

Mind your tongue

Language, public diplomacy and community cohesion in contemporary Australia–China relations

John Fitzgerald



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Policy brief
Report No. 20/2019



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What's the problem?

As Australia is compelled to engage a more confrontational China, there's a risk that political commentary and media reporting on China's influence and interference operations in Australia could affect Chinese-Australian communities adversely. What can well-meaning Australians do to help? And how can Chinese-Australian communities be enlisted as equal partners in meeting the challenges ahead?

The problem is twofold. On one side is the Chinese party-state. Agencies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) misrepresent and distort Australian commentary and reporting about the party's conduct at home and abroad, its interference operations in Australia, and legitimate Australian responses to its conduct and operations. The aim is to divert or silence criticism of the party, disarm critical voices in the Chinese-Australian community, and drive a wedge between communities within Australia.

On the other side are Australian politicians and media who run the risk of alienating and possibly stigmatising Chinese-Australians through misleading claims or imprecise choices of words.

What's the solution?

This briefing paper offers constructive suggestions for those who want to listen and for those who want to speak without causing unnecessary confusion or offence.

General recommendations

1. Generalisations are not ideal but they are often unavoidable. In generalising about Chinese-Australians, all politicians, media and commentators should recognise the enormous diversity among communities and individuals and reflect this diversity in their speech and conduct. This could for example mean routinely using the plural form 'Chinese-Australian communities,' in place of 'community,' or adding words such as 'diverse' or 'disparate,' as in 'diverse Chinese-Australian communities.'
2. In speaking or writing about China, Australian politicians, media and commentators should distinguish clearly between the Government of China, the CCP and the people of China, and distinguish Chinese-Australians and their many different communities from all of the above.
3. Australian politicians, media and commentators should avoid associating Chinese-Australians with the Chinese Government, the Chinese flag or the CCP, unless Chinese-Australians expressly wish to be associated in this way (which they are perfectly entitled to do).
4. Australian politicians, media and commentators should avoid using the English word 'Chinese' as a stand-alone word when another word will do. Using 'Chinese' as a prefix ('Chinese-Australians') or adjective ('Chinese Government') is generally fine.
5. Australians using social media based in China should bear in mind that their conversations with other Australians on Australian soil are monitored and censored by a foreign power.
6. Before using social media platforms, politicians and political parties should ask themselves whether using platforms that do not permit free and respectful discussion of fundamental political issues, among Australians on Australian soil, is consistent with their basic principles, and if it's not consistent then refrain from using them under any circumstances.



7. Politicians and political parties should as far as possible refrain from rhetorically attributing racist motives (where not justified) to their critics and opponents on sensitive issues relating to China and Australia's diverse Chinese-Australian communities.

Recommendations to government

1. Australian Government representatives should firmly rebuff all claims of racism and bigotry relating to Australia made by representatives of the Chinese Government whether in China, Australia or elsewhere, immediately those claims are made.
2. Foreign state ownership or control of media and placement of foreign state content in all Australian media, including social media, should be made subject to registration and reporting consistent with the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme legislation.¹

Public diplomacy, China style

The CCP takes public diplomacy seriously, both as party and as government. Through its international propaganda arms, it has spent around A\$10 billion each year over the past decade to frame what people of other countries say and write about China.² The aim is to foster a positive image of China under CCP rule and curate local conversations about issues of particular concern in order to shape other governments' policies and programs in ways that favour China's commercial interests and long-term strategic goals.

In seeking to influence foreign opinion in its favour, China's government resembles other governments. Foreign influence operations are an everyday part of public diplomacy and are welcomed where they're legitimate and transparent. But public diplomacy crosses the line from legitimate influence to improper interference when it involves covert, coercive or corrupt behaviour.³ In Australia, such behaviour attracts legislative remedies and security responses in addition to public censure.⁴

The Chinese Government engages in a range of visible and acceptable influence operations. At the legitimate end of the spectrum, it targets people outside China through cultural agreements and exchanges, hosts public events, and supports media and print publications and educational programs. In Australia, it provides journalists with free guided trips to China, supplies schools with language learning and cultural studies textbooks, and co-funds Confucius Classrooms in state school systems and Confucius Institutes on university campuses. Those efforts often bear fruit. No other country has managed to embed its own government's particular reading of history, politics and culture within other countries' educational systems as effectively as the Government of China.⁵

At the improper end of the spectrum, influence becomes interference. Through government and party channels, authorities based in Beijing are known to have censored Chinese-Australian community media, threatened private firms so as to limit commercial advertising in media outlets they disapprove of, made efforts to extend control over Chinese-Australian community organisations, and intimidated religious believers. Embassy and consular officials have called upon university executives to cancel events they regard as offensive. Above all, the CCP has engaged in wedge politics to undermine legitimate public debate on Chinese Government policy and conduct within Australia.

Wedging race

Wedge politics exploits differences among target communities. The CCP engages in a particular form of wedge politics known as ‘united front’ (*tongyi zhanxian*, literally *united battlefield*) work—a byword for a strategy of exploiting internal divisions among the party’s critics or adversaries by forming tactical alliances with some on the other side to isolate and destroy the party’s designated enemies from within. This confrontational and divisive strategy is institutionalised at the highest levels of the CCP organisation where it is coordinated through the United Front Work Department and International Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee.⁶ It’s ‘united’ only in the sense that the party seeks to unite people on either side of a ‘battlefront’ with the aim of subverting and overcoming so-called enemies who stand in its way.⁷

The CCP’s united front strategy proved highly successful in the civil war that brought the party to power in 1949, enabling it to recruit non-communist politicians, business leaders, media owners and intellectuals in order to undermine the Nationalist government (1928–1949) from within.⁸ Today, the party seeks to replicate this historical success on a global scale by recruiting foreign business leaders, retired officials, community leaders and compliant media to its service, silence its critics internationally, and advance the interests of the party by undermining the integrity of the foreign social, political and cultural institutions it targets for penetration.

