

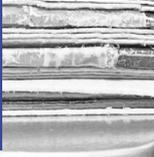
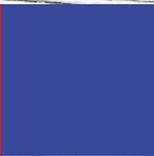
FIRST-GENERATION PRC MIGRANTS AND SOCIAL COHESION: VIEWS ON NEWS ABOUT THE PRC AND CHINESE- AUSTRALIANS

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The Australia-China Relations Institute (ACRI) is an independent, non-partisan research institute based at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). UTS:ACRI's mission is to inform Australia's engagement with China through substantive dialogue, and research and analysis grounded in scholarly rigour.

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Executive summary

This report investigates responses and reactions by first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants in Australia from the People's Republic of China (PRC) to news stories about the PRC and about Chinese-Australian communities in English-language Australian digital, print, television and other media.

Drawing on three focus groups, a quantitative survey of 689 respondents and 20 in-depth interviews, this report seeks to understand the implications of these first-generation migrants' views on news reporting for social cohesion in Australia.

Social cohesion has been identified as a key element of Australia's national interest,¹ underpinning Australia's prosperity and security.² 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.³ 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.

Social cohesion is a composite of several key components, including a sense of belonging, a sense of worth, a sense of social inclusion and justice, level of political participation, and level of acceptance or rejection.⁴ This study engages with these components through the prism of three broad contexts: (1) how Australia's PRC migrants see themselves and their community portrayed in the media; (2) how they see the PRC portrayed in the media; and (3) what impact they think such portrayals have on Australia's general public.

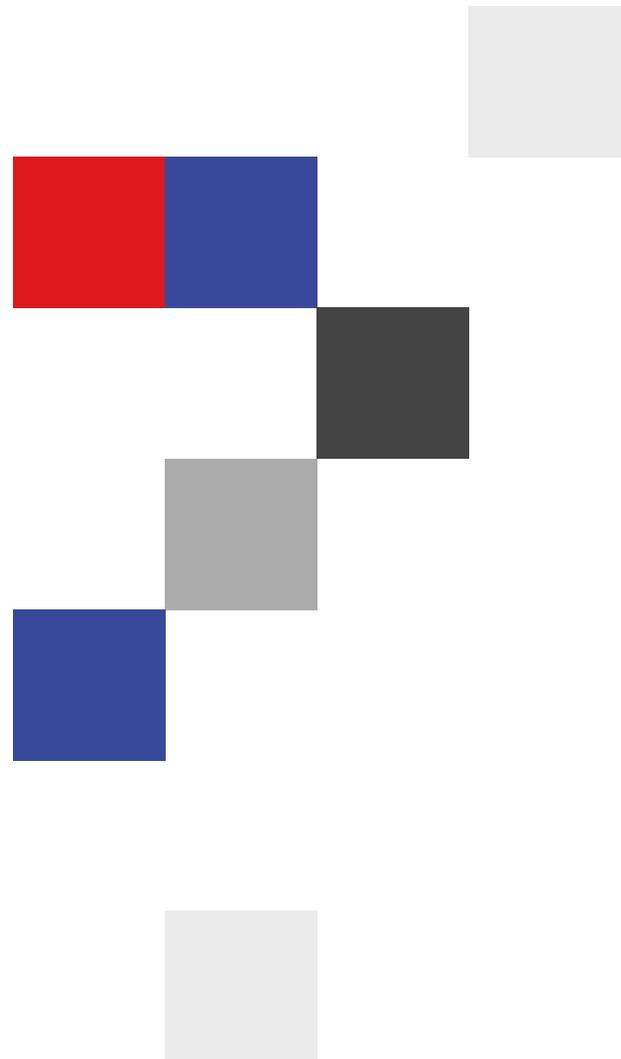
This report finds that:

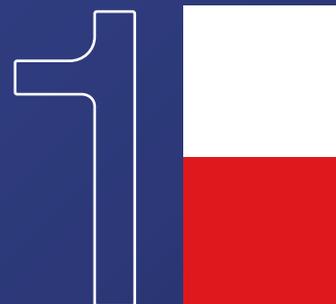
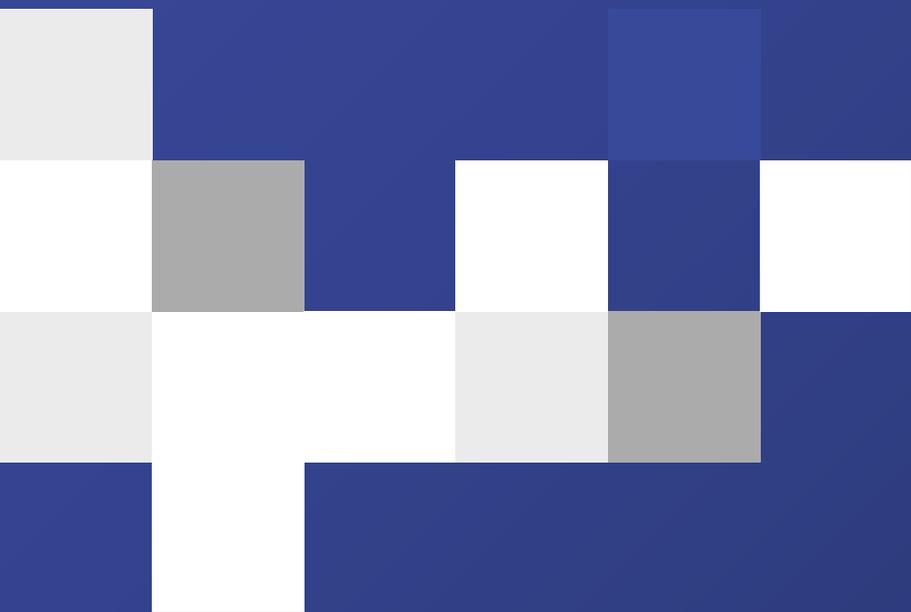
- **Both focus group discussions and in-depth interviewees perceive a high level of professionalism and balance in the Australian English-language media's reporting on domestic issues.** They acknowledge that Australia's English-language media, in contrast to PRC state media, tend to adopt a critical stance due to different news values. Interviewees generally express more trust in the Australian media than in PRC state media.
- **At the same time, a substantial majority (78 percent) of survey respondents believe that when Australia's English-language media report on Chinese-Australians they tend to lack fairness and balance.** Many in-depth interviewees expressed frustration that Chinese-Australians have been portrayed in Australian English-language media reports on Chinese influence as either in need of protection from persecution by the Chinese government, or as real or potential agents of Chinese influence. For these interviewees, the bulk of reporting has largely overlooked the positive role their community has made to Australian society.

