policy issue and to suggest solutions. They are deliberately prescriptive, specifically addressing two questions: What is the problem? What should be done?

The views expressed in this paper are entirely the author's own and not those of the Lowy Institute.

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

### KEY FINDINGS

- Almost every governmental policy decision made today has a China angle, and building understanding of China has become more pressing for Australian policymaking than ever.
- Despite the urgent demand within the Australian public service for China expertise and language skills, the existing skills of many Chinese-Australians are being overlooked. Australia has a significant, diverse, and growing population of Chinese-Australians, but they are underrepresented and underutilised in the public service.
- A better harnessing of the skills and knowledge of this community — including via improved recruitment processes, better use of data, skills-matching, and reviewing and clarifying security clearance processes and requirements — would have substantial benefits for Australian policymaking in one of its most important bilateral relationships.

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### **What is the problem?**

Chinese–Australian communities are invaluable sources of China-related expertise, yet their people are underrepresented in the country’s public service roles. Possible reasons include limited recruitment efforts, problems with gaining security clearances, failure to match existing skills with public service roles, and preconceptions based on perceived security risks. Where China literacy does exist in the Australian Public Service (APS), it is often underutilised or undervalued. The dearth of China capability means the public service is not drawing on an important source of talent, skills, and advice to develop Australia’s policies on China.

### **What should be done?**

The public service needs to value China expertise and capabilities within its ranks. It also needs to recruit more Chinese-Australians in policy roles.

It should do so by better matching skills and expertise with roles and positions. It should value existing country and regional expertise, collect and analyse better data, target culturally and linguistically diverse communities for recruitment, and overhaul its security clearance processes.

## INTRODUCTION

*Understanding our near neighbour's actions, intentions, and worldview has become more crucial and urgent.*

Almost every governmental policy decision made today has a China angle. What is Australia's national interest when it comes to China? How can Australia manage the bilateral relationship and the risks associated with China's increasing economic and geopolitical power? These conundrums are not new. They have been relevant to Australia's long-term public and foreign policy agenda for years. They are now more pressing than ever.

China is the second-largest economy in the world and Australia's biggest trading partner. China is also flexing its geopolitical muscle and expanding its influence in the region and beyond. COVID-19 has accelerated that trend, with China becoming increasingly assertive abroad, including adopting a 'wolf-warrior' style of diplomacy with other nations.<sup>1</sup> Understanding our near neighbour's actions, intentions, and worldview has become more crucial and urgent.

The importance to Australia of increasing this understanding, and building its China literacy, is well understood. Nowhere is it more important than in public policymaking. The 2019 Independent Review of the Australian Public Service recommended building a "workforce with deep experience in and knowledge of Asia and the Pacific". It noted:



In 2020, proficient Mandarin or Cantonese-speakers accounted for 1.2 per cent of APS employees in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and 1.7 per cent of Defence APS employees. Image: Flickr/NoRMaN TsAi 蔡英韻

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“Policy officers will require a more sophisticated understanding of the region, as well as Asian language proficiency. This has been a longstanding goal of the APS. It was a focus of the 2012 Australia in the Asian Century White Paper. Coordinated and sustained action to deepen Asia-relevant capabilities was not taken then, and it remains a skills gap across the APS.”<sup>2</sup>

Addressing the policy issues in Australia-China relations requires China-literate policymakers in governments at federal, state, territory, and local levels. Yet, Australia’s Asia literacy is meagre — an issue that has been recognised for decades by successive federal governments.<sup>3</sup> A critical aspect of this deficiency is inadequate knowledge and expertise on China. With China-related issues becoming more prominent in Australia’s foreign and domestic policies, Australia needs China-literate policymakers in the public service more than ever. Issues such as freedom of speech on university campuses, trade disputes and diversification, technology competition, cyber security, and foreign interference all involve an aspect of Australia-China relations and are relevant across the breadth of the public service — from the Foreign Affairs and Trade to Home Affairs and Attorney-General’s, as well as the education, treasury, industry, and communications portfolios.

