

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

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I am a Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities and a member of the College of Experts of the Australian Research Council (2020–22). My research expertise is on soft power, public diplomacy and diasporic Chinese media. I have a long-standing track record of research on the changing nature and development of the global Chinese diaspora in Australia, and have written and edited three books on this topic since 2000 (details of my publications are available at <https://www.uts.edu.au/staff/wanning.sun>). I am the author of a major report, *Chinese-Language Media in Australia: Developments, Challenges and Opportunities* (2016) and I currently lead an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project, ‘Chinese-Language Digital/Social Media in Australia: Rethinking Soft Power’ (2018–20). My most recent research on the Chinese diaspora in Australia is available by going to the above link.

In this submission, I address the concerns of the communities that constitute the Chinese diaspora and examine the barriers that inhibit the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia’s democratic and social institutions.

General Background

Migration from China to Australia started as early as the British colonial period, when it consisted mostly of miners and agricultural labourers. This situation continued until the early 1950s, when migration from China came to a virtual standstill. Australia resumed direct immigration from the Chinese mainland in significant numbers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely as a result of the economic reforms that occurred in China from the late 1970s and the implementation of China’s open-door policy in relation to study abroad. From the early 1980s, the Chinese people were caught up in a sustained ‘fever of going abroad’. Along with a number of other Western countries, such as the United States, Canada, Germany, Japan and New Zealand, Australia quickly identified language education as a new market segment. Following the 1989 Tiananmen incident, the Hawke government made the bold decision to allow 45,000 mainland Chinese students and nationals to settle permanently in Australia, signalling the beginning of the demographic shift from a Cantonese-speaking to a Mandarin-speaking majority in Australia’s Chinese community.

As a direct result of the country's greatly expanded intake of mainland Chinese migrants since the early 1990s, Australia has seen a rapid and considerable increase in the size of its Mandarin-speaking population. With its clean environment and relaxed lifestyle, Australia became an attractive destination for those from China's burgeoning middle class, who came to value quality of life more than standard of living. It is estimated that as many as 343,523 ethnic Chinese were living in Australia in 1996, and the 2001 census recorded more than 555,500. Over the past decade, this number has increased significantly, and according to the 2011 census, there were about 866,200 Australian residents claiming Chinese origin, with as many as 74 per cent of them the first generation of their family to move to Australia. There are currently about 1.2 million people of Chinese origin in Australia, approximately half of whom were born in China and [speak Mandarin in the home](#).

Despite this dramatic change in the demographics of the Chinese diaspora community, it is important to bear in mind that this is a population marked by diversity—of place of origin, experience, cultural sensibility, history and trajectory of migration, and political, religious, ethnic and ideological differences. Not only are there generational differences and a disconnect between the old and new migrant cohorts; ideological and political clashes also occur between, for instance, the mainlanders and the Hong Kongers, and between Falun Gong practitioners and supporters of the PRC. It is equally important to note that considerable diversity exists even within the Mandarin-speaking migrant cohort in terms of class background, education and level of cosmopolitanism, as well as degree of political distance from the Chinese government.

Prior to the economic reforms, the Chinese government tended to regard overseas Chinese people with varying degrees of suspicion and ambivalence. In recent decades, especially as part of China's agenda to 'go global', overseas Chinese have been encouraged by the Chinese government to promote Chinese culture, relay the Chinese government's version of the 'China story' to the world and promote China's interests to the wider international community.

In contrast to the Chinese government's keen interest in engaging Chinese migrants in its public diplomacy exercises, the Australian government has only recently turned its attention to ethnic communities in Australia as potential public diplomacy assets. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's [Public Diplomacy Strategy 2014–2016](#) document,

Australia wants to be seen as a ‘contemporary, creative, successful, diverse and tolerant nation; and an attractive place to study, work, visit, live and invest’ (DFAT 2014, 2). The document also proposes to ‘employ soft power for trade, investment and economic prosperity promotion’ (2014, 3). Special mention is made of the role of ‘diaspora communities’ in this process: ‘Diaspora communities not only play a key role in projecting contemporary Australia to the region, but also contribute to fostering a cohesive, harmonious and stable Australian society’ (2014, 10). However, just how the diaspora communities can be utilised to play these key roles is still a largely unexplored question. So far, there is little evidence that this recognition of the role of the diaspora communities in Australia’s public diplomacy agenda has translated into concrete policy implementation, at least in regard to the Chinese diaspora.