In applying united front tactics to Australia, the CCP appears to have settled on race or ethnic identity as its preferred wedge issue. Australian criticisms of China’s policies and activities at home and abroad are routinely met with accusations of racial prejudice.

John Lee, senior national security adviser to former Australian Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop

As awkward as it is, there is no escaping that race and ethnicity has become a legitimate political and national security issue and we need to be frank and upfront about the cause.

It is occurring primarily because the Communist Party has chosen to politicize and even weaponize race as a tool of foreign policy and subversion.

John Lee, ‘Australia’s Gladys Liu scandal shows how the Chinese Communist Party is weaponizing race,’ CNN, 24 September 2019, [online](#).

China’s party and government officials seek to divide Australian public opinion by suggesting that any hint of criticism of the CCP or its influence operations is bigoted or racist. In December 2017, China’s embassy in Canberra criticised Australian media for having ‘unscrupulously vilified the Chinese students as well as the Chinese community in Australia with racial prejudice.’⁹ In March 2018 the embassy accused the author of a book detailing China’s influence and interference operations in Australia of ‘racist bigotry.’¹⁰ And in June 2018 China’s resident Ambassador, referring to the passage of federal legislation to limit foreign government interference in Australian public life, urged the Australian Government to put an end to ‘bigotry’ in bilateral relations.¹¹

Within China, party, media and establishment intellectuals echo official claims of racism and bigotry, and prominent Australian public figures advance the party’s agenda through China’s propaganda media by misconstruing comments of fellow Australians as racist slurs.¹² Within Australia, mainstream media organisations amplify CCP claims of racism and bigotry through uncritical repetition.¹³



To facilitate the CCP's wedge politics, its champions abroad obscure critical differences between the concepts of party, government and people to ensure that any criticism of the party or government can be dismissed as 'anti-Chinese' bigotry.

John Garnaut, former Fairfax China correspondent and prime ministerial adviser

A key to the party's operations in Australia is collapsing the categories of Chinese Communist Party, China, and the Chinese people into a single organic whole—until the point where the party can be dropped from polite conversation altogether. The conflation means that critics of the party's activities can be readily caricatured and attacked as anti-China, anti-Chinese, and Sinophobic—labels that polarize and kill productive conversation.

Source: John Garnaut, 'How China interferes in Australia', Foreign Affairs, 9 March 2018, [online](#).

The orchestration of the party's wedging exercise is clear from the absence of alternative voices among people of goodwill in China prepared to challenge claims of racism and bigotry. Few would dare, as the charge of being 'anti-China' or a 'China traitor' can also be levelled against Chinese citizens who publicly contradict Beijing's official foreign policy positions.

Chinese Government claims of Australian racism aren't widely challenged in Australia either. To date, no Australian Government representative has publicly repudiated official accusations of racism and bigotry levelled against Australia. The result is that some Chinese-Australians, along with other Australians, are misled into thinking that criticism of China is 'racist', particularly when it's tagged to historical references to racial discrimination in Australia.¹⁴

Alex Joske, Chinese-Australian analyst

Beijing's agents here are also keen to remind Australians of this country's shameful history of racism against Chinese. The result is that when a Chinese-Australian is accused of having ties to Beijing, he may cry racism, saying that he's being tarnished by connections to Beijing only because he's ethnic Chinese. In the absence of balanced reporting in the Chinese-language media, many Australians are inclined to believe these claims.

Source: Alex Joske, 'Beijing is silencing Chinese Australians', New York Times, 6 February 2018, [online](#).

On the whole, Australian society copes reasonably well with its ethnic and cultural diversity. Four or five decades of community-building efforts supporting multiculturalism have yielded positive results. Nonetheless, one in five Australians surveyed in 2018 reported experiencing racism in the last 12 months, and surveys among Asian Australians indicate widespread experience of racist comments and conduct.¹⁵

In addition to the difficulties it poses for the health and well-being of minorities themselves, racism of any kind poses problems for Australian governments seeking to balance the management of domestic and international issues.

Badiucao, world-renowned Chinese-Australian artist

Communist China loves racism against its own people outside of China. It gives them the opportunity to unite the overseas population and sell the point that, you will only be protected and safe when you have a strong motherland.

Source: Bethany Allen Ebrahimian, 'China's rebel cartoonist unmasks', *Foreign Policy*, 4 June 2019, [online](#).

Racial profiling can also be counterproductive. Research collaborations between universities and research institutes in Australia and China, for example, are known to carry risks of cybercrime, intellectual property theft, espionage, and possible military and surveillance applications. But identifying possible breaches of research protocols by researchers' nationality or ethnicity risks stigmatising all researchers of Chinese descent and hence playing into CCP wedge politics.

There are better ways to approach the problem. Identifying research risks through a research team's institutional affiliations, corporate ties, project focus, or real-world military and surveillance applications is a fairer and surer way of identifying research collaborations that may present risks. On the evidence, an institutional or project-based focus suffices for the purpose.