Being China literate not only means having a good understanding of Chinese languages, but also of China’s political economy, cultures, traditions, histories, and societies. It requires skills and knowledge beyond speaking basic Mandarin. Broader historical and cultural knowledge is fundamental to both meaningful engagement with China as well as understanding how to push back against China when it is in Australia’s national interest. Such knowledge will ultimately allow Australian governments, businesses, and organisations to better communicate their priorities and interests with their Chinese counterparts.

There are two potential sources of China literacy in the Australian population. The first is a cadre of China specialists, including linguists and those with a strong education on China, or expertise based on deep experience of the Chinese culture and political economy. The second is the Chinese-Australian population. Currently, the Australian public service has a deficit in both groups.

First, there are far fewer Chinese-Australians in the public service than in the broader population. While around 1.2 million Australians report Chinese heritage (5.6 per cent of the total population), and 3.7 per cent of the population speak a Chinese language at home,<sup>4</sup> only 2.6 per cent

*There are far fewer Chinese-Australians in the public service than in the broader population.*



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of APS employees fell within the APS definition of Chinese heritage in 2019.<sup>5</sup>

*Just 5 per cent of the APS reported having tertiary qualifications in an Asia-related field in 2013.*

Second, the evidence points to a lack of China literacy in the public service. While China literacy encompasses more than just knowing one or more Chinese languages, a lack of comprehensive data means that language proficiency is commonly used as a substitute for 'literacy' or 'capability'. The data on Chinese literacy in the public service suggests a deficit based on generational neglect of linguistic and cultural awareness of Asia. Since the 1970s, consecutive Australian governments have invested in programs promoting the uptake of Asian languages in schools.<sup>6</sup> In 2008, the Rudd government committed to boosting Asia literacy with more than \$62 million in funding for school-based programs. But the investments have been inconsistent and sporadic, and the effects of this have persisted throughout the past decade. For example, just 5 per cent of the APS reported having tertiary qualifications in an Asia-related field in 2013.<sup>7</sup> In 2008, only 227 of Australia's more than 2100 diplomats possessed proficiency in any Asian language.<sup>8</sup> And there are still very few Australians of non-Chinese heritage — either within or outside the APS — who can speak Mandarin proficiently, with one estimate putting the figure as low as 130 in the entire country.<sup>9</sup>

There are several ways to bridge this literacy gap. The first would be to encourage and support increased China literacy across the breadth of the Australian population; this is a costly and long-term goal with a prolonged lag before its impacts are felt in the public service. The second is to invest in China literacy within the public service — a similarly long-term and expensive approach that may take decades to yield results. The third is to draw on the knowledge, experience, and skills of the Australia-Chinese population to build expertise within the public service. Australia will gain a competitive edge if it can harness the experience and skills of Chinese-Australians who speak a Chinese language fluently, understand the Chinese political system and its economy, and have significant cultural awareness. This paper will examine the third approach as a potential solution to the challenge of Australia's China literacy gap.

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

# CHINA LITERACY, LANGUAGE, AND PUBLIC POLICY

### The importance of language, and the dearth of language expertise in the APS

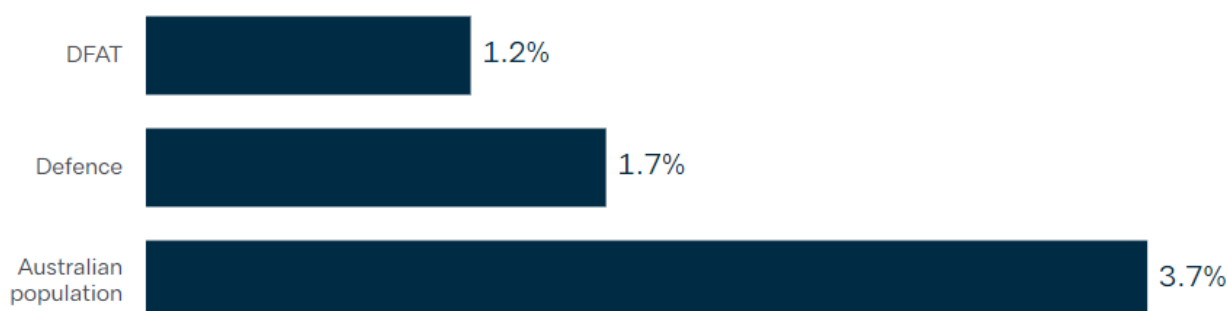
Last decade, Australia spent the least amount of time of all OECD countries teaching a second language to its students.<sup>10</sup> The proportion of students studying a foreign language in Year 12 decreased from 40 per cent in 1960 to around 10 per cent in 2016.<sup>11</sup> The situation with Chinese language study is not much better, with students eschewing Chinese as a second language at Year 12 and university level in Australia.<sup>12</sup>

