



Category: News and Commentary

Australia-China policy – effect on Chinese diaspora in Australia

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Australia's current policy towards China is unhealthy. It came about from the election of the **John Howard** government in March 1996 when a supportive stance on China was shifted towards one closely tied with US interests.¹ Today, China's trade with Australia is even seen by some as a threat to Australian sovereignty.² It is made worse by Beijing's continued refusal to pick up the phone to calls from Canberra.³

As to be expected, the ongoing deterioration in Australia-China relationship is adversely impacting on the ethnic Chinese community in Australia. It has been made worse by the sweeping assumption that the Chinese are potential "brain-washed" and potential "communist supporters"⁴ and also by the claim that China "actively reaches out to overseas Chinese communities, in Australia and elsewhere, to promote China's political interests and economic development".⁵

Some may say such anti-China sentiments are against "communist China" and not against Chinese people in China. However, such a fine textbook distinction is artificial. The division is porous because anti-China sentiments readily transform into "anti-Chinese" expressions. This is predictable - most people visualise "Chinese people" when they hear the word "China". That is natural, it being very difficult to separate the country (China) from its national people, generally called the Chinese".

¹ [https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/how-australia-got-badly-out-in-front-on-china-20210428-p57n8x](https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/how-australia-got-badly-out-in-front-on-china-20210428-p57n8x;);

https://www.aph.gov.au/sitecore/content/Home/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Publications_Archive/CIB/CIB9697/97cib23_Current_Issues_Brief_23_1996-97

² https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/data/UQ_11015/mbajps03.pdf?

³ <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/no-one-picks-up-canberra-s-call-warns-first-envoy-20200826-p55pmw>

⁴ <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2018/03/08/hami-m08.html>

⁵ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/lines-blurred-chinese-community-organisations-in-australia>



Not only that. Anti-Chinese sentiments affect many “Chinese-looking” Asian Australians. They are ethnically Chinese migrants from other countries and make up about 50% of the Chinese population in Australia.⁶ Anti-Chinese sentiments also affect Koreans and Japanese and anyone else looking like a Chinese.

As pointed out by Dr **Tim Soutphommasane**, formerly Commissioner of the *Australian Human Rights Commission* (2013 - 2018), various anti-Chinese sentiments expressed on the Chinese community constitute clear evidence of racial discrimination.⁷ Under the *Racial Discrimination Act* 1975,⁸ such racial discrimination is unlawful.

Obviously, it is not unlikely that exposure of our Chinese community to such discrimination may well impact upon the outcome of the coming Federal general election. This is because there is growing concern amongst Chinese-Australians that the people they elect may directly affect what the Australia-China relationship may be like going into the next few years. This is particularly for those who had been at the receiving end of specific incidents and those who, for other reasons, fear further deterioration in the Australia-China relationship.

The following is a snapshot profile of negative impacts being experienced in some parts of our community.

1. Racial resentment against Chinese

Recent surveys show the deteriorating Australia-China relationship is causing growing anti-Chinese sentiments in Australia. According to the annual *Scanlon report* into social cohesion, a survey led by Emeritus professor **Andrew Marcus** of *Monash University*, negative sentiments towards Chinese from Mainland China increased during the 2020/2021 period.⁹ In a survey in November 2020, 44% of Australians in the general

⁶ Chinese population in Australia: **1,213,903** by **ancestry** (2016 census). **677,240** born in [Mainland China](#) (2019): "[Migration, Australia, 2019-20 financial year | Australian Bureau of Statistics](#)". 17 June 2021.

⁷ [Sbs.com.au/news/most-aust](https://www.sbs.com.au/news/most-aust), 4 February 2021.

⁸ <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/what-does-law-say-wysm>

⁹ <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/report2020>:



community said they had “very negative” or “somewhat negative” feelings towards Chinese Australians. That’s a nearly three-fold increase from 13% in 2013.¹⁰

This negative sentiment looks like it has been well concealed or not fully acted out. A 2020 survey of about 1,000 Australian Chinese by the *Lowy Institute* in 2020 found only 37% indicated they had been treated differently or less favourably.¹¹ However, the actual percentage of those affected may be higher as the survey noted Chinese-Australians underestimate the level of discrimination against them when compared with their reported experiences.

