

What Does China Say About PRC Influence in Australia?



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On June 5, 2017, ABC's Four Corners aired a program investigating PRC government interference in Australia. The episode, titled 'Power and Influence: The hard edge of China's soft power,' accused the Communist Party of China of attempting to infiltrate Australia's major political parties. Since airing, the controversial program has sparked a heated public debate about the nature and extent of PRC government influence in Australia. But how exactly have China's state media and Chinese-language news outlets in Australia covered this discussion?

Articles in the state-run *Xinhua News Agency* (新华社) and *People's Daily* (人民日报) referred only to the official statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which deflected any notion that the Communist Party was actively attempting to influence Australian politics. The ministry spokesperson described Four Corners' claims as 'unfounded, extremely irresponsible, and not worth refuting.'

The nationalist tabloid *Global Times* (环球时报) published an editorial which dismissed the Four Corners program as 'based entirely on speculation.' It also called on Prime Minister Turnbull not to 'humour this extreme and deliberately misleading report.' The editorial concluded that it was actually Western nations which were guilty of attempting to infiltrate China and interfere in its domestic affairs. Last week, *Global Times* reiterated this

position by publishing another commentary accusing Australia of spying on the Chinese embassy in Australia.

Closer to home, local Chinese-language news outlets are divided on how to approach the issue. Known for its pro-PRC position, the popular *Sydney Today* (今日悉尼) was relatively muted on the subject. It included no original reporting of the Four Corners program, nor did it run translations of articles from the mainstream media – its regular *modus operandi*. The only exceptions were op-eds by former foreign minister Bob Carr and Professor James Laurenceson from the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology, Sydney. *Sydney Today* instead relied on re-posts of PRC state media and links to official statements by Chinese Ambassador Cheng Jingye and the Media Federation of Australia.

Other Australia-based news outlets, however, have been more perturbed by the Four Corners episode. The independent *Vision China Times* (看中国) ran an editorial which warned the Chinese-Australian community 'not to be too optimistic about (their) future.' The article stated that the actions of a few had undermined the credibility and reputation of the greater Chinese community in the eyes of the Australian public. While diplomatic ties could be repaired through ministerial meetings and mutual economic interest, they warned that 'the pile of bills left by the storm of public opinion (would) be borne entirely by Chinese-Australians.'

Writing in the *Global Times*, an Australian Chinese scholar Xue Er was surprisingly critical of the two businessmen who featured in the Four Corners program – Dr Chau Chak Wing and Huang Xiangmo. Xue Er denounced Chau and Huang as 'political opportunists' who had sullied China's image. If their political grandstanding were to become mainstream, it would be 'detrimental to the Party, the country, the people, and even provoke pointless disaster upon the local Chinese community.'

Rather than engage in 'lazy, irresponsible and dangerous' patriotism that 'perpetuated suspicion amongst the local population,' the Chinese community needed to properly engage with the local discourse, Xue Er wrote. This would require 'establishing effective channels of communication with mainstream society, instead of simply taking to the streets.' Similarly, PRC government departments needed to realise that steady integration of overseas communities into their adopted countries was the true path to 'revitalising the Chinese nation.'

Though certainly not without its faults, the Four Corners program brought the critical issue of PRC interference to the forefront of public discussion. But it has also highlighted a clear disconnect between the Australian mainstream media and the Chinese-Australian community.

Rather than generalising, it is important to understand the various perspectives of a diverse and fragmented

Chinese-Australian community. A preliminary look shows that Australia's Chinese community is conflicted and concerned about the way the discussion is heading. Failure to understand these perspectives, combined with sensationalist reporting, risks isolating the community and reinforcing the belief that they are a minority under siege.

Recent coverage of the 2016 Census results – including alarmist headlines from major newspapers – has only served to reinforce this perception of persecution and exclusion.

Within the local Chinese-language commentary we can also see efforts to address this dilemma. In order to do so, the Chinese-Australian community must be able to engage in the wider debate taking place in Australia. This will require access to critical journalism in their native language. The prevalence of PRC state media and absence of critical Chinese-language journalism in popular domestic platforms such as *Sydney Today* are not conducive to mutual engagement.

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