Clive Hamilton, Charles Sturt University, and author of *Silent invasion: China's influence in Australia*

Two Australian universities, University of Technology Sydney and Curtin University, are conducting internal reviews¹⁶ of their funding and research approval procedures after *Four Corners* revealed their links to researchers whose work has materially assisted China's human rights abuses against the Uyghur minority in Xinjiang province.¹⁷ UTS, in particular, is in the spotlight because of a major research collaboration with CETC, the Chinese state-owned military research conglomerate.

And UNSW scientists have collaborated with experts from the National University of Defence Technology (NUDT), a top military research centre, on China's Beidou satellite system, which has many civilian as well as military uses, including tracking the movements of people and guiding missiles.¹⁸ In many cases, a clear connection can be drawn between the work that [People's Liberation Army] personnel have done in Australia and specific projects they undertake for the Chinese military.¹⁹

Source: Excerpted from Clive Hamilton, 'Australian universities must wake up to the risks of researchers linked to China's military,' *The Conversation*, 18 July 2019, [online](#).

Foreign interference in Australian political, business, community and academic affairs can't be ignored without damage to national sovereignty, security, prosperity and cohesion. Interference by the CCP in domestic Australian community life and politics risks stifling public debate within Australia, with potentially damaging effects on policymaking at all levels of government, while undermining community goodwill and social cohesion. For these reasons, all risks arising from a foreign power deliberately wedging issues of race and ethnic identity in Australia's domestic society and politics need to be acknowledged and confronted.



When the CCP seeks to drive a wedge into the community politics of a foreign country such as Australia, it should be rebuffed and corrected. In particular, government representatives should firmly rebuff claims of racism and bigotry relating to Australia made by representatives of the Chinese Government in China, Australia and elsewhere, immediately those claims are made.

Manipulating community organisations and media

Some Australian political, business and community leaders may wish to be associated with CCP influence activities in Australia. That's their choice. Those who want to avoid becoming caught up inadvertently in united front operations will need to exercise due diligence before accepting an invitation to officiate at Chinese-Australian community functions with United Front Work Department ties.

Most Chinese-Australian community organisations provide valuable services to the communities they serve. Some, however, are susceptible to United Front manipulation. How can we tell one from another? See box.

By the author

There are a number of general rules that help indicate whether a community organisation is likely to be targeted under the party's united front strategy.

Ask. The simplest way is to ask Chinese-Australian friends and acquaintances, who are generally well aware of which organisations to trust and which are best avoided. Some associations that were once regarded as trustworthy and independent have come under the influence of consular officials. Local knowledge helps to identify them.²⁰

Check. Another is to check online to see whether an organisation has already been named in association with united front activities. A quick web search would reveal that organisations with 'peaceful reunification of China' in their title are likely to be connected to the United Front Work Department in Beijing, and that several other city and state organisations have been identified as working in close association with China's consulates in Australia to pursue the party's strategic objectives. Some have been identified in submissions to federal parliament that are available online.²¹

Confirm. As a general rule-of-thumb, a place-name community association founded in recent decades that is named after a city, town or province in China, and actively hosts official visiting delegations from China, is likely to be in close communication with local communist party officials in the nominated place to service their needs and pursue their interests in Australia. Even when not set up for this purpose, local place name associations are often approached by party officials to act as united front partners.

Independent social organisations are basically outlawed within China, and outside China's borders they're viewed with deep suspicion. Chinese Government officials do not generally patronise organisations that they cannot predictably influence in their favour.

Local Chinese-language media are another vehicle the CCP employs to garner support, silence opposition and drive a wedge into Chinese-Australian communities. The international propaganda arms of the CCP have majority ownership and control of almost all Chinese-language radio stations in Australia through state-run China Radio International's holdings in Melbourne-based CAMG.²² Arms of the CCP also control the majority of Chinese-language print media through various advertising and commercial deals, in some cases producing content in China for placement in Australian media.²³

Content that appears on social media using China-based platforms such as WeChat and Weibo is strictly monitored and controlled by authorities in Beijing.²⁴ Conversations over WeChat among Australians within Australia are commonly censored by authorities in China.²⁵

Foreign state ownership or control of media, and the placement of foreign state content in Australian media, are subject to registration and reporting consistent with the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme (FITS) legislation. However, censorship and misinformation activities undertaken by foreign governments through independent media and social media aren't all covered by FITS legislation.

Each of these CCP operations in Chinese-Australian media and community affairs forms part of a united front strategy to persuade people of Chinese descent, whatever their country of citizenship, that they owe loyalty to the CCP. Many Chinese-Australians strongly object to that presumption.

Still, the party claims success for its united front work because of its ability to draw on 'a wide range of people of Chinese descent in China and overseas to promote the reform and development of the country and defend the country's core interests'.²⁶ According to senior party officials, China's 'number one core interest' is keeping themselves and their party in power,²⁷ so securing loyalty to the leadership of the CCP among Chinese nationals overseas and ethnic Chinese citizens of other countries remains a fundamental premise of the party's united front diplomacy in Australia, however infuriating that may appear to many Chinese-Australians.

Public diplomacy, Australia style

The party's united front work among Chinese overseas is a Leninist variant of a widely accepted form of diplomacy known as 'diaspora diplomacy'.²⁸ Diplomacy targeting diaspora communities overseas is undertaken by many countries with large émigré populations, including Ireland, Israel, Italy and India, as well as China. The Indian Government runs an active diaspora diplomacy program that reaches out to around 600,000 people of Indian descent in Australia. Unlike authorities in Beijing, however, the Indian Government draws a clear distinction between Indian and foreign citizens among the Indian diaspora and it does not as a rule associate loyalty to India with loyalty to the party in power.²⁹

The Australian Government also operates diaspora diplomacy programs, reaching out to Australian citizens overseas to foster trade and investment and promote Australia as a diverse and inclusive liberal democracy.³⁰ Australian public diplomacy reflects Australian national values and interests, and changes periodically in response to new challenges, but one constant is the ideal of Australia as a diverse and inclusive liberal democracy.