- **Just over half (51 percent) of survey respondents believe that Australia’s English-language media were either ‘relatively distrustful’ (42 percent) or ‘completely distrustful’ (nine percent) of Chinese-Australian communities, and seven in 10 (70 percent) believe that the media tend to portray them, both collectively and individually, as objects of suspicion and risks to national security.** Despite the diverse range of opinions and political views within this cohort, these figures, when combined with interview data, point to a widespread feeling among respondents that their community is substantially more likely to be mistrusted, misunderstood and misinterpreted by the Australian English-language media now than in the past.
- **There is a widespread perception among survey respondents that Australian English-language media reporting on PRC-related issues has led to a low level of acceptance of their community by the Australian public.** About six in 10 (63 percent) respondents self-report feelings of emotional and mental anguish and helplessness in response to the media’s perceived ‘othering’ rhetoric in their reporting of most matters Chinese.
- **Over half of survey respondents (53 percent) believe that reporting by the Australian English-language media on the PRC has been ‘too negative’.**
- **Despite Australian English-language media and government attempts to differentiate the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the nation of China from Chinese-Australian communities, a majority of survey respondents (51 percent) believe that hostile coverage of the PRC has led to suspicion of them, regardless of the media’s and government’s intentions.** Both the quantitative and qualitative data in this report show that the prevailing narrative of geopolitical tensions between Australia and the PRC and the media’s tendency to depict the PRC as a hostile country have posed serious challenges for PRC migrants in their efforts to be accepted into Australian society.
- **There are a number of ways in which Australian English-language media reporting can diminish PRC first-generation migrants’ sense of worth as a community.** Central to this problem is the discrepancy between their self-perceptions, and how they believe they are perceived by the public. The majority of survey respondents (58 percent) believe that they are better informed about the PRC than both Australia’s English-speaking public and the Chinese public living in the PRC, and hence better positioned than either group to assess the accuracy of the Australia’s media reporting on the PRC. In-depth interviews provide myriad reasons behind this belief. They also show an acute awareness of the widespread public perception that they have been ‘brainwashed’ by PRC propaganda.
- **Interviewees emphasise that while they do not have a problem with ‘negative’ news about the PRC, they frequently perceive a particular news-making agenda in Australian English-language media that frames the PRC and Chinese-Australians as hostile entities.**
- **Despite an increased level of interest in engaging with Australia’s electoral processes as voters, 76 percent of survey respondents report that they feel that they rarely or never have a say in shaping public debates.** Around six in 10 (63 percent) report prevalent feelings of powerlessness in relation to having their voices heard by the media. A small number of respondents report having lodged complaints about media reporting by writing either to politicians (eight percent) or the media outlet in question (six percent).* However, most report that they tend to process such daily feelings of ‘discursive injustice’ by airing them within their own community and through their own networks, by discussing them with family and friends (55 percent), or sharing in their social media networks (23 percent).

* The original version of this report said that 'Fourteen percent report having lodged complaints about media reporting by writing either to politicians (eight percent) or the media (six percent).' This has been updated for clarity and accuracy.

- **There are deep complexities in respondents' sense of belonging.** Considered together, survey participants' responses to a number of questions indicate a high level of ambivalence, uncertainty and even conflicted feelings towards both Australia and the PRC. On the one hand, respondents seem to remain strongly committed to making Australia home: compared with five years ago, one in three (33 percent) report no change in their sense of belonging, and another 38 percent report a stronger sense of belonging; 10 percent report having a substantially reduced sense of belonging to Australia, and only two percent say they no longer have any sense of belonging. On the other hand, 46 percent of respondents either strongly agree (17 percent) or are inclined to agree (29 percent) that reading media stories about the China threat has diminished their sense of belonging to mainstream Australian society.
- **Despite a commitment to remaining in Australia, and because they see Australia as a better place than the PRC to build their lives, an overwhelming majority of respondents (91 percent) voice concerns that Australia's English-language media have a tendency to engage in speculation about war with China, primarily because they believe such speculation has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.** They are equally concerned about how Chinese-Australians would be treated should Australia find itself at war with the PRC.





Introduction

Over the past decade, and especially since 2017, there has been an exponential increase in the Australian English-language media's reporting on the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Chinese-Australian communities.⁵

Assessments of such reporting are polarised. On the one hand, in the view of some journalists, the Australian media's reporting on the PRC is 'not markedly less intelligent or accurate than Australian media coverage in general'⁶ and 'a free press is a magic weapon against China's influence peddling'.⁷ On the other hand, in the view of some China studies scholars, much of this reporting has led to the consolidation of a 'China threat' discourse,⁸ giving rise to what some have called a 'China panic',⁹ with some commentators observing that China-influence reporting has become 'securitised'.¹⁰

At the same time, research has shown that negative attitudes by the general public towards Chinese diaspora communities are directly correlated with how the *government* of the PRC is reported in the media (author's emphasis).¹¹

As such, it is important to gauge the level of concern among Chinese-Australians about this perceived hostile media coverage, as this will impact the degree to which members of this community feel 'included' in the wider Australian community – an important benchmark of social cohesion.¹² Given that PRC migrants comprise the largest and most recently arrived cohort among Australia's Chinese communities, and given that they typically maintain closer ties with mainland China than other diasporic Chinese, their responses warrant particular attention.

This report investigates responses and reactions by first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants in Australia from the PRC to news stories about the PRC and about Chinese-Australian communities in English-language Australian digital, print, television and other media. It examines, in particular, (1) how members of this community see themselves portrayed in the media; (2) how they see the PRC being portrayed in the media; and (3) what impact they believe such portrayals have on Australia's general public.

Drawing on three focus groups, a quantitative survey of 689 respondents, and 20 in-depth interviews, the report seeks to understand the implications of these first-generation migrants' views on news reporting for social cohesion in Australia.

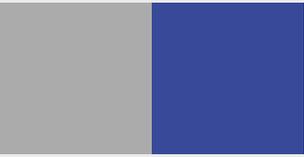




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Opinions on the accuracy of Australian media reporting on the PRC



“ New migrants from China base their judgement of the Australian media’s China reporting on their direct personal experience. In contrast, those who do not have direct experience of China can only judge the credibility of news based on the reputation of the news organisation in question. ”

Interview participant 13ⁱ



“ Until two years ago, I got all my news and information from the Australian mainstream media, but now I’ve started to read news from Chinese media too, so I can compare them. When it comes to reporting on China, I identify with neither side, but at least I have more resources at my disposal to properly inform myself. Mainstream audiences are not privy to these resources. ”

Interview participant 19

ⁱ Some in-depth interviewees requested anonymity, so they are identified with a code (e.g., ‘IP3’). Some have given permission to be partially identified (e.g., by city of residence or profession), while others are identified by name because they specifically requested this. See Appendix 2 for more information about interviewees.

2.1 Background

Some polling has been conducted in the recent past on Chinese-Australians' views on the accuracy of Australian English-language media reporting on the PRC.

Three polls between 2020 and 2022 were conducted by the Lowy Institute, surveying about 1,000 Chinese-Australians of various backgrounds (see Methodology and Appendix 1).ⁱⁱ While it can be assumed that some of the respondents to these polls were PRC-born, some – perhaps many – would have been Australian-born Chinese, or from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia or other countries.

This makes it difficult to disaggregate the data provided in these surveys to get a clear sense of the similarities and differences between first-generation migrants from the PRC and the other cohorts of Chinese ancestry; hence the significance of studying PRC migrants as a distinct group of Chinese-Australians.