As may be seen in the following examples, anti-Chinese sentiments had been expressed in various ways:

- During the last Federal election in May 2019, **George Hua**, a migrant from China and a Liberal Party election candidate in Hotham, found a billboard with his face on it had been covered with a cross and two words in black, capital letters: “**NO CHINA.**”¹²

<https://scanloninstitute.org.au/sites/default/files/2021-02/SC2020%20Report%20Final.pdf>

¹⁰ 63% of Australian Chinese feel that people with Chinese heritage are accepted in Australian Society; <https://charts.lowyinstitute.org/features/chinese-communities/topics/who-did-we-survey> ;

¹¹ <https://charts.lowyinstitute.org/features/chinese-communities/topics/experiences-of-discrimination>

¹²

https://www.theaustralian.com.au/subscribe/news/1/?sourceCode=TAWEB_WRE170_a_GGL&dest=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.theaustralian.com.au%2Fnation%2Fpolitics%2Fliberal-candidate-george-hua-shocked-after-billboard-defaced-with-racist-graffiti%2Fnews-story%2F8cacb7687898972491b0bcb79aa982ce&memtype=anonymous&mode=premium&v21=dynamic-warm-test-score&V21spcbehaviour=append



- **Physical attacks on Chinese and other Asians** A Lowy Institute survey of Chinese-Australians found there had been political, verbal, and even physical attacks on the Chinese community in Australia.¹³ In particular, nearly one in five have been physically threatened or attacked in the past year because of their Chinese heritage.¹⁴ Also, about one in three (31%) said they had been called offensive names because they were of Chinese heritage.
- **Threats issued to Chinese-Australians** Media reported that¹⁵ Councillor **Kun Huang** of the *Cumberland Council* in New South Wales received a letter which hurled insults about his name. It threatened death to him and “all Chinese people.” He was accused of stealing all milk powder, buying up all houses and bringing disease to Australia “for centuries”. This was a race-hate letter signed by its supposed perpetrator. Councillor **Craig Chung** at the *City of Sydney* received a similar letter two days later. Councillor **Christina Wu** at the *Georges River council* and another local councillor also received similar letters.

¹³ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/lines-blurred-chinese-community-organisations-in-australia>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/03/nearly-one-in-five-chinese-australians-threatened-or-attacked-in-past-year-survey-finds> , 3 March 2021

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/04/how-anti-chinese-sentiment-in-australia-seeped-into-the-mainstream>

- **Other manifestations of racism against Chinese-Australians.** Community group, *Asian Australian Alliance (AAA)*, released new data to *Guardian Australia* showing **499** people had self-reported a racist incident since April 2020. The vast majority of recipients were women. The AAA group had been tracking anti-Asian and anti-Chinese incidents since April 2020. [It received 178 responses in its first two weeks.](#)¹⁶



Despite the tensions, Asian Australians are being encouraged to continue calling out racism. (*ABC News: GFX by Jarrod Fankhauser*) Erin Chew, national convenor for the Asian Australian Alliance, said Asian-Australians were often accused of excusing the CPP when speaking about race. "Just because of our cultural background, why is it that we are accused of playing into the hands or the propaganda of the CCP?" she said: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-18/china-australia-coronavirus-racism-affects-on-ordinary-people/12469092>

2. Restraint by Chinese-Australian organisations

A *Lowy Institute* survey identified another impact of the deteriorated Australia-China relations.¹⁷ It noted that most Chinese-Australian community

¹⁶ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/report-reveals-shocking-anti-asian-racism-in-australia-during-coronavirus-pandemic/bb8c8258-c051-4f62-9deb-4cccf855ac5e>

¹⁷ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/lines-blurred-chinese-community-organisations-in-australia#sec45501>



organisations steer clear of conflict with China's government and anything regarded as its core national interests. They fear "the backlash that comes with any expression of positive sentiment about China and they do not want to get involved in politics at all."¹⁸ This is particularly so now that the survey had identified two things about such organisations likely to be of great interest to **ASIO** and other Australian anti-China people on the look-out for China-sympathisers, viz Firstly, Chinese-Australians are more positive towards China than the broader Australian population, eg, 72% of Chinese-Australians (as compared to 23% of the broader population) trust China to act responsibly in the world.¹⁹ Secondly, most of these organisations sought economic gain, but some sought to advance China's political agenda.

In other words, the deteriorated Australia-China relationship has meant these organisations no longer feel they can safely exercise their freedom of expression. For example, their saying positive things about China's political situation is likely to attract unwelcome attention. This is even though the same view, expressed by non-Chinese Australians, would be regarded as just an exercise of Australia's much appreciated freedom of expression.²⁰

3. Chinese people being singled out for "loyalty tests"

Anti-China sentiments have also transformed how Australian Chinese may be looked upon in a specific way - they may be asked to prove their loyalty to Australia.