For many years, the Australian Government set aside possible concerns about conflicting values and diverging strategic interests in dealing with the communist government of China in order to promote trade and investment and people-to-people ties in a spirit of mutual goodwill. Although partly a matter of courtesy, that approach reflected a hard-headed judgement of the risks and opportunities surrounding relations with a China at a time when the government in Beijing was committed to domestic reforms and international openness.

That judgement is currently under revision because its underlying assumptions no longer appear tenable. The Chinese Government's occupation and militarisation of disputed territories in the South China Sea has undermined Australian faith in China's commitment to the rules-based order. China's hostile cyber intrusions into Australia, its interference in political parties and community organisations, and its implied threats of trade retaliation if Australian governments speak or act in defence of their sovereignty and interests, have together eroded a store of goodwill built up over many decades. And its handling of domestic issues, including the mass internment of Uyghur and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, has further eroded trust in Xi Jinping's China. Lowy Institute polling indicates that many Australians no longer trust China to act responsibly in the world.³¹

The language of Australian foreign policy is being refashioned to reflect this changing strategic picture, along with changing public sentiment in Australia. The refashioning has involved reviewing longstanding assumptions about national security and prosperity and reframing the link between values and interests as they bear on China, and more particularly on China's single-party state and its domestic and international operations.

Values were long distinguished from interests in Australian public diplomacy on the understanding that, while values may be unchanging, national economic and strategic interests are always open to negotiation. So, when the Australian and Chinese governments entered into negotiations over trade, investment and related matters, they each agreed to leave their values at the door. This well-established convention ceased to make sense once China's government began testing Australia's commitment to the defence of Australia's values and sovereignty at home through interference operations on Australian soil. Community push-back in defence of basic values and freedoms provided a timely reminder to a democratic government that values are anchored not in foreign policy documents but in civic life.

The revised terms of Australian foreign policy engagement were clearly enunciated in the Turnbull government's *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*. In this important statement, national identity was associated explicitly with liberal-democratic values, and the national interest was extended to include upholding the core values of political, economic and religious freedom, liberal democracy, the rule of law, racial and gender equality and mutual respect.³²

Acknowledging Chinese-Australian concerns

The principles of racial equality and mutual respect apply to Australian governments and citizens just as they do to the governments and peoples of other countries. Australia espouses these principles domestically as part of its inclusive multicultural ethos. If Australian governments fail to live up to the principles they profess, their capacity to promote their values abroad is likely to be compromised. It follows that statements of concern about foreign government interference shouldn't lead to the racial profiling of Australians with cultural or heritage links to those countries.

Unless carefully managed, otherwise well-founded media reporting on the CCP's influence and interference operations in Australia could inadvertently target Chinese-Australian communities. One widely reported vector of foreign government interference in Chinese-Australian community affairs is the body of community associations that have been sponsored or persuaded by Chinese Government agencies to act on Beijing's behalf in Australia. A second is Chinese-language media platforms that have been bought out or financially compromised by Chinese Government agencies. A third involves donations to political parties and funding to universities to leverage influence improperly in support of Chinese Government positions on geopolitical issues.

Some community leaders have expressed concern that mainstream media reports on these issues and associated government legislation together risk targeting Chinese-Australians as agents of a foreign power. Dr Anthony Pun, OAM, National President of the Chinese Community Council of Australia, wrote on 17 April 2019 that China's critics in Australia were 'publishing anti-Chinese prejudice' and warned that 'insidious anti-Chinese sentiments' were targeting Chinese-Australians irrespective of their status or their politics.³³ Responding to federal legislation limiting foreign interference, former Victorian Labor parliamentarian Hong Lim was reported in March as saying 'we found the bill condescending, patronising and insulting to the Chinese community. Our only crime is to be born Chinese.'³⁴ These concerns and those of other leaders of Chinese-Australian community organisations deserve respect. Along with other Australians, Chinese-Australians are entitled to express their views on any matter, including views for and against the claims and conduct of China's communist party government, and they should feel free to do so without fear of being tainted as agents of a foreign government.

At the same time, a number of Chinese-Australian community groups have applauded media exposure of Beijing's interference activities in Australia and welcomed the Australian Government's legislative response. They include Chinese-Australian religious organisations, community media outlets, democracy activists, and groups representing minorities in China subject to Chinese Government intimidation and harassment in Australia. Some point to claims that Chinese Government officials engage in allegations of racism in order to drive a wedge between communities in Australia.³⁵ All concerns arising from confusion between improper Chinese Government interference in Australia on the one side and legitimate Chinese-Australian community organisation, publication and political activity on the other need to be addressed and allayed.

Acting as an agent of a foreign government isn't in any case illegal in Australia. Australians are at liberty to advocate the views and interests of a foreign government in return for material benefits for themselves, their families, their businesses or their community organisations. Those who do so, however, need to register their interest under the FITS registration process.



Mitigating risks through language

The risk of anti-Chinese racism can never be discounted, but neither can risks of foreign government interference in local community affairs. Both sets of risks need to be acknowledged and managed appropriately.

More careful use of language in distinguishing between the legitimate cultural attachments of minority populations and the interests of foreign governments can go some way towards mitigating those risks. Clarity and consistency are essential for avoiding misunderstanding or inadvertently causing offence through sloppy language use.