Each of the Lowy Institute's polls asked their Chinese-Australian respondents: 'Overall, would you say Australian media reporting about China is too negative, too positive, fair and balanced, or don't know?' In the most recent poll (2022), 42 percent of respondents said Australian media reporting about China was 'too negative', 42 percent found it 'fair and balanced' and 13 percent said it was 'too positive'.¹³ By contrast, in the previous year's poll, 57 percent had said such reporting was 'too negative', 33 percent had said it was 'fair and balanced' and nine percent had thought it was 'too positive'.¹⁴ In 2020, 50 percent of respondents had said such reporting about China was 'too negative', 31 percent had found it 'fair and balanced', and 19 percent had said it was 'too positive'.¹⁵

In 2022, the Lowy Institute asked the same question in a more general poll of about 2,000 Australian adults. The results were strikingly different: 10 percent of respondents said the reporting was 'too positive', 61 percent said it was 'fair and balanced', 26 percent found it 'too negative' and three percent said they 'didn't know'.¹⁶

For comparative purposes, the author posed the same question to PRC-born migrants in the survey for this report for the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), to determine whether the responses differ in this specific community. Respondents were also asked about who is best able to judge the accuracy of Australian English-language media reporting about the PRC.

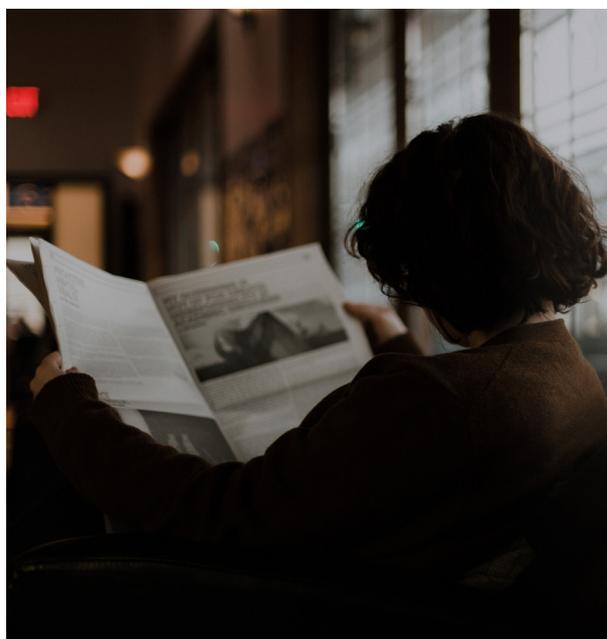


Image credit: priscilladupreez / Unsplash

ii The Chinese-Australian respondents in these polls had different histories, trajectories of migration, countries of origin, length of time in Australia, dialect groups, English-language proficiency and professional profile.

2.2 Fairness and balance in the Australian media’s reporting on the PRC: Quantitative responses

Twenty-five percent of a cohort of 689 PRC-born migrants surveyed for this report said that they believed that the Australian English-language media’s reporting on the PRC is ‘fair and balanced’.

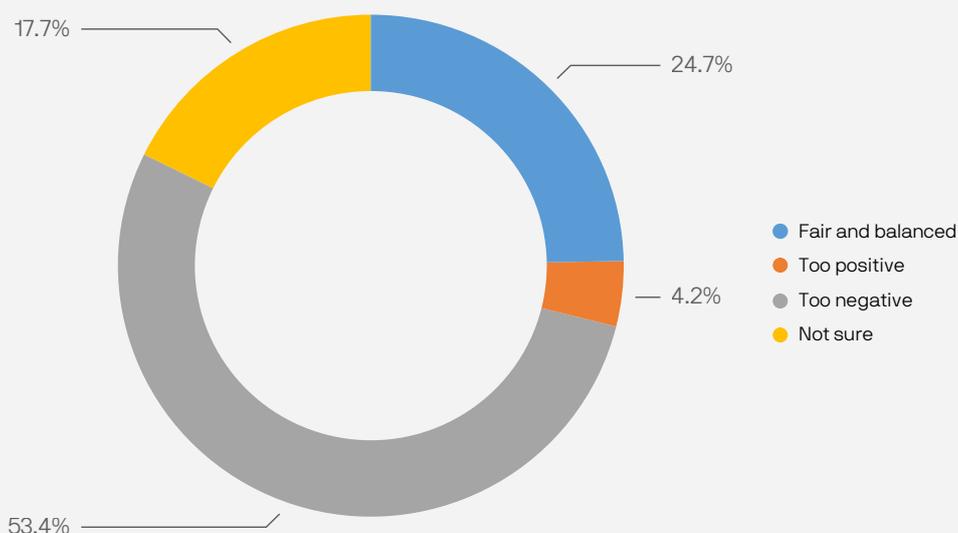
This is substantially fewer than the 42 percent of the broader Chinese-Australian cohort surveyed by the Lowy Institute in 2022 who selected this option. Both of these results are also markedly lower than the 61 percent who selected this option in the cohort of Australian adults surveyed by the Lowy Institute in 2022.

Fifty-three percent of survey respondents in this UTS:ACRI report said the reporting was ‘too negative’, four percent judged it to be ‘too positive’ and 18 percent said they were ‘uncertain’ (Figure 1; see also Appendix 1 for a comparison with the Lowy Institute’s survey results).

These data, viewed together, suggest that first-generation migrants from the PRC in Australia are less trustful than non-PRC Chinese-Australians that Australia’s English-language media reporting on the PRC will be fair and balanced. They also suggest that both groups have a lower level of trust in such reporting than do members of the general public.

Figure 1. Fairness and balance in the Australian English-language media’s reporting on the PRC

Overall, would you say Australian media reporting about China is too negative, too positive, fair and balanced, or don’t know?



Source: Wanning Sun, survey of Mandarin-speaking first-generation migrants from the PRC in Australia

2.3 Fairness and balance in the Australian media’s reporting on the PRC: Qualitative responses

Subsequent in-depth one-on-one interviews with 20 PRC-born migrants shed some light on why the majority of survey respondents express negative opinions on the fairness and balance of Australian English-language media reporting on the PRC, compared with the opinions of non-Chinese-Australians.

They point to a number of possible factors – ideological, social, cultural and economic – that might account for the stark discrepancy between the views of mainstream audiences and first-generation migrants from the PRC.

A number of interviewees discussed the economics of media production and expressed the belief that the profit-seeking bottom line was a key determinant in the media’s production of negative news about the PRC. For instance, interview participant (IP) 3ⁱⁱⁱ said that the media operate according to the logic of ‘confirmation bias’:

Ordinary people in Australia know little about China, and what little they do know about China tends to be based on misperceptions. In order to ‘attract the eyeballs’ of readers, the Australian media tend to pander to readers’ pre-existing prejudices about China.

IP3 went on to say that the media know that audiences will be more willing to read and accept reports that confirm their established biases, and so will tend to ignore, dismiss or downplay stories that present contradictory information about the PRC.

