

Submission to Multicultural Framework Review

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My submission is focused on the need for Australia's multiculturalism to be reconceptualised and redesigned by taking into account the opportunities and challenges posed by current geopolitics, and by the growing complexity of the myriad Chinese-Australian communities.

This focus on the Australian-Chinese communities is in response to a number of unique factors: (a) a higher percentage of arrivals from the PRC than in previous periods; (b) a fast-changing geopolitical dynamics featuring growing tension and hostility between the US and China; and (c) Australia's foreign-policy positioning vis-à-vis the US and China, and the Australian government's national security and defence strategy, which increasingly imagines China as the nation's greatest military threat.

Key Recommendations

1. At the conceptual level, a new multicultural framework needs to recognise that the well-being of Australia's multicultural communities is closely related to, and inevitably affected by, geopolitics, and by Australia's foreign policy towards migrants' countries of origin. It is no longer viable to conceptualise foreign policy and multicultural affairs as two separate entities. This new reality may have serious implications for the current bureaucratic structure of various departments in the federal government, and the relationships between them.
2. In terms of the well-being of various Chinese-Australian communities, the government should recognise that the 'China threat' discourse has caused serious concern among the Chinese-Australian communities, many of whom feel that, caught in the hostility between their motherland and their new country of residence, they

have been subject to undue suspicion and distrust. My recent research¹ shows a worryingly low level of acceptance of the Chinese-Australian communities by the Australian public, and a low level of trust between English-language media and Chinese-Australian communities, especially Mandarin-speaking first-generation Australians and permanent residents. These tendencies alert us to serious problems in the nation's bid for multicultural harmony and social inclusiveness.

3. Future multicultural policy needs to put the principle of human rights back into its framework, especially in the context of countering foreign interference. The Chinese-Australian communities are complex and diverse in terms of political views, social values, and cultural practices. In light of this diversity or sometimes even conflict, the overall principle of respecting individuals' right to freedom of expression is paramount. For this reason, just as individuals speaking out against the Chinese government should be safe from harassment and abuse, those who wish to speak in support of the Chinese government should not automatically be seen as brainwashed by China's propaganda, or – even worse – suspected or accused of operating as agents and spies of the Chinese state.
4. Similarly, free access to all social media platforms including WeChat needs to be respected. Naturally, WeChat should comply with all relevant Australian regulations. However, because WeChat is by far the most useful platform for PRC migrants, it is important that the government respect this community's right to stay connected with their families, friends and networks in China. It is crucial that the issue of WeChat should not be weaponised by politicians who single-mindedly push for a ban or partial ban in the name of security interests .
5. In line with the goal of developing adequate communication platforms to reach out to non-English speaking populations, the government should continue to use Chinese social media such as WeChat and Xiaohongshu to facilitate political engagement, better delivery of social services in aged care, health care and disability care, as well as to promote social inclusion and belonging.
6. More than ever before, there is a serious need to support ongoing research in order to identify feasible strategies, methods and pathways of ensuring inclusion and

¹ Wanning Sun, 2023. 'First-generation PRC migrants and social cohesion: Views on news about the PRC and Chinese-Australians'. <https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/first-generation-prc-migrants-and-social-cohesion-views-news-about-prc-and-chinese>

acceptance of Chinese-Australians, especially first-generation PRC migrants. The government should actively harness the hitherto largely untapped resource of the Chinese-Australian communities as assets in defending Australia's national security and national interest, rather than regarding them as primarily a liability. Identifying effective strategies to promote their social, cultural and political integration should be considered as an urgent matter of national interest and national security.

Background

Chinese-Australians, Social Inclusion and the National Interest

In recent years, and especially since COVID-19 and during the last period of government by the Coalition, we have witnessed growing anti-Chinese racism, the demonisation of Chinese-Australians, suspicion of Chinese-Australians' political loyalties, and a lack of civic and citizenship education for new migrants.

Social cohesiveness has been identified as a key element of Australia's national interest,² underpinning Australia's prosperity and security.³ Indeed, security commentators make the case that 'building trusted and apolitical engagement with all parts of the community, and notably Australians of Chinese origin' is an important component of formulating an overarching national interest strategy.⁴ Facilitating the integration of minority groups, particularly those as sizeable as the Chinese-Australian communities, is not only consistent with a liberal perspective of justice and equality, but it is also a matter of pragmatic importance, especially if Australia is intent on growing its own political influence and increasing its national power in strategic competition with foreign coercive influence.

² Heather Smith, 2023. 'Reconciling the Australian national interest'. *Australian Outlook*, Australian Institute for International Affairs, 14 April. <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/reconciling-the-australian-national-interest/>

³ Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, 2023. 'About us – Our portfolios – Social cohesion'. accessed 19 July. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/social-cohesion/about-social-cohesion>

⁴ Rory Medcalf and Michelle Price, 2020. 'Why Australia needs a total national interest strategy'. *The Australian Financial Review*, 9 December 9. <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/why-australia-needs-a-total-national-interest-strategy-20201208-p56lr5>

For the same reason, Osmond Chiu cautions that pursuing our foreign policy through a defence and security lens needs to stop fuelling ‘the perception that Chinese-Australians would be acceptable collateral damage in a conflict’.⁵

This view – that Chinese-Australians would be acceptable collateral damage in a conflict – seems to have been implicitly adopted by many commentators in our media, as well as by some think-tanks and politicians. This has been extremely damaging to the legitimacy and validity of the ethos and philosophy of multiculturalism.