The fact is that everyday English can be very confusing when it comes to speaking and writing about China and matters Chinese. Add common problems of translation and the potential for misunderstanding is considerable, as words that appear the same do not in fact have identical meanings.

For example, the English word ‘Chinese’ can refer to anything relating to the country of China, including its language, society and culture, as well as a host of things derived from China, such as food, religion, music and so on, and also to distinct categories of people, including Chinese citizens, people of Chinese descent and ethnic Chinese nationals of other countries. Depending on context, ‘Chinese’ can mean any or many of the above, and this can be very confusing for non-native speakers of English.

In the national Chinese language there are different words or phrases for many of these distinct concepts and categories. The word *Zhongguo* refers to China or something relating to that country. Hence, the word *Zhongguoren* refers to Chinese nationals. This isn’t the same as the word for people of Chinese descent, which is *huaren*. A different term again, *huayi*, is prefixed to the names of other countries to refer to people of Chinese descent who are citizens of other countries, so *huayi Aozhouren* refers to Chinese-Australians. In the national Chinese language, the word ‘Chinese’ in ‘Chinese-Australian’ is completely different from the word ‘Chinese’ in ‘Chinese citizen’. Rightly so, as one is Australian and the other a citizen of China. Yet in English the one word can mean both.

These important distinctions are obscured in English to the point where people unaware of them can be misled into thinking ‘Chinese’ means any or all of these things at once. Conversely, people who read Chinese or speak its many dialects might not be clear about which of those meanings applies when they come across the word ‘Chinese’ in English. Either way, misunderstandings about the word ‘Chinese’ can lead to confusion and rancour.

By the author

Analysing the inflationary impact of an outbreak of swine fever among pigs in China in June 2019, UBS market analyst Paul Donovan referred to 'Chinese pigs'. Social media netizens in China misread his reference to animals as a reference to people. State media confirmed their reading and called for swift action to correct this 'racist' slur on the Chinese people, and the party's *Global Times* reported calls for an official apology from UBS. UBS shares fell on reports of the misunderstanding.

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#BREAKING UBS chief global economist Paul Donovan used distasteful and racist language to analyze China's inflation in a recent UBS report, sparking uproar across Chinese social media. Chinese netizens called for an official apology from #UBS.

10:16 pm – 12 Jun 2019

'China' is clear enough, but the word 'Chinese' is so vague that it's best avoided as a stand-alone word. Precision is preferable: best refer to the people of China, or the culture of China, or to chickens or flowers in China, or Chinese-Canadians and Chinese-Australians.

The Government of China gives additional ground for caution over the use of the word 'Chinese' when it attributes criticism of its human rights record to 'anti-Chinese' bigotry in its Chinese-language propaganda. The word for 'anti-Chinese' (*fanhua*) alludes to historical anti-Chinese racism predating the CCP's takeover of China.³⁶

This is an especially powerful term in the party's united front armoury that carries considerable weight among Chinese-speaking communities that have experienced historical racism overseas. The use of the term in Chinese Government communications is intended to suggest that the party's foreign critics should be ignored, if not silenced, because they're blinded by bigotry and bias.



By the author

In July 2019, violence broke out on the University of Queensland (UQ) campus when a group of students supporting the Government of China attacked another group protesting in sympathy with Chinese citizens voicing criticism of the government, including a million and more democracy demonstrators in Hong Kong and relatives of Uyghur and Muslim minorities undergoing forced 're-education' in Xinjiang.

China's Consulate-General in Brisbane issued a Chinese-language statement about the UQ student violence on its website to inform people of Chinese descent in Australia.³⁷ In Chinese script, the consulate applauded those who initiated the violence for their 'patriotic behaviour' and attributed blame to protesters harbouring 'anti-China' or 'anti-Chinese' sentiments. The word used here (*fanhua*) is ambiguous, but outside of China it generally refers to ethnic discrimination against people of Chinese descent.

The consulate's framing of the student demonstrations as a problem of 'anti-China/Chinese' discrimination was picked up by sympathetic community organisations in Sydney and Melbourne. Promotional material for a pro-Beijing demonstration scheduled for the Sydney CBD on 17 August began: 'Have you ever felt discriminated against because of Hong Kong riots in Australia? Let's SAY NO to discrimination! (让我们一起向歧视 SAY NO!)'.³⁸ The cynicism was breathtaking: framing a political dispute as a form of ethnic discrimination, the pro-Beijing organisers invited visiting Chinese students and Chinese-Australians to tackle 'discrimination' in Australia by denouncing the Hong Kong student movement.

This approach is lifted straight out of the party's united front playbook for wedging race issues to deflect criticism of the Beijing government's human rights record: in working with people of Chinese descent around the world, divert attention from the real issues by attributing criticism of party policy to historical 'anti-Chinese' or 'anti-China' discrimination and then mobilise people to oppose alleged 'discrimination'.³⁹

The English word 'Chinese' can also be confusing to Chinese-Australians. Sloppy use of the word can appear to question the loyalty of Australian citizens of Chinese descent who prefer to be known as Australians or, if need be, as Chinese-Australians, on the model of 'Anglo-Australians' or 'Chinese-Canadians', not as 'Chinese'.

By the author

In the 2019 federal election, a candidate in Sydney appealed to Chinese-Australian voters in English through the dominant Chinese-language social media platform, WeChat:

Today I spent the afternoon consulting with my friend and mentor the Hon Bob Carr about his views on the disrespect for the Chinese people in the media over the last few years. He told me he thought the Prime Minister should do more to defend the Chinese people in Australia.

