

Obsession with China's Influence Is Hurting Australia's Public Diplomacy Agenda



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Successful engagement with the Chinese community is a litmus test for the effectiveness of multiculturalism as a national policy.

As a result of the arrival in Australia of new Chinese migrants from the People's Republic of China (PRC) over the past three decades or so, the diversity in demographic composition of the ethnic Chinese population has intensified. To date, the PRC is the largest overseas birthplace for Australians after the United Kingdom and New Zealand. Added to this, China has now surpassed Japan as Australia's biggest trading partner, in terms of both imports and exports. This means that China is one of only two countries, along with the United Kingdom, that not only have seen large numbers of migrants settling in Australia but also have proven to be crucial to Australia's economic survival.

However, unlike the UK, which was for a long time considered to be the "mother country" by many Anglo-Celtic Australians, China is not a liberal democracy. Unlike India, another supplier of skilled migrants to Australia and a member of the British Commonwealth, the Chinese generally do not share with Anglo-Australians a passion for cricket, and most Chinese migrants did not have English as a lingua franca prior to their migration. Thus, in comparison with their Indian migrant community counterparts, Chinese-speaking migrants generally experience a greater linguistic, cultural, and political distance from Australia's Anglo-Celtic mainstream.

It is this paradoxical situation—Australia's economic dependence on China, hand-in-hand with its perception that China's political, ideological, and cultural values are incompatible with Australia's—that explains the prevailing feelings of fear and anxiety that many Australians have about China.

Chinese-language media in

Australia

These feelings are no doubt exacerbated by the global discourse on the "rise of China," and mounting evidence of the Chinese government's efforts to shape international public opinion through the media. Like Narendra Modi's government, which actively pursues its diasporic communities—"non-resident Indians"—to contribute to India's national economy, the Chinese government also considers diasporic Chinese communities as public diplomacy resources and assets. Moreover, much more than the Indian government, the Chinese administration strategically engages with diasporic Chinese media which are now widely described in policy circles in China as the "vessels" that can propel China's public diplomacy agenda out into the world. Indeed, such efforts have begun to bear tangible outcomes in Chinese-language migrant media in various countries outside China.

In Australia, as elsewhere, China's state media have made significant inroads into the space of Chinese-language media over the past few years. We have seen cases of struggling Chinese-language media enterprises being bailed out as a result of the largesse of the Chinese state media, as well as examples of lucrative deals, partnerships, and content-sharing arrangements between China's state media organisations and cash-strapped Chinese migrant media entities.

Very commonly misunderstood is the moral motivation behind China's attempts at global media expansion. One phrase that appears in China's policy discussions so often that it has taken on the appearance of a self-evident truth is the saying that 'the West is strong and we are weak'. This expression captures China's perception of the current dynamics of the global media

and communication sector and its own place within it. Another frequently-used phrase states that China is 'in a passive position and often gets beaten up'. In other words, what often dominates policy discussions is a deep-seated sense of injustice and grievance, imbued with the feeling of being "hard done by" in relation to the West—Australia included. China's soft power initiative, of which expansion into Australia's media landscape is a part, aims to increase China's media presence globally, with the main purpose being to reduce or even eradicate the "bias" and "prejudices" against China that are seen as pervasive in Western media. The overriding conviction that fuels this drive is that China has been robbed of its rightful voice in a world dominated by the imperialistic media power of the West.

Ironically, but perhaps not surprisingly, China's actions aimed at seeking redress for these perceived moral and discursive injustices have become new sources of anxiety for the West, reinforcing the West's fear of a "China threat." In the mainstream Australian media, China's efforts to globalise its own media have been read as a covert attempt to move propaganda offshore, to export communism, and to take over the symbolic space of the free world. China's expansionist impulses are seen as imperialistic in design and intent, with the ultimate goal being to achieve global dominance and "rule the world."

Australian mainstream media response

For many years, mainstream English-language media and diasporic Chinese-language media have existed in parallel universes. While it is apparent that there exists a multicultural ethnic media sector "out there," with the exception of SBS's multicultural language

programs, this sector remains "ethnic." The implication of labelling and treating non-English-language migrant media as "ethnic" is that, except on controversial matters, its content usually does not register in the consciousness of the English-speaking mainstream, and it is widely assumed there is little need for two-way cross-fertilisation of content. Thus, the onus has always been on the ethnic side to translate the content of mainstream media into the ethnic language in question, but seldom the other way round.

Due to the language barriers that are reinforced by this attitude, non-Chinese audiences have typically considered Chinese-language media in Australia to be some kind of "black box," and for this reason, these media have existed mostly outside the purview of Australian media regulators, the business sector, Government bodies, and mainstream media establishments.