Differences between Australia’s and the PRC’s political systems were also identified as a key factor. IP11 said that audiences in liberal democracies try to make sense of what is happening in other countries according to their own political values:

Westerners tend to believe that liberal democracy is superior, but democracy may not necessarily work well in some Asian countries, including China. If democracy is the only benchmark, then it will lead to very judgemental reporting on what China does. On the other hand, most people who migrated to Australia from China are beneficiaries of the Chinese system. They are used to the Chinese environment, and even though they are unhappy with a lot of things China does, they know that criticising China is tantamount to criticising their own mother.

iii Some interviewees requested anonymity, so they are identified with a code (e.g., ‘IP3’). Some have given permission to be partially identified (e.g., by city of residence or profession), while others are identified by name because they specifically requested this. See Appendix 2 for more information about interviewees.



A Melbourne-based engineer (IP4) echoed this opinion, but approached it from a historical point of view:

Chinese-Australians may have a different understanding of China's history and geopolitical position, leading to a more sympathetic view of China and a negative perception of criticism of China in the media. For example, some Chinese-Australians may view China as a victim of historical imperialism and Western domination, while the general Australian public may view China as a rising superpower with an authoritarian government.

Differences in what audiences expect from the media were also considered to be relevant by some interviewees, especially in regard to the role of the media vis-à-vis the government.

For example, IP12 said:

In China, the media play the role of the government's mouthpiece, and have to be in sync with the government in their reporting. It could be difficult for them to accept the watchdog role of the media that you see in the Western media. Also, first-generation migrants from China grew up in China, and they're used to so-called 'positive reporting'. They know there is a difference between private communication, where criticisms can be made, and published content, which must give the impression of consensus. When you put these two factors together, you can understand why they don't feel comfortable about the Western media's reporting about China.

2.4 Capacity to judge the accuracy of the Australian media’s reporting on the PRC: Quantitative responses

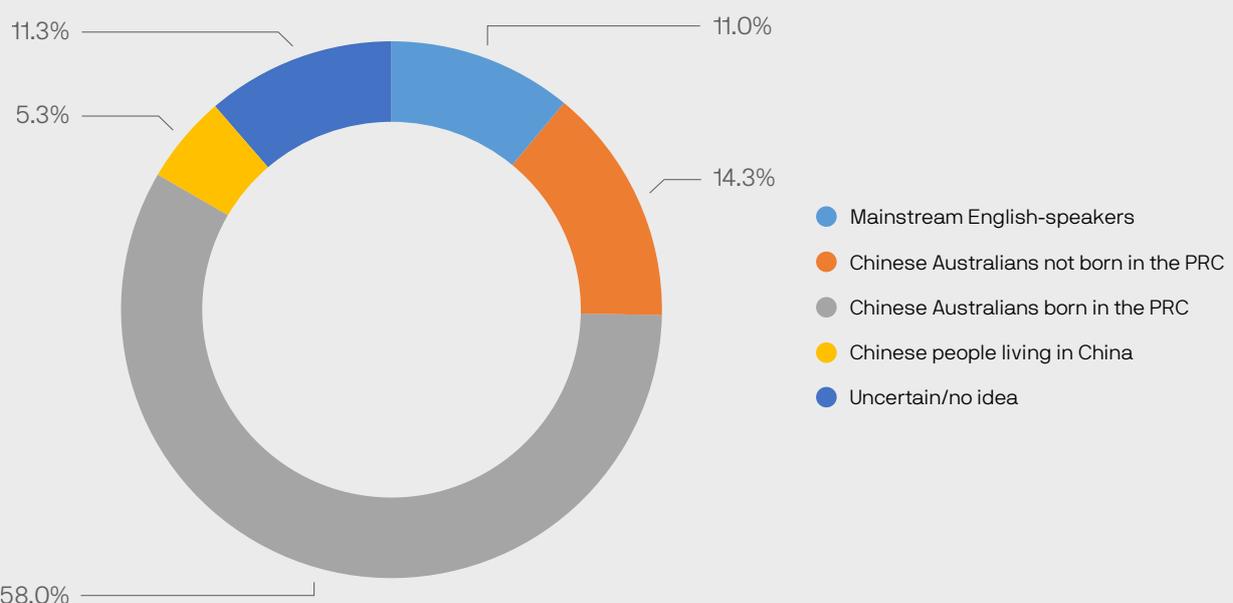
Survey respondents were asked:

‘In your opinion, which of the following groups of people is best able to judge the accuracy of mainstream English-language Australian media reporting about the PRC?’

More than half of respondents (58 percent) said that Chinese-Australians born in the PRC were best able to make this judgement. Fourteen percent thought people of Chinese heritage not born in the PRC could make this judgement most accurately, with 11 percent saying mainstream English-speakers were best placed to do so. Five percent nominated Chinese people living in the PRC as best placed to make this judgement (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Group best able to judge the accuracy of Australia’s English-language media reporting about the PRC

In your opinion, which of the following groups of people is best able to judge the accuracy of mainstream English-language Australian media reporting about the PRC?



2.5 Capacity to judge the accuracy of the Australian media's reporting on the PRC: Qualitative responses

When individual interviewees were asked why they believed the majority of survey respondents thought themselves to be more qualified than others to judge the accuracy of the Australian English-language media's reporting on the PRC, their responses revealed a widely held view that it was likely because PRC-born Australians have available to them perspectives from both the PRC and Australia.

IP10, a data analyst with a policy research company, pointed to the 'special position' of first-generation Chinese-Australian migrants:

They are on a middle ground between the two countries. They read news from both sides. And they see big discrepancies between what they can see from both sides. People tend to believe what they experience, what they see with their own eyes. To normal Aussies, most people get information from single [Australian English-language mainstream] sources.

IP5 echoed this view, saying he believed he is better informed about the PRC than most Australians without mainland Chinese heritage:

The majority of Australians believe Australian media coverage of China is fair and balanced because most of them are not able or willing to compare the information they have been fed, let alone seek different news channels. On the other hand, Chinese-Australians, more than half, I would say, are bilingual, and when they hear claims made about China in the media, they can 'let the bullet fly for a while' before making up their own minds.

IP5 believed that this tendency to use only English-language sources has more serious implications when monolingual Australian journalists themselves do not attempt to seek alternative points of view.

Sources aside, interviewees said that a lack of direct experience with the PRC is another factor that helps explain why first-generation PRC migrants in Australia believe themselves to be better informed. IP13 said:

New migrants from China base their judgement of the Australian media's China reporting on their direct personal experience. In contrast, those who do not have direct experience of China can only judge the credibility of news based on the reputation of the news organisation in question.

To further illustrate this point, IP13 cited the example of the ABC's and SBS' reporting on the decision by the Australian Border Force (ABF) to cancel PRC students' visas over the issue of their experience of military training in the PRC:¹⁷

The use of the words 'military training' invokes ideas of learning to use weapons and arms such as explosives, but the so-called military training given to Chinese students is not military in that sense. They merely subject students to a regime of military-style drills that aim to strengthen their capacity for resilience, independence, discipline and endurance.