In response to a survey by Asian Studies Association of Australia, one academic noted: “We have seen the gradual hollowing out of the deep language and cultural expertise on China in Australia. Increasingly those Australians who speak to us about China don’t know the language, nor have they spent extended time studying its history, culture and politics.”<sup>13</sup> Another academic has identified the deficit in language skills as being detrimental to relations between Canberra and Beijing.<sup>14</sup>

*“We have seen the gradual hollowing out of the deep language and cultural expertise on China in Australia.”*

## Proficiency in Chinese languages in DFAT and Defence

% OF EMPLOYEES IDENTIFIED AS PROFICIENT IN MANDARIN OR CANTONESE



### Sources

DFAT: Refers to DFAT APS staff only and does not include Locally Engaged Staff. Data supplied by DFAT, current as at 17 Aug 2020.

Defence: Supplied by the Department of Defence, 22 Aug 2020.

Australian population: [Cultural Diversity in Australia](#) (2016 ABS Census data).

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

*It is not enough to rely on translations of official documents or the words of a spokesperson from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

By 2020, Mandarin had become the second most common language proficiency in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), behind French. However, there are still only 47 DFAT diplomats who have current tested professional level proficiency in Mandarin or Cantonese.<sup>15</sup> This is equivalent to approximately 1.2 per cent of all DFAT diplomats. At the Department of Defence, which uses a self-identification system for capturing language proficiency, 1.7 per cent of APS employees identified as proficient in a Chinese language.<sup>16</sup> This is far lower than the 3.7 per cent of all Australians who speak Mandarin or Cantonese at home, according to 2016 Census data.<sup>17</sup>

This language skill deficit matters. Many key Chinese debates and documents are available only in the Chinese language. In a 2016 report on Chinese language capacity in Australia, Jane Orton pointed out that “Australia needs to be able to source and judge essential information from around the globe on its own behalf, including information concerning China, often written or spoken in Chinese only.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Language skills are important, but insufficient**

In determining how Australia should respond to China, it is vital to understand China's domestic priorities and settings, as they have a strong influence on its international goals and policies. For a country such as China, with its opaque and labyrinthine political structure, understanding its modern history and contemporary culture is critical as it gives valuable clues to the different interests and incentives operating within the system. This awareness assists in interpreting China's decision-making processes, both at different levels of government, as well as in businesses.

It is not enough to rely on translations of official documents or the words of a spokesperson from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Reading these is a good and important start, but a greater understanding of China generally — from its customs to its statecraft — is necessary to interpret them. Without those additional layers of understanding and interpretation, the risk of misunderstanding is high.<sup>19</sup>

A more nuanced grasp of Chinese societies and cultures also gives context to news from China and its policy directions. For example, familiarity with the history of surveillance in China, the genesis of different social movements, or how urban and rural families are

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governed, can be central to considering and predicting possible policies and how they may be perceived by the Chinese people themselves.<sup>20</sup>

There are too few Australians with the requisite Chinese language and cultural skills to parse these developments within the APS, to the detriment of Australian policymaking both generally and in relation to China. This is despite repeated calls and numerous government-led initiatives over the past few decades to improve China literacy, and Asia literacy more generally.<sup>21</sup> Instead, much of Australia's Chinese language and cultural literacy resides in the Asian-Australian (more specifically, Chinese-Australian) communities.<sup>22</sup>

## THE CHINESE-AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

*Chinese-Australians are also more likely than the general population to speak a Chinese language.*