WeChat respondents, writing in Chinese, complained that the candidate addressed them as ‘Chinese’ or ‘Chinese people’ when they considered themselves Australian. Translated, some of those WeChat responses read as follows:

- “‘Chinese people’ means ‘Chinese people’. Not us, not Australians!”
- ‘He is obviously *not* including me. I am an Australian.’
- ‘If the parliamentarians I choose to elect are going to care more about Chinese people ... then they can go to China and show their concern. We Australians need parliamentarians who are concerned about Australia.’

Source: Maree Ma reported on this WeChat incident on her Twitter account: [online](#).

When it comes to writing or speaking about Chinese-Australians, it’s important to recognise the diversity of the communities embraced by the term. Not all come from China, by any means. And wherever they hail from, people can be sensitive about being mistaken for other nationalities—New Zealanders for Australians, for example, or Canadians for US citizens. Chinese-Australians want to be recognised first and foremost as Australians, while also being acknowledged being as diverse as the countries and regions from which they hail.

Jieh-Yung Lo, Chinese-Australian writer and political activist

Unfortunately for us, the diversity within our community is not fully understood by the majority of our politicians and political parties. Out of the 1.2 million Australians with Chinese heritage and ancestry, more than 500,000 were born in Mainland China while more than 700,000 were born in places such as Vietnam, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Philippines and of course Australia. Such diversity also means not all Chinese Australians speak Chinese Mandarin.

Source: Jieh-Yung Lo, ‘To win our federal election vote, politicians should get to know the real Chinese-Australia’, ABC News, 15 May 2019, [online](#).

The same principle applies to graphic representations. Placing the flag of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) above or alongside an article about Chinese-Australians makes several errors at once. It associates people of Chinese descent with China, when a minority of Chinese-Australians come from the PRC, and it identifies Australian citizens of Chinese descent with the national flag of another country, China, when in fact they wave the Australian flag.



Wesa Chau, co-founder of Poliversity and Young Victorian of the Year 2010

By putting up the PRC flag in referencing Chinese-Australians, @GuardianAus just wrongly accused the Chinese Communist Party of meddling in Australian domestic politics. #auspol #ausvotes2019



Source: Wesa Chau, Twitter, 19 April 2019, [online](#).

Chinese-Australians are generally well informed about China, Australia and world affairs and want to be acknowledged and included in national conversations about China and Australia's relations with that country. Australia would benefit if all Chinese-Australians felt equally welcome to participate in public affairs as well as in the business and cultural life of the country. Chinese-Australians are an indispensable part of the solution to CCP interference in Australian affairs.

Prime Minister Malcom Turnbull, 2017

We are focused on the activities of foreign states and their agents in Australia and not the loyalties of Australians who happen to be from a foreign country. There is no place for racism or xenophobia in our country. Our diaspora communities are part of the solution, not the problem. To think otherwise would be not only wrong and divisive but also folly—in a nation where most of us come from migrant families and one in four of us was born overseas.

Source: Malcom Turnbull, 'Speech introducing the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017', 7 December 2017, [online](#).

In reaching out to Chinese-Australians, caution is advised on the reach and limitations of China-based social media such as WeChat and Weibo. Their use among Australians is largely confined to immigrants from the PRC, and conversations among Australians on those platforms are known to be monitored and censored by China's censorship authorities. Getting to know people and becoming familiar with how they communicate with one another is far preferable.

Precision is also required when speaking or writing about China itself. Is the subject the Government of China, the CCP or the people, culture or society of China? This matters for reasons of accuracy and fairness. When we speak or write about the US, France or Australia, we generally differentiate parties and governments from societies and nations. A country as diverse as China deserves no less.

Rowan Callick, former China correspondent and Asia-Pacific editor with *The Australian* and *The Australian Financial Review*

Whenever I speak or write about China, I always take care to indicate whether I am referring to the Government of China, the Chinese communist party, or the people of China or Chinese society.

Some party types in China don't like this because they insist that the party and the people are one and the same, that you can't put two hairs between them, but that does not help Australians understand the nuances of our relations with China.

Source: Correspondence with the author.

Many Australians who welcome China's rise have serious and well-founded misgivings about the CCP and its authoritarian style of government. This distinction is also worth making clear.

Peter Varghese, former Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

For Australia, a democratic China becoming the predominant power in the Indo Pacific is a very different proposition to an authoritarian China occupying this position.

Source: Peter Varghese, 'The Indo Pacific and its strategic challenges: an Australian perspective', presentation to the Institute of South East Asian Studies, Singapore, 8 January 2019.

It also helps to be clear about the issues under discussion. A number of aspiring politicians and radio shock-jocks talk of 'Chinese' taking over the country. Much of the heat around this claim emanates from housing affordability.

There's no denying that buying a house or apartment can be a challenge for anyone wanting to enter the housing market in Australia's larger metropolitan centres, but there's no reliable evidence showing that existing residential housing has been placed beyond reach by purchases on the part of foreign nationals.

By law, all Australians, including Asian-Australians, are equally entitled to acquire residential property. Foreign nationals may acquire new dwellings or vacant residential land. In the absence of substantial evidence, claims that 'Asians' or 'Chinese' are pushing others out of the market for existing housing stock are empirically wrong and *prima facie* discriminatory.



Similar claims are sometimes made about ‘Chinese’ buying up rural properties. Foreign nationals are entitled to purchase rural property subject to federal government review in the case of large or sensitive holdings. Unless reasonable grounds for concern are put forward, singling foreign nationals of one country out for criticism over rural property purchases is blatantly discriminatory.