To IP13, the Australian English-language media's coverage of the issue was problematic on at least two counts: their initial failure to provide context; and their assumption of the legitimacy of the ABF's point of view without having sought different points of view, whereas IP13 strongly believed the ABF's decision was made on the basis of an incorrect assumption.

Some interviewees expressed the belief that the discrepancy between English-language readers and themselves lies in different levels of sensitivity – that is, they may be more sensitised to PRC-related issues, or at least may be sensitised in different directions, and on different issues, compared with members of the general public. As IP14, a Perth-based accountant, put it:

I think Chinese-Australians in general pay more attention to media reports on China than do other Australians. Because China is their homeland, [PRC-born] Chinese-Australians care more about China and news about China. When there is a negative report on China [in the mainstream media], it attracts more attention from Chinese-Australians than from others.

Elaborating on why PRC migrants may see themselves as better judges than mainstream audiences in relation to the fairness and balance of reporting on the PRC and Chinese-Australians, IP1, who has been in Australia for 38 years, said:

When it comes to our media reports criticising domestic politics, say, in relation to the policies of Labor or the Liberals, Australian audiences can more or less work out for themselves whether the reporting is fair and balanced. This is because they have direct experience

of whether these policies are working or not. Based on this, they can choose the level at which they identify with mainstream media. But when it comes to reporting on China and our communities, mainstream audiences have no other points of reference other than what they're told by the mainstream media. So, they're not in a position to tell if this reporting is overly negative. Instead, they have no reason not to identify with the media's perspectives.

IP1 said that it was precisely for this reason that most people interviewed for this project answered that they were better positioned than mainstream audiences in Australia to judge the accuracy of reporting on the PRC.

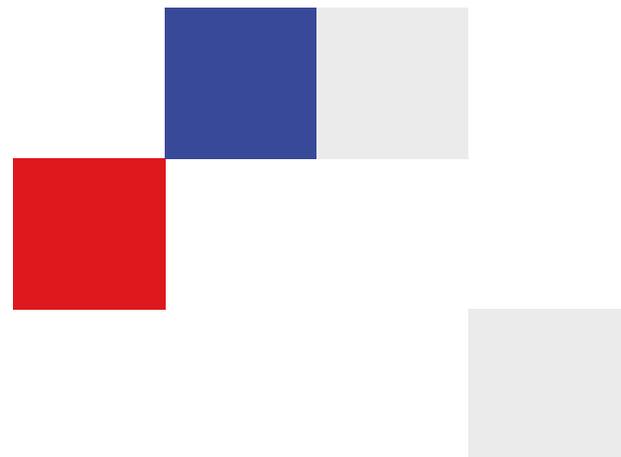
IP19 echoed the view of IP1:

Until two years ago, I got all my news and information from the Australian mainstream media, but now I've started to read news from Chinese media too, so I can compare them. When it comes to reporting on China, I identify with neither side, but at least I have more resources at my disposal to properly inform myself. Mainstream audiences are not privy to these resources.

It is clear from these interviews that there are myriad reasons why this group believes they are best placed to judge Australian English-language media reporting on the PRC and Chinese-Australian communities. Perhaps the most common explanation that interviewees gave was their perceived greater level of direct experience with, and first-hand knowledge of, the PRC and Chinese-Australian communities.

2.6 Conclusion

First-generation PRC-born migrants acknowledge differences in news values between Australian English-language media and PRC state media. They also note the general tendency of the English-language media to focus on ‘negative’ reporting on most topics. Nevertheless, they are of the opinion that the Australian English-language media’s reporting on the PRC lacks balance, depth and independence. They also believe that, since they have direct experience with, and can access information about, the PRC and their own communities from both Chinese-language and English-language media, they are in the best position to judge the accuracy of the Australian English-language media’s reporting of their homeland.

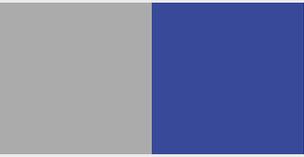




3



Opinions on the issue of trust in Australian media to represent Chinese-Australian communities fairly



“ Chinese-Australians naturally have a wealth of knowledge and cultural connections that can be leveraged to build stronger economic and cultural ties between Australia and China. Instead of being unfairly labelled as potential spies (which really hurts), they should be recognised as valuable assets and bridges for promoting mutual understanding and collaboration. ”

Interview participant 2

3.1 Background

In recent years, news outlets¹⁸ and politicians¹⁹ have made an effort to differentiate between the PRC government and mainland Chinese people, and between the PRC government and Chinese-Australians.

Despite this, according to the *UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll 2023*, a survey of 2000 Australians by the Australia-China Relations Institute and the Centre for Business Intelligence & Data Analytics at the University of Technology Sydney, 43 percent of Australians said they believed that ‘Australians of Chinese origin can be mobilised by the Chinese government to undermine Australia’s interests and social cohesion’.²⁰

The percentage of respondents agreeing with the statement has slowly crept up over the last three years, with 42 percent of *UTS:ACRI/BIDA Poll* respondents in agreement in 2022 and 39 percent in agreement in 2021.²¹

These results suggest that there is a substantial level of distrust of Chinese-Australians in the wider community. However, while there has been sustained public criticism of xenophobia and racism, and the tendency to racially profile Chinese-Australians on matters of national security, politics and public life,²² the role of the Australian English-language media in these transformative processes is yet to be thoroughly investigated.

Research on media credibility has shown the close connection between media exposure and political distrust.²³ Among media and communication studies scholars, a lack of trust in society is widely considered to be detrimental to social cohesion and economic development.²⁴ Recent research has also warned of the ‘rise of mistrust’ and has identified a ‘Trust Deficit Disorder’, including a lack of trust in our news media.²⁵

Trust is a matter of subjective expectations, and a ‘socially differentiated, experientially variable response’.²⁶ Hence, it is important to assess the level of trust Chinese-Australians – and particularly PRC-born migrants – have in news producers’ intention and capacity to ‘tell us true stories and not made-up ones; that they will strive to be accurate rather than approximate’.²⁷