A high-profile **example** of this is what happened in October 2020 to three Chinese-Australian citizens invited by the Australian *Senate Committee* to have their say on how the Chinese community feel about multiculturalism. After twenty minutes into the session, one of the Committee members, Senator **Eric Abetz**, demanded that they each condemn the **Communist Party of China (CPC)**. When they objected to the question on the basis that it is irrelevant, the Senator pressed them repeatedly,

¹⁸ <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/lines-blurred-chinese-community-organisations-in-australia#sec45501>

¹⁹ <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/chinese-communities/Lowy%20Institute%20%E2%80%93%20Being%20Chinese%20in%20Australia.pdf>.

²⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-15/how-our-foreign-influence-laws-have-undermined-democracy/11212848>

asking "why not?". Each made clear they didn't support the CCP, but noted that such demands hadn't been issued to other witnesses at the inquiry.



IMAGE SOURCE, YUN JIANG

One of the three, university researcher **Yun Jiang**, said, "This felt less like a public inquiry and more like a public witch-hunt."²¹

Linda Jackson, Deputy Chair of an independent Australian policy institute and visiting professor at *Sydney University*, said her reading of the Senate hearing transcript of this incident vividly reminded her of televised anti-Communist **McCarthy** hearings in the US in 1954.

Many Chinese-Australian who work as government bureaucrats say they have increasingly felt under suspicion. One illustration may be seen in 2020. A junior adviser for the Australian government, an Australian Chinese, visited Australia's *Department of Defence* in Canberra for a meeting. He and another Australian colleague showed their identification cards as they stepped into the building. But he was stopped by a guard, who took him aside. He described the incident as follows: "They asked to take a photo of me - like a portrait - there in the lobby. And it was just me. The Caucasian colleague who was with me - he wasn't asked to do that".²²

²¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-54595120>

²² <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-54595120>



Younger or less established public servants like him are saying they feel pressure to prove their patriotism. Also, they are extra wary when giving policy advice, as they would wish to avoid unfair scrutiny. As this young man said, "If I was a Caucasian-Australian, I'd be a lot more comfortable coming out and saying something different. But if you're from a Chinese background, people would just see you as being compromised. That's the sort of culture that we've got at the moment."

This is of concern to many people in the Chinese community because they feel they are being negatively singled out as a group amongst the wider Australian community just because of their ethnicity.

Just like Australian-Chinese organisations, many amongst them are now careful about exercising their normal freedom of expression normally taken for granted by their fellow Australians. As noted by **Linda Jakobson**,²³ "Time and time again over the past six to 12 months, countless Australians of Chinese heritage, from all walks of life, have said that they fear speaking in public about China, because if they say anything positive about the PRC they will be called Communist sympathisers or outright stooges of the Communist Party."²⁴

Further, as pointed out by another senior Australian, Dr **Godfree Roberts**, it is also about double-standards. He noted this of Australia's Defence Minister, **Peter Dutton** who had publicly displayed allegiance to the US, and yet he declared that you can't have an allegiance to another country and pretend to have an allegiance to this country at the same time.²⁵

4. Australia not renewing links with China's scholars²⁶

²³ <https://johnmenadue.com/mccarthyism-is-now-rampant-in-australia/> 26 October 2020

²⁴ <https://johnmenadue.com/mccarthyism-is-now-rampant-in-australia/>

²⁵

<https://www.quora.com/Why-is-the-Australia-China-relationship-suddenly-on-a-downturn> ;
<https://minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/peterdutton/Pages/doorstop-interview-melbourne-11122017.aspx>

²⁶ <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/gareth-evans-rates-foreign-influence-call-a-joke/news-story/fb6913575f4b7a28237ccb1293d5fe7a>.



The Australia-China relationship has also impacted upon Chinese researchers and other scholars with otherwise normal links to Australian universities and other tertiary institutions.²⁷

Australia revoked the visas of two visiting Chinese academics following escalation of Australia-China tensions. **Chen Hong**, a professor of Australian Studies at *East China Normal University* in **Shanghai**, said in an email to Reuters that he had received a letter from Australia's Home Affairs Department cancelling his visa. The letter said he had been deemed by security body ASIO to pose a threat to national security. **Li Jianjun**, had received a similar letter.²⁸ He had been doing a PhD at Western Sydney University, funded by a \$60,000 Australia China Scholarship from BHP Billiton as part of the program.