Hans Hendrichske and Wei Li, University of Sydney

The scale of Chinese* investment in the Australian residential property market continues to polarise public opinion. Chinese buyers are often blamed for driving up house prices in Australia and causing the current affordability crisis. However, Chinese offshore purchases are surprisingly low. Based on Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) approval figures, ABS data, and our own data on actual Chinese investment in commercial real estate, we estimate Chinese residential real estate investment totals around 2% of all residential real estate transactions in Australia.

Based on (2014) FIRB data, overall foreign investment accounts for 13.4% ... of total residential real estate investment, while Chinese residential investment in the Australian real estate market lies near the 2% mark. Before suggesting Chinese investors are a major factor behind declining affordability, commentators should at least consider the data.

Based on the data we do have, Chinese investment in Australian residential real estate accounts for just 2% of the total real estate sales volume. Chinese applicants for residential real estate investment approval account for one sixth or 16% of potential foreign real estate investors. This suggests the housing and housing affordability crisis will not be solved by a clamp-down on one group of buyers.

*‘Chinese’ refers to citizens of China or corporate entities registered in that country.

Source: Excerpted from Hans Hendrichske, Wei Li, ‘Chinese investment in residential real estate amounts to just 2%’, The Conversation, 14 September 2015, [online](#).

Conclusion

Global challenges, including terrorism and authoritarian state behaviours, are compelling immigrant countries around the world to reflect carefully on the challenges of maintaining ethnocultural diversity and supporting community attachments to former homelands, on the one hand, while maintaining national security and social cohesion on the other.

In Australia, the focus of recent concern has been China. In fact, concerns over foreign or Asian property ownership are neither new to Australia nor confined to purchasers from China. In the 1980s and 1990s, similar fears were expressed about residential and commercial property purchases by Japanese nationals. Neither concern has been well founded.

Similarly, the CCP isn't alone in reaching out to diaspora communities based in other countries. Yet here the similarity ends.

The party's united front diplomacy gives particular grounds for concern where it reaches out to people of Chinese descent regardless of citizenship, demands their loyalty to the party, and engages in covert and coercive behaviour to silence Chinese-Australians who harbour deep affection for China but none for the party.

Australians who are concerned that public conversations about China's influence and interference operations in Australia could adversely affect Chinese-Australian communities can help mitigate risks by heeding the many voices to be heard among those communities, by cultivating respect among all Australians for minority rights and freedoms, by working for greater minority inclusion in senior positions and peak bodies and councils, and by taking the time to be more thoughtful about what they say and how and where they say it.

While the risks of fanning anti-Chinese racism through criticism of Chinese government behaviour are real, so are the challenges arising from a foreign government exploiting sensitivities over ethnic identity and cohesion in Australia's multicultural society as a cover for interference in public life and community affairs.

Both sets of risks require Australia's education systems and civil society to deal sensitively with intercultural issues and require Australia's diplomatic and political representatives to defend Australian national interests in ways that don't jeopardise the social standing of minority communities or damage social harmony. The ongoing challenge from a more confident and confrontational government in China will require firm and principled approaches from Australians for many years to come, expressed in clear and unambiguous language.