Image credit: Brian A Jackson / Shutterstock

3.2 Trust in Australian media reporting on Chinese–Australian communities: Quantitative responses

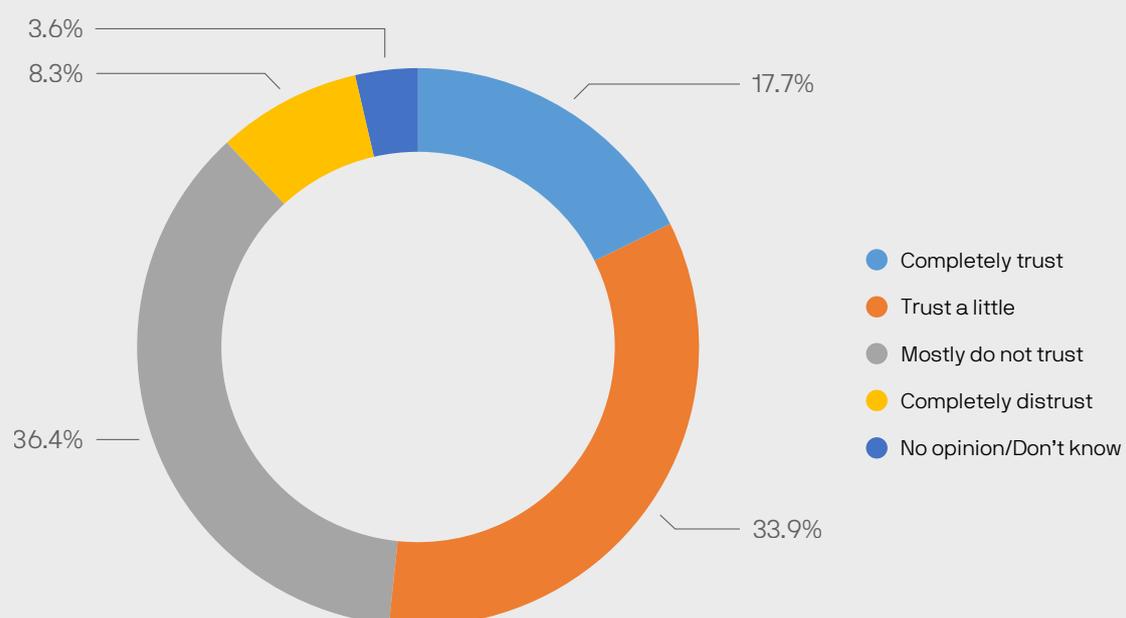
Survey respondents were asked:

‘To what extent do you trust the Australian English-language media to publish fair and balanced reports about the Chinese–Australian communities?’

The majority of respondents (78 percent) expressed some level of pessimism about the trustworthiness of Australian English-language media to publish fair and balanced reports about Chinese–Australian communities, saying either that they ‘mostly do not trust’ (36 percent), or that they only ‘trust a little’ (34 percent), or that they ‘completely distrust’ (eight percent) this media group on this matter. Eighteen percent said they ‘completely trust’ the Australian English-language media to report on Chinese–Australian communities with fairness and balance (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Level of trust in Australia’s English-language media to publish fair and balanced reports about Chinese–Australian communities

To what extent do you trust the Australian English-language media to publish fair and balanced reports about the Chinese–Australian communities?



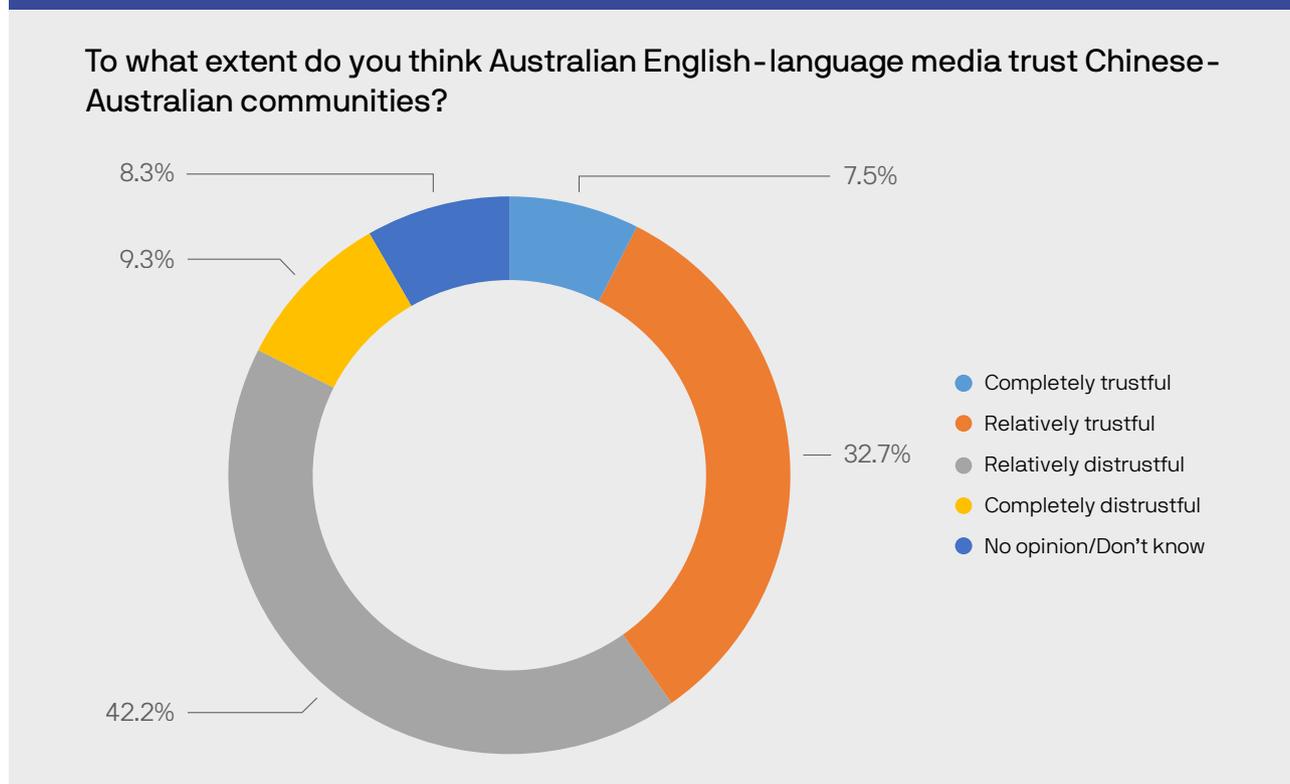
3.3 Confidence that Australian media trust Chinese-Australians: Quantitative responses

Survey respondents were asked:

‘To what extent do you think Australian English-language media trust Chinese-Australian communities?’

Survey respondents were divided about whether the Australian English-language media trust Chinese-Australians. While more than half of respondents (51 percent) believed that this media group were either ‘relatively distrustful’ (42 percent) or ‘completely distrustful’ (nine percent) of people in their communities, just over 40 percent of respondents held a more optimistic view about this media group’s level of trust in their communities, saying they believed that the Australian English-language media were either ‘completely trustful’ (eight percent) or ‘relatively trustful’ (33 percent) of Chinese-Australians (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Extent to which Australia’s English-language media are perceived to trust Chinese-Australian communities



3.4 Confidence that Australian media trust Chinese–Australians: Qualitative responses

IP18, a retired migration agent living in Adelaide, believed the Australian English-language media’s distrust of Chinese–Australian communities is symptomatic of a general level of distrust in all communities that are not Western, European or Anglo–Australian:

On the issue of trust, have you ever seen our media trusting people from the Vietnamese communities, the Arab communities and the indigenous communities? I don’t think so. Whether the government admits it or not, there’s an unconscious racism which presumes the supremacy of the white people.