Members of Chinese-Australian communities likely already possess a significant level of language and cultural competency with the potential to fill at least some of the capability gap in the APS. These communities are extremely diverse. Of the 5.6 per cent of Australians who report Chinese ancestry, 59 per cent were born outside mainland China, in places such as Australia, Malaysia, and Hong Kong.<sup>23</sup> Members of the various communities do not all share the same views and may even have little interest in China. They are from a diverse range of socioeconomic, political, and ethnic groups.<sup>24</sup> While not all Chinese-Australians have a deep understanding of China, in general they are more likely than other groups to have the relevant linguistic skills and cultural familiarity.<sup>25</sup>

Chinese-Australians are also more likely than the general population to speak a Chinese language.<sup>26</sup> However, just as important is the experience of living in different cultures. Arguably, those who have been immersed in more than one culture can better understand the reasons behind differing views and perspectives and are better placed to foster intercultural understanding. This is the great dividend from Australia's multicultural character.

Yet, the low levels of Chinese-language proficiency in key government departments indicate that the APS has not managed to sufficiently harness the capabilities that exist within these communities. Bicultural knowledge and experience are invaluable tools in policy advising, so more Chinese-Australians should be involved in the policy work of the APS, including on the myriad policy issues related to China. However, the data shows that this has not been the case.

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### IDENTIFYING THE GAPS

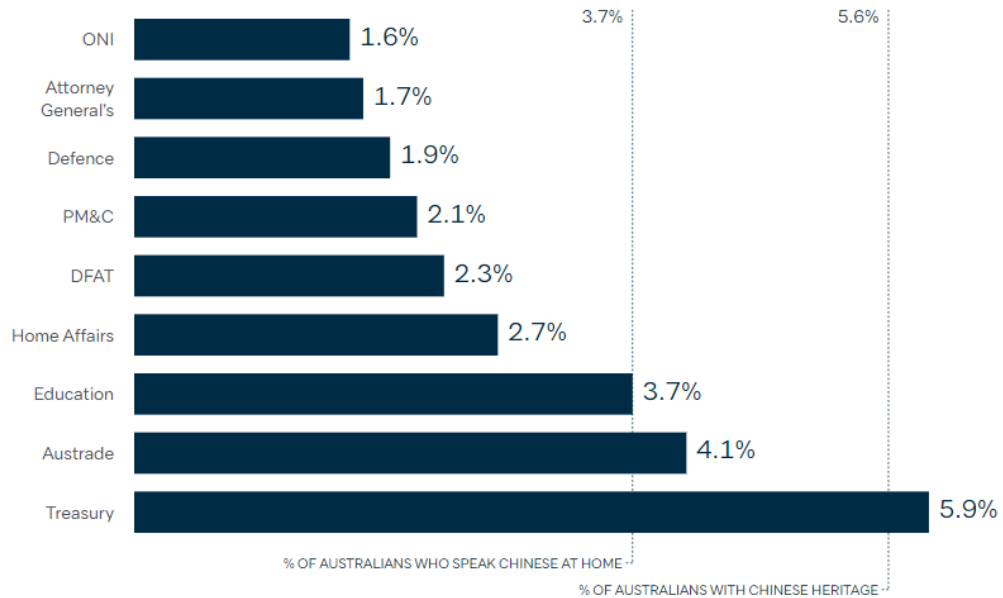
Good data is required to understand the scale of the problem. The Australian Public Service Employment Database (APSED), maintained by the Australian Public Service Commission, stores employment data on APS employees as supplied by the human resources divisions of the various APS agencies. According to APSED definitions, a person of Chinese heritage is someone born in China, Hong Kong, Macau, or Taiwan and/or whose first language spoken is Chinese, Mandarin, or Cantonese. While this methodology may significantly undercount the number of Chinese-Australians in the public service, there is no better data available. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data on languages spoken at home<sup>27</sup> (which is the data most comparable to the APSED data) show that 3.7 per cent of Australians spoke Mandarin or Cantonese at home in 2016,<sup>28</sup> up from 2.8 per cent in 2011,<sup>29</sup> 2.3 per cent in 2006,<sup>30</sup> and 2.1 per cent in 2001.<sup>31</sup>