Chinese-language media in Australia

The Chinese-language media in Australia have become one of the focal points in the debate on China’s influence. In September 2016, I published a major [report](#) on the Chinese-language media in Australia, and one of the points I made there was that China’s state media have been making gradual inroads into Australia’s existing ethnic Chinese newspapers and radio programs. Many commentators have cited this trend as evidence of China’s influence within our nation.

The report also made a number of other points, which—perhaps because they turned out to be less convenient to the ‘Chinese influence’ narrative—received less attention from the media and government bodies. One of these highlighted the emergence of a vigorous and growing Chinese-language digital news media sector based in Australia, and tried to tease out some of the complexities in this sector’s relationships with both China and Australia. I argued that this sector operates differently from existing ethnic Chinese media, and could not simply be lumped together with these legacy media. A more recent [publication](#), based on a survey of the 50 most popular WeChat Subscription Accounts in Australia that deliver digital Chinese-language content, finds that the status of Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia is confined by China’s pre-existing technological infrastructure and regulatory framework, rather than any direct intervention of a specific authority, media outlet or platform, and that these media outlets and platforms should best be understood as an instance of transnational entrepreneurship rather than as instruments of Chinese government propaganda. In addition, a

recent [large survey](#) shows that the great majority of readers now get their news online, and that the readership for traditional media outlets is increasingly negligible. Given this trend, it is important for current debates to focus primarily on the [digital media sector](#).

Over the past few years since the release of the report mentioned above, the Chinese-language media sector in Australia has seen some major changes. *Singtao Daily*, the most established Chinese language newspaper in Australia since 1982, ceased publication early this year due to lack of readership, despite its attempts at survival through myriad partnerships with China's state media. *New Express Daily*, widely known for their pro-Beijing stance, also had to cease publication as a newspaper. By contrast, Chinese-language media that are known for their critical stance towards China seem to go from strength to strength. For instance, *Epoch Times* is believed to be 'closely tied to Falun Gong' and the 'biggest advocate of President Donald Trump'. Its Australian edition is reported to have most aggressively pushed its anti-China content into the private letter-boxes of Australian households. Both *Epoch Times* and *Vision Times Australia* publish in Chinese and English, and both have a consistent, if not exclusive, anti-CCP agenda. Jocelyn Chey, who formerly held diplomatic posts in China and Hong Kong, [comments](#): 'Given this political background, it is unwise to rely on *Vision Times* or *Epoch Times* for advice about how to relate to the government and people of China, any more than on how to deal with viral infections'. To make this media landscape even more perplexingly complex, the US government has just committed funding to Decode China, a new Chinese-language news site in Australia.

The statement repetitively made by many public [commentators](#)—that a significant section of the Chinese-language media in Australia is controlled by the CCP—has never been entirely accurate. And it is even less accurate now.

Fear of Racism and Demonization

In recent years, those in the Chinese diaspora have been placed under growing pressure to declare their political allegiance to Australia, and their loyalty to their adopted country has publicly been called into question. This is evidenced in the claims made by many public and media commentators, such as Clive Hamilton (*Silent Invasion*) and Peter Hartcher (the *Quarterly Essay* issue *Red Flag*). In recent months, the mere mention of PRC students and migrants has conjured up the popular narrative about their overriding patriotism towards

China at best and their role as agents of Chinese influence on the other. There seems to be a huge blind spot in the narrative of the ‘untrustworthy PRC diaspora’: modern China has experienced only one-party rule, and these migrants—as well as those who remain in China—did not choose to live in a Communist country. They were born into that system. It isn’t as if Chinese people have chosen to side with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but had other options—there is only the CCP and one or more ineffectual opposition parties. It is therefore not only unfair but also illogical to assume that PRC migrants—and indeed citizens of the PRC—are loyal to the CCP simply because they live—or have lived—in a nation that happens to be ruled by the CCP.

We are living in a time when Chinese Australians are feeling the heat regardless of whether they support China or Australia. And it is even harder for those who refuse to choose. Anti-Chinese sentiment, which has been on the rise for several years now—especially since the gradual ascendancy of the discourse of Chinese influence in the mainstream media—has been brought to the fore by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since its outbreak, members of the Chinese community have been subject to growing levels of racism and have experienced increased fear for their physical safety and mental wellbeing. A recent [survey](#) conducted by Osmond Chiu from Per Capita in collaboration with the Asian Australian Alliance received more than 400 responses. More worryingly, the survey found that almost 90% of those who experienced anti-Asian racism did not report it to the police. [Another survey](#), conducted by the Australian National University’s Centre for Social Research produced equally disturbing results: 82% of Asian-Australians reported they had experienced discrimination.