Notes

- 1 *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018*, [online](#).
- 2 David Shambaugh, *China goes global: the partial power*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2013, 207.
- 3 Unacceptable foreign interference is distinguished from legitimate foreign influence where it involves activities that are in any way covert, coercive or corrupt. See Malcom Turnbull, 'Speech introducing the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017', 7 December 2017, [online](#).
- 4 Legislation covering foreign influence and interference activities includes the *National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act 2018*, which amended the federal Criminal Code to introduce new national security offences; the *Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act 2018*, which created a registration scheme for communications activities undertaken on behalf of or in collaboration with certain categories of foreigners; and the *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Act 2018*, which among other amendments banned foreign political donations.
- 5 Australian analysts first drew attention to this issue many years ago. See Geoff Wade, 'Confucius Institutes and Chinese soft power in Australia', Parliamentary Library, Australian Parliament, 24 November 2014, [online](#). Beyond Australia, see Rachelle Peterson, *Outsourced to China: Confucius Institutes and soft power in American higher education*, National Association of Scholars, New York, April 2017, and Elizabeth Redden, 'Who controls Confucius Institutes?', *Inside Higher Education*, 28 February 2019, [online](#).
- 6 Peter Mattis, Alex Joske, 'The third magic weapon: reforming China's United Front', *War on the Rocks*, 24 June 2019, [online](#); Anne-Marie Brady, *Magic weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping*, Wilson Center, Washington DC, 2017, [online](#); Gerry Groot, 'The expansion of the United Front under Xi Jinping', *The China Story Yearbook 2018*, ANUPress, Canberra, 2018, [online](#); John Garnaut, 'Australia's China reset', *The Monthly*, August 2018, [online](#).
- 7 On the party's generic 'enemy mentality', see John Fitzgerald, 'Human dignity and its enemies', *Inside Story*, 16 August 2017, [online](#).
- 8 After achieving victory, the party proceeded to imprison and execute the business, media and political allies whom it had tactically recruited from the other side. Lyman P Van Slyke, *Enemies and friends: the united front in Chinese communist history*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1967.
- 9 'Remarks of Spokesperson of Chinese Embassy in Australia', 6 December 2017, [online](#).
- 10 'Chinese Embassy Spokesperson's Remarks', 1 March 2018, [online](#).
- 11 'What China really thinks', *9News*, 19 June 2018, [online](#).
- 12 See, for example, Chen Hong, 'Australia smearing China with spying brush', *Global Times*, 11 February 2019, [online](#), and Bob Carr, 'Australians with Chinese origins need to come together', *China Daily*, 30 April 2019, [online](#).
- 13 See, for example, Glenda Korporaal, 'Academic takes a swipe at anti-China rhetoric', *The Australian*, 12 February 2019, [online](#), and Michael Smith, 'Banned billionaire Huang Xiangmo calls Australia a "giant baby" for cancelling visa', *Australian Financial Review*, 12 February 2012, [online](#).
- 14 On Chinese-Australian experience of white Australian racism, see John Fitzgerald, *Big white lie: Chinese Australians in white Australia*, UNSW Press, Kensington, 2007.
- 15 Andrew Markus, Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation surveys 2018, [online](#); Australian Human Rights Commission consultations 2012: No place for racism, [online](#); N. Biddle, M. Gray, D Herz, D & J. Lo, Asian Australian Experiences of Discrimination, ANU, 2019, [online](#).
- 16 Sophie McNeill, Jeanavive McGregor, Meredith Griffiths, Michael Walsh, Echo Hui, 'UTS, Curtin unis announce reviews over links to surveillance tech used by Chinese Government', *ABC News*, 16 July 2019, [online](#).
- 17 Anna Hayes, 'Explainer: who are the Uyghurs and why is the Chinese government detaining them?', *The Conversation*, 15 February 2019, [online](#).
- 18 Liangqing Lu, Yong Li, Chris Rizos, 'Virtual baseline method for Beidou attitude determination—an improved long-short baseline ambiguity resolution method', *Advances in Space Research*, 12 March 2013, 51(6):1029–1034.
- 19 Alex Joske, *Picking flowers, making honey: the Chinese military's collaboration with foreign universities*, ASPI, Canberra, 30 October 2018, [online](#).
- 20 In all Australian states and territories, there have been instances of older Chinese-Australian community associations being flooded by new pro-Beijing members who vote out the governing council and vote themselves into office to facilitate closer consular links and united front operations. For an illustration, see the case of the Chinese Professional Club of Australia cited in Clive Hamilton, *Silent invasion*, Hardie Grant, Melbourne, 2018, 45.
- 21 Clive Hamilton, Alex Joske, 'Submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security Inquiry into the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Bill 2017', [online](#).
- 22 Koh Gui Qing, John Shiffman, 'Beijing's covert radio network airs China-friendly news across Washington, and the world', *Reuters*, 2 November 2015, [online](#). Since its Australian purchases, China Radio International has been folded into other party agencies.
- 23 Clive Hamilton, *Silent invasion*, Hardie Grant, Melbourne, 2018, 40–45.
- 24 Sun Wanning, *Chinese language media in Australia*, UTS-ACRI, Sydney, 2016.
- 25 John Fitzgerald, 'Beijing's Guoqing versus Australia's way of life', *Inside Story*, 27 September 2016, [online](#).
- 26 'Press conference: CPC's united front and international relations', *China.org.cn*, 23 October 2017, [online](#).
- 27 'Dai Bingguo, "Adhere to the path of peaceful development"', Dec. 6, 2010'. English translation at US–China Institute, [online](#).
- 28 On diaspora diplomacy, see John Fitzgerald, Wesa Chau, *International cultural engagements among Australians of Pacific islands and Asian descent: a preliminary research report*, Australian Council of Learned Academies, 3 September 2014, [online](#).
- 29 People of Indian descent are classified into three categories and approached accordingly: Non Indian Resident (NRI) referring to a person with an Indian passport who lives abroad; Overseas Citizen of India (OCI), a person who was once an Indian passport holder but has migrated elsewhere and secured foreign citizenship; and Persons of Indian Origin (PIO), those who view India as their historical homeland, but were neither born in India nor held Indian citizenship. I wish to thank Professor Fazal Rizvi for drawing these distinctions to my attention. On the Indian Government approach to diaspora affairs see Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, *Diaspora Engagement*, [online](#).
- 30 Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), *Public Diplomacy Strategy 2014–2016*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2014, [online](#).
- 31 Kelsey Munro, 'Australian attitudes to China shift: 2019 Lowy Poll', *The Interpreter*, 27 June 2019, [online](#).
- 32 DFAT, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, Australian Government, Canberra, 2017, [online](#), 11.
- 33 John Menadue, 'Anthony Pun. A response from the Chinese Community Council of Australia', *John Menadue—Pearls and Irritations*, 17 April 2019, [online](#).
- 34 Michael Walsh, Jason Fang, 'Why do some Chinese Australians feel targeted by the government's new foreign influence transparency laws?', *ABC News*, 29 March 2019, [online](#).
- 35 Jieh-Yung Lo, 'Chinese Australians are not a fifth column', *Foreign Policy*, 31 May 2019, [online](#).
- 36 See, for example, Trevor Marshallsea, 澳洲的“中国干预”争议引发反华种族主义隐忧 ('Australia's "China interference" debate triggers anti-Chinese racism'), *BBC*, 23 June 2018, [online](#).
- 37 驻布里斯班总领馆发言人就澳大利亚昆士兰大学中国留学生自发反对反华分裂活动事的表态, 25 July 2019, [online](#).
- 38 The original reads: 'Have you ever feel unfair and being discriminated because of Hong Kong riots in Australia? 让我们一起向歧视 SAY NO', [online](#).
- 39 驻布里斯班总领馆发言人就澳大利亚昆士兰大学中国留学生自发反对反华分裂活动事的表态, 25 July 2019, [online](#).

Acronyms and abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
FITS	Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme
PRC	People's Republic of China
UQ	University of Queensland