By comparison, APSED data indicates that 2.6 per cent of APS employees fitted within its definition of Chinese heritage as at December 2019.<sup>32</sup>

It is reasonable to expect that representation of Chinese-Australians in the APS would lag that in the general population, as it may take years for the composition of the workplace to respond to social and demographic change. The data on new hires (engagements) may be a better indicator of whether the APS recruitment reflects the broader community composition. In 2019, only 2.3 per cent of APS engagements were people of Chinese heritage. Again, this remains significantly lower than the proportion in the general population.<sup>33</sup>

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Proportion of APS employees with Chinese heritage by agency  
TOTAL HEADCOUNT BY HERITAGE, DECEMBER 2019



Sources: Australian Public Service Employment Database; Australian Bureau of Statistics

Abbreviations: Office of National Intelligence (ONI) | Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) | Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

Further analysis shows that employees with Chinese heritage are also underrepresented in certain roles and departments. For example, the highest percentage of employees with Chinese heritage are employed in information and communications technology roles, at 5.5 per cent, followed by accounting and finance at 4.7 per cent.<sup>34</sup> By contrast, only 2.2 per cent of strategic policy roles — including those that develop Australia’s policies on China — are filled by Australians with Chinese heritage.

There is also a marked difference in the representation of employees with Chinese heritage across the various federal government departments (See Figure 1).<sup>35</sup> Treasury and Austrade were the only agencies with a higher representation of people with Chinese heritage than the general population.

The problem of underrepresentation of people with Chinese heritage is especially acute at senior management level (which is known as the Senior Executive Service or ‘SES’ in the APS). For example, employees of Chinese heritage in the SES comprised only 1 per cent of Assistant Secretaries (AS) or equivalent, and 0.3 per cent of First Assistant

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Secretaries (FAS) or equivalent<sup>36</sup> — there were only two Chinese-Australian FAS out of a total 577 FAS across the entire APS.<sup>37</sup>

The dearth of Australians of Asian background in senior roles is sometimes referred to as the ‘bamboo ceiling’.<sup>38</sup> Although this phenomenon exists in both the public and private sectors in Australia,<sup>39</sup> it is more pronounced in the public sector. Approximately 1 per cent of federal and state government department heads are from non-European backgrounds. This compares with 4 per cent of ASX 200 CEOs from non-European backgrounds<sup>40</sup> — still dismally low, but far higher than their government counterparts. At senior executive level, the figure for non-European backgrounds in the corporate sector is 5.8 per cent for ASX 200 companies, more than double that of their counterparts in federal and state government departments, who comprise 2.4 per cent of the senior executive service.<sup>41</sup>

### The ‘bamboo ceiling’ in Australia's public and private sectors

% OF SENIOR STAFF WITH NON-EUROPEAN BACKGROUNDS

	Government	ASX200
CEOs / Heads of department	1%	4%
Senior executives	2.4%	5.8%

Source: Australian Human Rights Commission, *Leading for Change: A Blueprint for Cultural Diversity and Inclusive Leadership Revisited* ([access](#)) – April 2018



## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

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Progress in addressing this lag in public service diversity has been patchy. In 2019, the APS reported that 36 of its 97 agencies had “an action plan, strategy and/or policy in place to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) employees.”<sup>42</sup> This is despite the Secretaries Equality and Diversity Council agreeing two years earlier to appoint CALD champions and set up CALD networks in agencies in which they did not already exist.<sup>43</sup> Some public service departments are further attempting to address the lack of ethnic and cultural diversity under the ‘inclusion and diversity’ pillar, including through initiatives such as establishing CALD employee networks and appointing senior Champions for CALD.<sup>44</sup>

However, these efforts to date have had limitations. Issues such as “only paying lip service” and “not walking the talk” were reported by APS staff in interviews for this study.<sup>45</sup> Instead of displaying genuine interest in employees and their cultures, some Chinese-Australian officers say that diversity efforts seem to revolve around events such as “superficial morning teas”.<sup>46</sup> The effort devoted by individuals to these diversity initiatives is often seen as “extra-curricular” and to be done outside normal working hours, rather than as a “core” part of work.<sup>47</sup>

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

# IDENTIFYING THE CAUSES

The Australian public service should represent and reflect the Australian public it serves. With few Chinese-Australians employed across the APS and even fewer in policy advising roles, the causes and potential remedies warrant analysis.