Over the last couple of years, and, in particular, during the past year, the mainstream English-language media's position vis-à-vis the Chinese media in Australia has swung from apathy and indifference to mild obsession. But the frameworks within which these discussions have taken place are mostly narrowly-focused at best, and sensationalist and alarmist at worst. In most cases, media reports have been more or less accurate about the extent and scale of the penetration of local Chinese-language media by Chinese state media. However, what they have left out of the discussion is whether the increased presence of China's propaganda equates to or translates into a direct impact on Chinese-speaking migrant audiences. Nor has there been a concerted attempt to explain the political and moral motivations



PHOTO: EMILY ZHANG

behind China's efforts. Due to these blind spots, the mainstream English-language media's coverage has to some extent contributed to fear and anxiety about the implications of China's rise, rather than seeking to understand and address these sentiments.

Of particular interest to mainstream English reporters are the speeches and actions of Chinese individuals who display pro-China nationalism—as in the case of a Chinese student rally in Melbourne against the Hague's decision—and Australia's position—on China's sovereignty claims in the South China Sea. Yet few of these journalists reflect on the possibility that such pro-Chinese nationalism is as much a response to their own narrowly-focused and one-dimensional reporting on China as it is the result of Chinese government's patriotic propaganda.

Risk of alienating the Chinese community

Equally problematically, the mainstream English-language media have more or less related to Australia's Chinese-language media as the nation's Other. There is usually little interest in seeking perspectives and information from these media, except to look for evidence of differences from or even hostility towards Australian views, or to try and unearth pro-China—and sometimes actual Chinese government—perspectives.

Most worrying of all is the tendency, evidenced in some recent media reports, to accuse Chinese migrants and international students from China of being agents of influence on behalf of the Chinese government, thereby conflating the Chinese government with the Chinese people, and Chinese citizens

with diasporic Chinese communities.

The implications of an ever-expanding Chinese media sector, including digital and social media, in Australia are many and complex. To look on the "bright side," it seems that the Chinese migrant community in Australia are "spoiled for choice," since they have, within their reach, state Chinese media, Chinese migrant media, transnational Chinese media from other Chinese migration destinations, the Chinese-language media provided as part of Australia's multicultural media (SBS radio, television, and Internet outlets), and the mainstream English-language Australian media. At the same time, individuals in this community are sometimes—perhaps often—confronted with conflicting and competing perspectives on Australia and China, or in relation to other relevant global affairs. For instance, China's state media criticise the United States and Australia for meddling in the South China Sea dispute, whereas the mainstream Australian media criticise China for its aggressive behaviour in asserting sovereignty rights in the region. The tensions and dilemmas facing individuals from the Chinese migrant community become at best a source of cultural anxiety and frustration, at worst a trigger for social disharmony. Situations such as these can encourage the formation of a vicious circle of racism whereby the Australian mainstream media's coverage of China-related issues may generate negative and often visceral sentiments towards Australia among Chinese migrants, whose consequent sense of grievance—sometimes expressed in emotionally charged terms—may incur further mainstream prejudice against them.

Chinese as key players in Australian public life

To dispel the spectre of such a vicious circle is crucial to Australia's national agenda of strengthening democracy, ensuring economic prosperity, promoting social cohesion, and practising effective engagement with China. Chinese migrants in Australia are voters capable of shaping outcomes in electoral politics. This is evidenced in the last Federal election, where pro-Coalition Chinese voters effectively used WeChat—currently the most widely used Chinese social media platform—to campaign against the Labor Party. Chinese Australians—whether they realise it or not—have also been active agents on behalf of economic growth. This is not only because, as individuals, they are enthusiastic consumers with high consumption power in the Australian economy, but also, and equally notably, because the Chinese business community in Australia is a key intermediary in business and trade relations between the two countries.

Furthermore, Australia's Chinese communities have been key stakeholders in the long history of racial politics in the nation. They have been both victims of, and advocates against, racism. At the same time, like every other community, they are also equally capable of entertaining cultural stereotypes and racial biases against others. Successful engagement with the Chinese community is thus a litmus test for the effectiveness of multiculturalism as a national policy. As a result, it has become a matter of pressing concern to turn the current tension between the Chinese community and the mainstream into an opportunity for building a more inclusive multicultural program which, as Andrew Jakubowicz, noted

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scholar of multiculturalism, argues, "validates difference while stressing common values associated with universal human rights," and which encourages rigorous, rational and respectful dialogue and debate.

Finally, political, social, and cultural actors aside, Chinese migrants can be enthusiastic promoters of goodwill on behalf of Australia in the cultivation of mutually beneficial Australia-China relations. To be sure, the Australian government has also noted the importance of diaphora diplomacy, particularly the need to draw on the linguistic skills, social networks, and cultural community connections of diasporic communities. But to prosecute this policy effectively has never been as important as it is now, given that China has been increasingly pro-active in its efforts to engage Chinese migrant communities as key assets of its own public diplomacy agenda.

The importance of cultivating a deeper level of engagement in Australian public life within the Chinese (and broader Asian) diaspora cannot be overstated. The more migrant community members feel that they are being treated with respect and are regarded as equal partners in the political and social processes of the nation, the more likely they are to reciprocate this respect and egalitarian treatment and fulfil their own duties and responsibilities as Australia citizens, and identify with and embrace the democratic values of their adopted country. The Chinese community is no exception to this.

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