Professor **Chen Hong** is a regular visitor to Australia and commentator on Australian relations, featuring regularly in Australian media and writing in the Chinese state media. Both he and Mr **Li** run Australian studies centres at Shanghai's *East China Normal University* and the *Beijing Foreign Studies University*.

What caused the anti-Chinese sentiments?

The *Lowy Institute* survey also found 52% of Chinese-Australians say deteriorating *Australia-China relations* contributed to their negative experience. However, a major contributing factor is the *Foreign Interference Transparency Scheme Act* 2018 (FITS Act). It is aimed at ferreting out agents of undue influence on Australia's sovereignty.

Even though some claim it is "country agnostic,"²⁹ its major underlying basis is that certain Australian-Chinese are potential spies and traitors.

²⁷ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/australia-cancels-chinese-scholars-visas> ;
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-09-12/chinese-academic-hits-out-at-australian-government/100442592>

²⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-china-academics-idUSKBN2601FK>;
<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-09-09/chinese-scholars-have-visas-revoked-as-diplomatic-crisis-grows/12644022>

²⁹ <https://johnmenadue.com/anthony-pun-a-response-from-the-chinese-community-council-of-australia-ccca/>



Australia's former Ambassador, **Tony Kevin**, pointed out that it is “clearly aimed at deterring professional contacts with people or institutions in presumed ‘hostile’ foreign powers, **China** and **Russia**”.³⁰ He said one could not imagine it applying against individuals having similar contacts with foreign ministries, think tanks or institutes in such ‘friendly’ nations as the **US** or **UK** or **Israel**. He also indicated it was likely to be inevitably “applied in arbitrary and discretionary ways”.³¹

The following are some specific comments from Australian-Chinese about the FITS Act:³²

- It is “ill-defined” and “puts the loyalty of Chinese-Australians into question”;
- it has “a chilling effect” and “people are scared to even talk about these things”;
- A city councillor believes the laws put people in a difficult position: “You constantly feel like you have to prove your loyalty, even inside the Liberal Party”;
- A former member of state parliament said, “the extreme right is abusing the foreign interference law to target people”;

University researcher **Yun Jiang** neatly summed it up by saying it is used to wrongly conflate the ordinary activities of the Chinese-Australian community with alleged nefarious interference by China.³³

Fear of being sent to internment camps

The deteriorating Australia-China relationship has also raised some concern from Australia-Chinese community leaders. This is the possibility that, should there be an Australian-China war, the whole Chinese community in Australia may be forcibly relocated and incarcerated in a

³⁰ **Tony Kevin**, former Australian ambassador to Poland and Cambodia, an Emeritus Fellow at *Australian National University*, Canberra, and the author of *Return to Moscow* (2017).

³¹ *Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security (PJCIS)* on 16 March 2018 (see *Hansard*).

³² <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/lines-blurred-chinese-community-organisations-in-australia#sec45501>

³³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-54595120>



concentration camp.³⁴ After all, history has shown that Australia had interned ‘enemy aliens’ from countries at war with Australia and internment was “based solely on their nationality, even if they had done no wrong.”³⁵ Internees were held in camps around Australia, often in remote locations.

This concern and sentiment was expressed at a forum discussion about Australia-China tensions.³⁶ **Jason Yat-Sen Li** (President of *Australian-Chinese Forum*) said to anti-China advocate, **John Lee Cheong Seong**, “*John, I’ll see you there*”, a reference to all Chinese in Australia being forcibly interned in the event of an Australia-China war.³⁷

The latter probably didn’t show belief in this concern. That’s probably because he felt he’s protected as he is a fellow of the US neo-conservative, **Hudson Institute**, and a former advisor to former Australian Foreign Minister, **Julie Bishop**.³⁸ Time will tell whether Australia will spare him if all Chinese Australians were to be interned. It may be that things may be better for him if China had collapsed as he had predicted in his 2007 book entitled “**Will China fail?**”.

Australia has wisely adopted a universal policy of not treating all **Australian-Muslims** as if they are potential terrorists. It may thus be asked why those able to make a difference do not take steps to ensure members of the **Australian-Chinese** community are treated as if they belong rather than be left to feel and act like they don’t belong.



³⁴ [Internment of Japanese Americans - Wikipedia](#)

³⁵ <https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/immigration-and-citizenship/wartime-internment-camps-australia>

³⁶ <https://youtu.be/kA2KaEKs1LA>.

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=od6Js490cWI>, a critical analysis of the war-mongering video by ‘60 Minutes Australia’.

³⁸ [Dr John Lee — United States Studies Centre](#)