### Recruitment

A potential factor is that few Chinese-Australians apply for these roles because they do not see the public service as a rewarding career path. Equally, the APS may be seen as an undesirable employer for Chinese-Australians due to their underrepresentation in its ranks, including in its leadership. Combined, these factors may be compounding the problem. However, there is insufficient recruitment data to test this assumption, and efforts within at least one department to capture such information have been resisted.<sup>48</sup>

At the very least, the APS would need to make significant efforts in its recruitment programs to change perceptions among potential employees. However, there is a perception that many, if not most, departments do not target underrepresented ethnic or cultural heritage groups in their recruitment drives.<sup>49</sup> There is also anecdotal evidence that individual efforts to reach out to Chinese-Australian communities may be “punished with suspicion of intentions and a huge amount of paperwork”.<sup>50</sup>

### Security Clearances

Another possible factor in the underrepresentation of Chinese-Australians in the APS is the security clearance process. Having access to sensitive material is essential for numerous policy roles, especially in foreign affairs, defence, and national security, and requires employees to obtain formal security clearances from government. The security clearance process is notoriously slow for many applicants, who are given no guarantee of time frame. In Australia, while benchmarks for Negative Vetting Level 1 and 2 clearances — formerly referred to as Secret and Top Secret — are 90 and 125 business days respectively,<sup>51</sup> some clearance processes are reported to have taken longer than two years.<sup>52</sup> Even for those who are already in the public service, moving to a role requiring a higher clearance can be a frustrating process, with a risk that applicants accept other job offers rather than continuing to wait.<sup>53</sup>

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## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

*The security clearance process plays an indisputably important role in protecting Australia from actors seeking illicit access to government information and improper influence over government employees.*

Interviews for this research suggested that these problems are exacerbated for applicants of Chinese heritage. They may have spent time in China or have family members in China, further complicating the clearance process. There is some evidence that the already lengthy process may take six months longer for Chinese-Australians than for other Australians.<sup>54</sup>

There is little official data publicly available in Australia, but data from the United States (a Five Eyes intelligence partner to Australia) indicates that individuals of Chinese heritage find it harder to obtain security clearances. Between 2010 and 2019, for example, 61 per cent of US security clearance applicants with connections to China were denied the necessary approval, compared with 34 per cent of applicants with connections to other countries.<sup>55</sup>

People with diverse cultural experiences, including second-language abilities, extensive international travel, and studies abroad are likely to be well informed and possess useful qualities for public policy roles. Those experiences, however, may make the security clearance process even more difficult than it is for applicants with less diverse backgrounds. Former head of the Office of National Assessments, Allan Gyngell, has recently remarked that:

“It is much harder for people who have families anywhere overseas, not just China, but other parts of the world as well to get those security clearances because at the highest level they are highly intrusive and require detailed inquiries into contacts. All of us have heard anecdotal evidence that Chinese-Australians have decided no ‘I’m not going to get anywhere in the public service’. That is a great waste of talent for us.”<sup>56</sup>

The security clearance process plays an indisputably important role in protecting Australia from actors seeking illicit access to government information and improper influence over government employees. It is therefore imperative that individuals are carefully scrutinised and screened before taking up roles with access to national security classified information. However, it is possible that the right balance has not been achieved, and that the process is inadvertently sidelining important sources of expertise and insight into the Chinese party-state.