A new multicultural framework needs to reflect the fact that the well-being of Chinese-Australians is closely related to, and inevitably affected by, current geopolitics, by Australia’s foreign policy towards China, and by Australia’s national security policy favouring a close alliance with the US. It is increasingly difficult to conceptualise the two as separate entities.

Given this, the challenge to facilitate the social integration of this particular cohort is enormous. Recently, Andrew Jakubowicz commented on what he has called ‘Sinophobia in times of COVID-19’. He writes:

Identity within and attachment to Australia for ethnic immigrants depend on how well the system they enter protects their human rights from the omnipresent threats from racists and xenophobes. They will not release their grip on the old if the new emerges as threatening and potentially dangerous.⁶

Lack of Information and Communication Platforms for Practical Needs

While many people in these communities feel marginalised and excluded in political and social terms, in practical terms there is also a gap in the government’s efforts to deliver a wide range of services, including aged care, health care, legal aid, and myriad other social initiatives, such as GambleAware and information about domestic violence.

Academics who conduct research on various aspects of the Chinese-Australian communities have demonstrated the importance of Chinese social media platforms in the everyday lives of people in these communities. For instance, Bingqin Li (UNSW) has been studying how community organisations such as the Chinese Australian Services Society (CASS) use WeChat to recruit volunteers in aged care and self-help groups. WeChat is particularly useful

⁵ Osmond Chiu, 2023. ‘Australia’s Chinese diaspora faces a representation deficit’. *East Asia Forum*, 10 March. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2023/03/10/australias-chinese-diaspora-faces-a-representation-deficit/>

⁶ Andrew Jakubowicz, 2020. ‘How Sinophobia goes viral: Building resilience against Australia’s latest anti-Chinese contagion’. ABC Religion & Ethics, 27 February. <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/andrew-jakubowicz-sinophobia-goes-viral/11983714>

for community-based service providers to contact hard-to-reach older people. Li reports that some of these older people have been quietly contributing to the shortage of aged care labour in Australia for many years. But now, with the help of WeChat, CASS has recruited many more volunteers, including many new migrants from mainland China.

For older Chinese Australians, WeChat is essentially a lifeline for overcoming social isolation and learning about Australian culture, regulations, social services, events and networks. If it were banned or its use restricted, many of these elders would return to a state of effectively being ‘blind, deaf and mute’.

Similarly, Tina Du, (currently at University of South Australia) has studied the information behaviour of Chinese migrants over the age of 67, and found that WeChat plays a significant and essential role in enabling these senior citizens to live in Australia and remain connected with China.⁷ This is especially relevant, given the challenges identified in the Australian Government’s recent *2023 Intergenerational Report*.⁸

Some researchers are also urging health professionals to use WeChat to assist their patients. Dr Ling Zhang (Sydney University) is a nurse practitioner and research fellow specialising in the care of patients with cardiovascular disease. Based on her finding of low levels of eHealth literacy among migrant communities, Zhang argues that WeChat should be used as a platform for GPs and cardiologists to disseminate health information by health care providers, given its wide reach.

This growing body of evidence-based research is pointing to the crucial role that WeChat is playing in the lives of many Chinese-Australian migrants, and so far, no concrete evidence has been identified that shows that WeChat is a threat of any kind to Australia’s national security.

Senator James Paterson, who chaired the Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, believes that ‘We must also harden the resilience of our diaspora communities targeted by transnational repression to protect their right to free speech’⁹.

⁷ Jia Tina Du, 2023. ‘Understanding the information journey of late-life migrants to inform support design Information seeking driven by a major life transition’. *Information Processing & Management* 60(2), March. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0306457322002734?via%3Dihub>

⁸ Australian Government, 2023. *2023 Intergenerational Report*. The Treasury, 24 August. <https://treasury.gov.au/publication/2023-intergenerational-report>

⁹ James Paterson, 2023. ‘Australia must de-weaponise TikTok and WeChat’. *The Australian Financial Review*, 2 August. <https://www.afr.com/policy/foreign-affairs/we-must-de-weaponise-tiktok-and-wechat-20230716-p5dolo>

To echo Senator Paterson's call to protect our diaspora communities' right to free speech, it is important to point out that the right to freedom of expression and free access to all social media platforms, including WeChat, indeed needs to be respected. While WeChat should be expected to comply with all relevant Australian regulations, it is also important that the government recognise and accept that WeChat is the most widely used social media platform for PRC migrants, and has become essential for them in staying connected with their families, friends and networks in China. Whatever policies emerge in this space must respect this community's right to use the platform for such purposes. Moreover, these policies must encourage the government to harness the platform as a way of improving PRC migrants' capacity to access information about social services and other vital government functions. It is crucial that the issue of WeChat should not be weaponised by politicians who single-mindedly push for a ban or a partial ban in the name of security interests.

The government should not only continue its nascent use of WeChat to facilitate political engagement, to deliver social services in aged care, health care, disability care, and to encourage and promote inclusion and belonging; it should also fund further research to identify ways of doing more with the platform in these spheres, and to do it better.

Summary

The question of how to address the issue of Australian-Chinese communities is an integral component of the multicultural framework review. A number of factors – a large number of recent arrivals from the PRC, a fast-changing geopolitical dynamics featuring growing tension and hostility between the US and China, and Australia's increasing tendency in its foreign policy to imagine China as our biggest military threat – come to bear on the current review of the multicultural framework. Much work – overall reconceptualisation, governing structure, a rethinking of policy, and the design of practical strategies – remains to be done. The government will benefit enormously by actively seeking the views of scholars, multicultural agencies and community stakeholders in updating its framework.

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