Jimmy Li (IP2), chair of the Chinese Community Council of Australia, Victoria chapter, highlighted a recent news report that he believed embodies a deep distrust of Chinese–Australians, and reflected unfair media coverage of the incident in question.²⁸ The report, titled ‘Why authorities are alarmed by these pictures showing three Chinese men taking photos at an Australian military show’, appeared in the *Daily Mail* on March 6 2023. The article stated that three Chinese men had been taking photos at an airshow in Victoria, and this had ‘aroused [the] suspicions’ of a security expert. The *Daily Mail* withdrew the report the next day without any explanation. IP2, who also spoke to *SBS Chinese* about this incident, was concerned about the impact of ‘war-mongering’ on Chinese–Australian communities:²⁹

Phrases like ‘Chinese spy’ or ‘Chinese threat’ used in the media can make others and society treat us differently, even trigger racism... It can affect everyone in the Chinese community.

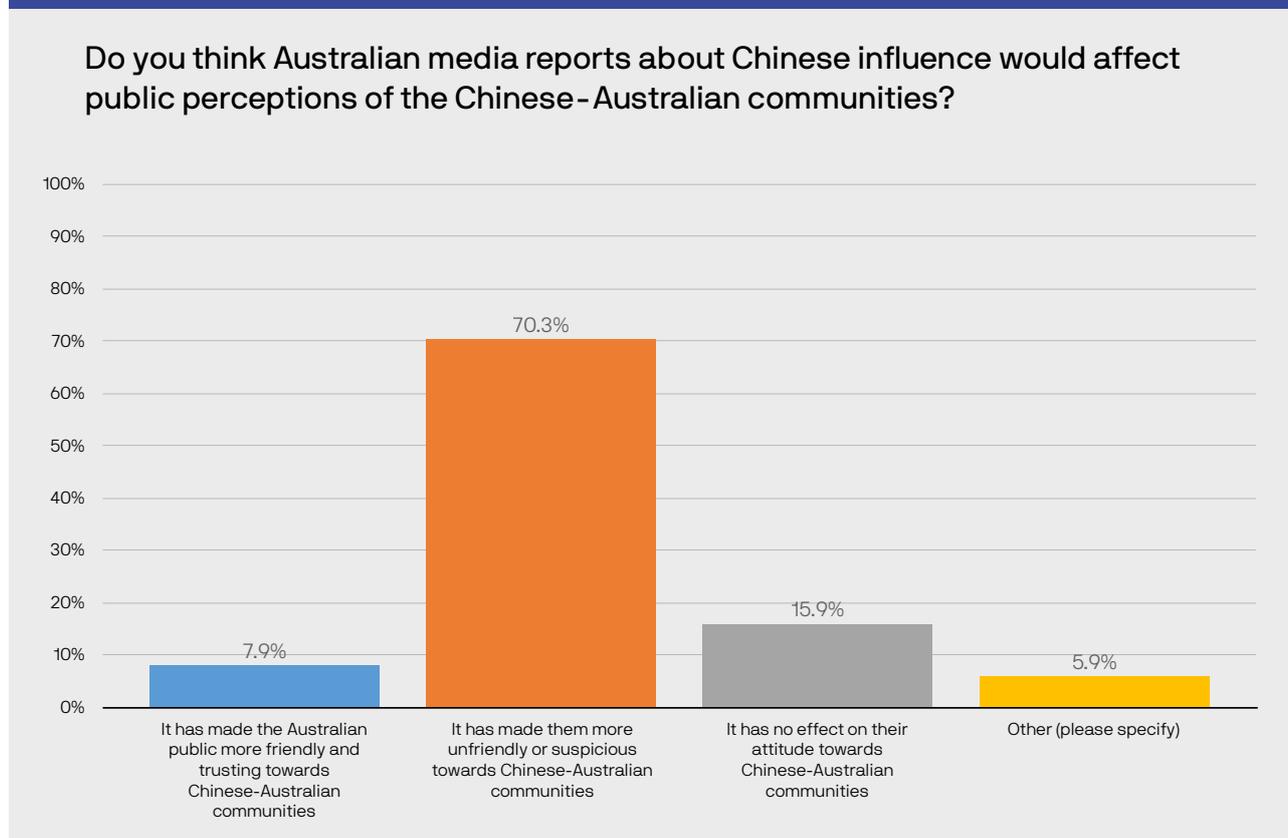
3.5 Impact of Australian media reports about Chinese influence on public perceptions of Chinese-Australians: Quantitative responses

Survey respondents were asked:

‘Do you think Australian media reports about Chinese influence would affect public perceptions of the Chinese-Australian communities?’

Eight percent of respondents said: ‘It has made the Australian public more friendly and trusting towards Chinese-Australian communities.’ Seven in 10 respondents (70 percent) said: ‘It has made [the Australian public] more unfriendly or suspicious towards Chinese-Australian communities.’ Sixteen percent of respondents thought such reports have ‘no effect on [the Australian public’s] attitudes towards Chinese-Australian communities’ (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Perception of the impact of Australian English-language media reports about Chinese influence on the Australian public’s attitudes towards Chinese-Australian communities



3.6 Impact of Australian media reports about Chinese influence on public perceptions of Chinese-Australians: Qualitative responses

Many interviewees expressed frustration that Chinese-Australians have been portrayed in Australian English-language media reports on Chinese influence as either in need of protection from persecution by the Chinese government, or as real or potential agents of Chinese influence. For these interviewees, the bulk of reporting has largely overlooked the positive role their community has made to Australian society.

IP2 summarised the sentiments of the majority of interviewees in this statement:

Chinese-Australians naturally have a wealth of knowledge and cultural connections that can be leveraged to build stronger economic and cultural ties between Australia and China. Instead of being unfairly labelled as potential spies (which really hurts), they should be recognised as valuable assets and bridges for promoting mutual understanding and collaboration. Drawing on their natural familiarity with China's history and culture, Chinese-Australians can make significant contributions towards enhancing bilateral relations and promoting cross-cultural communication, and building a more harmonious and more prosperous society for all Australians.

IP4 is a core member of Asian Australian Volunteers Inc. Like IP2, he stressed that there are:

... myriad ways in which people from my community contribute to Australian society. Frankly, we are too busy volunteering to promote ourselves.

IP4 works with a large team of volunteers who regularly organise to deliver food and daily necessities to those in need, provide transport for people who have mobility issues, and offer free translation and interpretation for those who need to access government services. He said that many people with Chinese heritage volunteer for the Salvation Army, the SES, the Red Cross, and various landcare, fire and rescue services. Many community groups (particularly arts and performing groups) regularly visit aged care homes and people from disadvantaged groups.

The active involvement in social welfare initiatives and support for vulnerable communities mentioned by IP4 is echoed by IP20, who further articulated the significance of their contributions – not just to their own community as first-generation PRC migrants, but also to the multicultural fabric and social cohesiveness of the wider Australian community – despite the distrust and misunderstanding they live with:

Chinese-Australians have celebrated and shared their rich heritage, promoting diversity and multiculturalism. Through cultural festivals, arts, and culinary traditions, they have introduced unique perspectives, fostering understanding and appreciation. These contributions have created opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, enriching the Australian identity. Through these efforts, they have fostered a sense of belonging for themselves and others, creating spaces where individuals can thrive.