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

### Preconceptions

When Chinese-Australians with deep knowledge of China are recruited to the APS, management preconceptions may hinder their placement in China-related roles. Once an employee has obtained the necessary security clearance, it could be assumed that their work options would not be constrained by their ethnicity. However, in one department, a group of Chinese-Australians has raised concerns that they are less likely to be offered a place working on China-related topics due to their Chinese heritage.<sup>57</sup> In another department, a Chinese-Australian commented that the APS “would never hire someone with my name [to work on national security]. It’s just too risky.” Another observed: “even though I was best-placed [for China-related work], I suspect they didn’t give it to me due to perceived conflict of interest, because of my ethnicity.”<sup>58</sup>

One result of this is that departments may spend an extraordinary amount of time and resources training public servants to speak a Chinese language and gain better understanding of Chinese society and culture, while those with existing China literacy, including language skills, are sidelined.<sup>59</sup>

The perception among at least some APS employees of Chinese heritage is that their ethnic or cultural background is an impediment to working on China-related issues, even when that is where their specialised knowledge or strength lies — a scenario that is likely to have had a demoralising effect. For the public service, that can lead to staff disengagement, higher attrition levels, and a resulting dearth of Chinese-Australians progressing to senior roles. As professor of Chinese history Louise Edwards remarked in a recent speech:

“[Asian students] are creative, multilingual, innovative, energetic, empathetic, globally aware and unless they get invited into the heart of organisational policymaking, agenda setting, and *listened to* while they are there, I fear that they will take their great ideas and head out of Australia, to Asia, where they will be heard. Their cross-cultural skills will be valued rather than ignored or regarded with suspicion.”<sup>60</sup>

### APS management processes

Another factor affecting low levels of China knowledge and Chinese language ability in the APS may be the skills requirements and performance management processes.

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## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

*A series of public sector capability reviews, including the 2019 Independent Review of the APS, has identified several weaknesses in APS capability.*

A series of public sector capability reviews, including the 2019 Independent Review of the APS, has identified several weaknesses in APS capability, which include prioritising short-term responsiveness at the expense of long-term thinking, and failing to capitalise on employee potential.<sup>61</sup> Policy roles are largely seen as generalist, suiting a good policy analyst who can master content and prepare a brief quickly and efficiently. As a result, the APS has tended to prioritise skills such as the ability to write talking points, respond to letters from the public, and arrange ministerial visits, over those of policy analysis and policy development,<sup>62</sup> and it is likely that the current performance management and promotion systems reflect this.

The public service as a whole may recognise that specialised knowledge of China is useful, but managers need to understand how to utilise those capabilities to advantage, and there is little evidence this is the case. For example, during interviews for this study, several public servants with proficient Chinese-language skills report never having used them during the course of their work.<sup>63</sup> As a consequence, graduates risk losing their language proficiency after a few years of working in the public service. Better matching of existing skills with public service roles would be a cost-saving measure.

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

# WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE CHINA LITERACY IN THE APS?

This study has uncovered a clear gap between the China literacy and skills requirements of the APS and the representation of those by Chinese-Australians in the service. Examining the dynamics of the issue, there are numerous policy measures available to the government that could begin to address this gap.

### **1) Collect and publish better data and undertake evidence-based research on the representation of different culturally and linguistically diverse groups within the public service**

The Australian Public Service Commission should collect greater and more detailed data on different CALD groups within the public service as part of the annual APS Employee Census.<sup>64</sup> It should devise demographic questions to appropriately measure cultural and linguistic diversity at the workplace level, across divisions and units, and at all levels of the talent pipeline. Such data should be published, including segregation by attributes such as classification level, job family, location, and agency.

Recruitment and promotion data should also be collected and standardised across the departments and agencies and be made publicly available. This process could build on existing efforts at some agencies, such as at DFAT, which has committed to report to staff annually on the results of CALD recruitment, selection, promotion and diplomatic posting processes.<sup>65</sup>

Better data and evidence would allow more thorough investigation of the problems related to underrepresentation of Chinese-Australians in the APS, for example, whether due to issues related to recruitment, retention, or other factors.