Members of the Chinese diaspora in Australia are also becoming more concerned about the political distrust in them that has been displayed extensively. Media, public commentators and politicians mostly imagine this community as being in transactional relationships—either as subjects to be managed for their potential connection with the Chinese government or as ethnic voters to be wooed during elections. Through such imaginings, their human rights as citizens of Australia seem to have become less relevant than their predetermined identity as ethnic Chinese, and they are called to choose between Australia and China as if they were individuals without any cultural, emotional and cognitive tension and ambivalence.

This has been profoundly alienating to the various diasporic Chinese communities in Australia. It is safe to say that many people in this community do not feel included, and are

therefore discouraged from developing a sense of belonging. Some of them feel very strongly that they are being disenfranchised in political terms. This is a matter of urgent concern—yet, apart from the acknowledgement of some politicians who recently commended the contribution of the Chinese diaspora communities to Australia’s multicultural society, there have been no comprehensive efforts to consider the impact of this political alienation on both the community itself and the nation’s democracy.

Barriers to Political Participation

For members of the diaspora who are new to Australia’s democratic system, political participation may take the form of becoming political candidates, donors, lobbyists and party supporters. Some members of the Chinese diaspora are political aspirants in these ways, while at the same time maintaining cultural, social and economic ties with China and Chinese government organizations. While participation in Australian politics could be perfectly legitimate, the increasing hostility between Australia and China and the tendency to see China as ‘our enemy’ can lead to aspersions being cast on members of the Chinese diaspora, who are seen as likely ‘agents’ of the Chinese government—because they are somewhat ‘connected’, ‘linked to’ and ‘appeared at the same event as’ Chinese government officials or organizations. This means that anyone from the Chinese diaspora who is considering becoming a political candidate, unless they openly declare their opposition to the Chinese government, may need to think twice about the likely political backlash against them. This is evidenced in the ways in which the media reported on [Gladys Liu](#), the Liberal Party’s Member for Chisholm for her alleged links to people who are believed to be close to Chinese government officials.

Individuals with political aspirations aside, political engagement by the vast majority of those in Chinese diasporic communities takes the form of becoming informed citizens and learning about Australia’s political system and how democracy works. My research indicates that when first-generation, Mandarin-speaking migrants become naturalized citizens, they (1) transition to a political system with voting rights and duties; (2) adjust to a different civic culture; and (3) shift to a media and digital communication environment that features two different, even conflicting, political outlooks. Empirical Australia-based evidence exists that suggests people whose first language is not English, who were born overseas and who are

from a non-democratic background tend to have lower levels of political knowledge and skills.

At the same time, my own research—which supports existing international research—indicates that these new migrants have an exceptionally high level of interest in participating in Australian politics. As new citizens in a democracy, many are keen to access political information and learn about democratic values, as well as democratic procedures. On the other hand, my research has also identified a conspicuous dearth of government-funded resources and services that enable migrant adults among diaspora communities to engage in civic education outside the formal educational system. A lack of easily accessible information and civic education aimed at improving the level of political interest, political knowledge and civic awareness among diasporas is a major problem.

Conclusion

The government should make it a priority to attack racism head on by introducing a new national anti-racism campaign and implementing a more effective and ongoing mechanism and framework to combat racism. This task is particularly urgent in response to the rising tide of virulent far-right white supremacists, who are exploiting COVID-19 to engage in racist campaigns against various racial, ethnic and religious minorities.

It behoves all—the government, the media and the public—to bear in mind that most members of Australia’s Chinese diaspora are rights-bearing citizens in multicultural Australia. The government should realize that there is currently a profound and prevalent sense of alienation in the Chinese diaspora. There is a widely shared view among the Chinese diaspora community in Australia that Chinese Australians have increasingly become collateral damage in the escalating diplomatic tension between China and Australia.

At the same time, there is a very high level of enthusiasm among first-generation migrants to learn about democratic values, practices and processes. The best way to ensure that this high level of enthusiasm is sustained is to promote social inclusion and encourage fair representation, so that this community develops a sense of political belonging. There needs to be a comprehensive, concerted effort at both national and state levels to provide resources for civic education for adult members of the diaspora who are not part of Australia’s secondary and tertiary education systems.