### **2) Match skills, experiences, and interests with roles and positions instead of looking at generic skillsets by classification level**

Currently, public servants with Asian language and cultural skills and experience are not necessarily working in areas that fully utilise these attributes. At the same time, public service departments and agencies

*The APS should actively target people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds when developing recruitment and progression strategies.*

## CHINESE-AUSTRALIANS IN THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC SERVICE

*The national security community needs to formulate strategies to better adapt for and utilise the diverse makeup of Australian society.*

are looking for candidates with Asia capabilities but may not be using appropriate selection criteria for these skills. There are job/skill mismatches. Instead of using the generic public service selection criteria based on classification levels, the APS should consider also targeting specific Asia-capability skills and experiences.

This also means opening more positions to external recruitment. For example, diplomatic postings could be an open competitive process like other APS vacancies (such as the international trade agency Austrade which advertises publicly to fill some roles abroad), to attract people with Asia capabilities from across the public service and the broader Australian community.

### **3) Target culturally and linguistically diverse communities for APS recruitment**

The APS should actively target people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds when developing recruitment and progression strategies. This could include simple steps such as having Chinese-Australian public servants speak at university events targeting students from Chinese background.

Beyond these recruitment efforts, it is imperative that the public service fosters a welcoming culture where diversity and difference is valued. The APS should examine existing initiatives for progressing women in public service and consider adapting them for progressing other minority groups.

### **4) Foster integrated policymaking, where interdisciplinary thinking and country and regional expertise is valued across the public service**

Country and regional expertise should be valued and rewarded through inbuilt incentives for performance management and training and development. Public servants should be incentivised to fully utilise their knowledge and skills, rather than feel constrained by formal role or rank.

Similarly, training opportunities that improve Asia knowledge and capabilities should be offered to a broad range of policymakers, not just to people in dedicated Asia-related roles. The public service needs to improve its general Asia skills, not just among a few employees who are focused on an Asia-specific portfolio.

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Middle and senior managers need to make full use of a diverse workforce. One measure would be to create a database of skills and topics of expertise, such as Mandarin proficiency or knowledge of Chinese state-owned enterprises, which would help identify employees with the requisite skills and knowledge base for China-relevant work.

### **5) Create a community of interest in China within the public service, linking with academia and think tanks**

A community where public servants interested in China could meet regularly to exchange ideas and discuss views on topics related to China would have three distinct benefits. First, members could identify where interests and expertise lie, even for those not currently working in a relevant role. Second, members could openly discuss ideas outside the constraints of their respective 'departmental view'. Third, it would build knowledge on China and capacity within the public service. It would be especially useful to include junior or newer public servants whose knowledge and expertise may not be well-utilised in overtly hierarchical departments. Such an initiative should be championed by senior managers.

### **6) Review the security clearance process to account for potential opportunities lost**

The national security community needs to formulate strategies to better adapt for and utilise the diverse makeup of Australian society. This includes reviewing both the processes and criteria for security clearances.<sup>66</sup> The mechanism should account for the need to manage espionage and coercion risks while ensuring that people with the right skills and expertise are not deterred from applying for, nor blocked from, relevant roles. Departmental leaders should clarify agency criteria on allowing (or preventing) Chinese-Australians with current security clearances from working on China-related matters.



## CONCLUSION

To enable an integrated approach to policymaking on China, Australia needs to value country expertise and facilitate interdisciplinary thinking. China is becoming more powerful, and the world is becoming more interconnected and complex. In this context, having a broad knowledge of China across the public service is essential, as social, economic, and security interests become more intertwined. While Australia has a significant, diverse, and growing population of Chinese-Australians, they are currently underrepresented in the public service, and those in the service are often underutilised. This Policy Brief has identified several relatively simple measures the APS could adopt to harness more effectively the skills and knowledge of this community. Doing so would have substantial benefits for Australian policymaking in one of its most important bilateral relationships.

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- <sup>46</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>47</sup> Interviews by author with officials from APS departments in Canberra on 27 February, 6 and 17 March 2020, on the condition of anonymity.
- <sup>48</sup> Interview by author with officials from one APS department in Canberra on 17 March 2020, on the condition of anonymity.
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- <sup>58</sup> Interviews by author with officials from APS departments in Canberra in early 2020. In the United States, ‘assignment restrictions’ of this type are formalised in State Department policy, and Congressman Andy Kim has told of receiving a letter

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