3.7 Separating criticism of the PRC government from respect for Chinese-Australians: Quantitative responses

Survey respondents were asked:

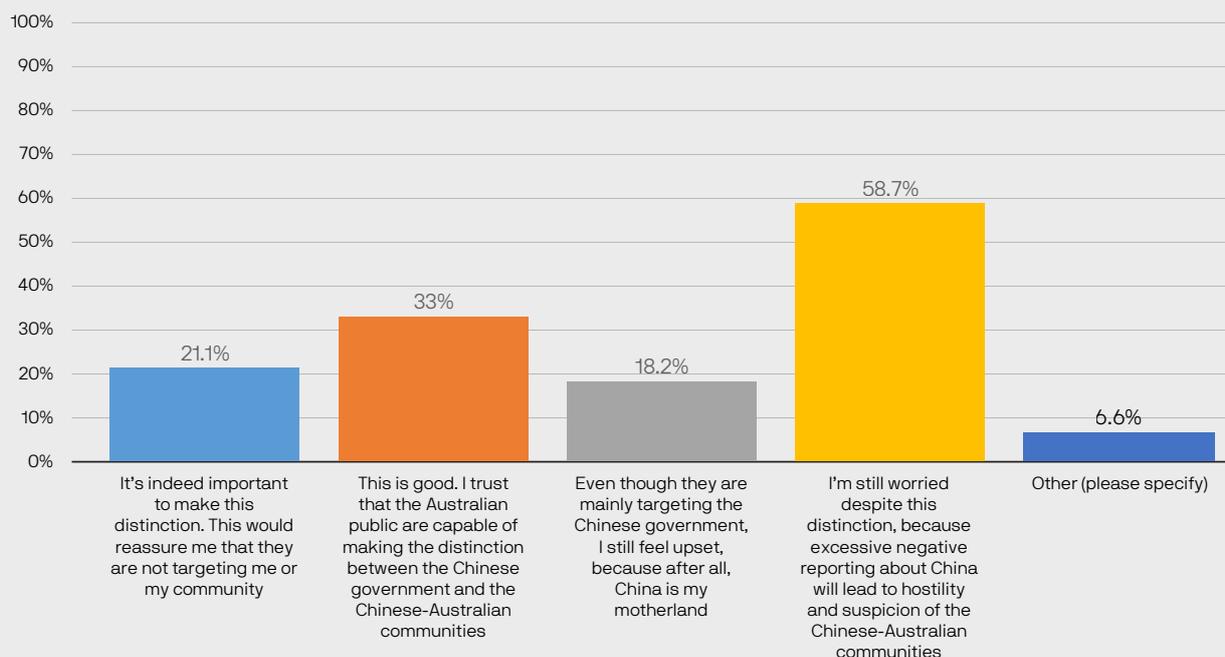
‘When the media or politicians say such things as, “We may criticise the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government, but we also respect our Chinese-Australian communities”, how do you react?’

Respondents were given five options, from which they could select multiple answers (for this reason the sum of the results is in excess of 100 percent). The majority of respondents (59 percent) said:

‘I’m still worried despite this distinction, because excessive negative reporting about China will lead to hostility and suspicion of the Chinese-Australian communities.’ Thirty-three percent said: ‘This is good. I trust that the Australian public are capable of making the distinction between the Chinese government and the Chinese-Australian communities.’ Twenty-one percent said: ‘It’s indeed important to make this distinction. This would reassure me that they are not targeting me or my community,’ and 18 percent said: ‘Even though they are mainly targeting the Chinese government, I still feel upset, because after all, China is my motherland,’ (Figure 6).

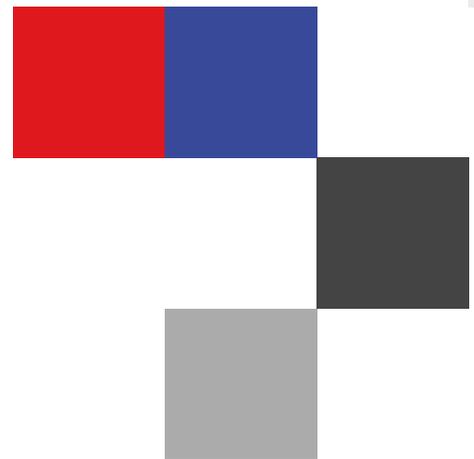
Figure 6. Separating criticisms of the PRC government from respect for Chinese-Australians

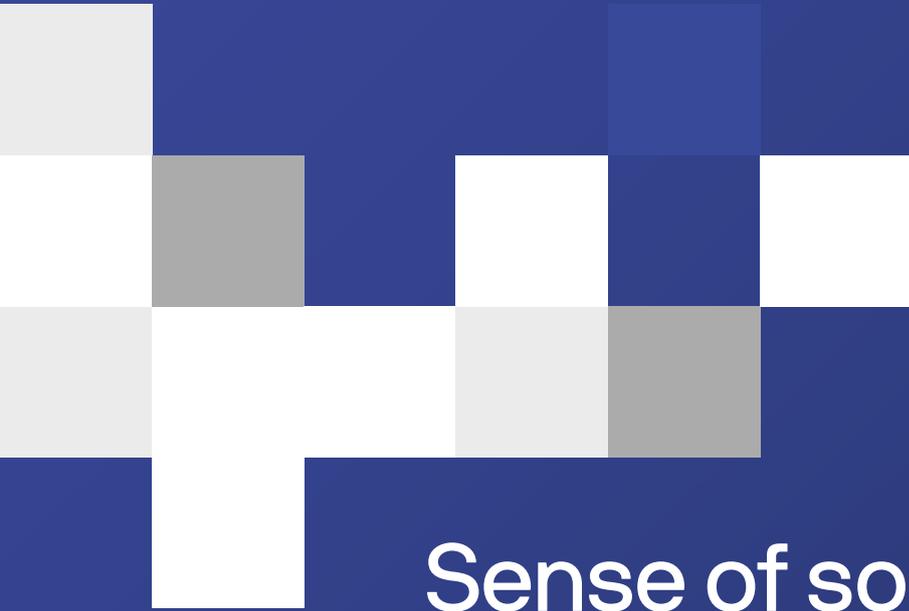
When the media or politicians say such things as, ‘We may criticise the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government, but we also respect our Chinese-Australian communities’, how do you react?



3.8 Conclusion

There is a low level of trust amongst first-generation PRC-born migrants in Australia that Australia's English-language media will publish fair and balanced reports about Chinese-Australian communities. There is also a strong perception that Australia's English-language media do not trust Chinese-Australians. They also believe that the prevalence of 'Chinese influence' reporting in the media has led to widespread suspicion of – even hostility towards – people in this community.

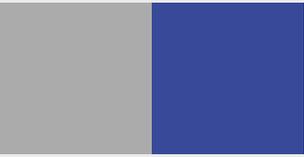




4



Sense of social inclusion and justice



“ For first-generation migrants who come from the PRC, they are still very emotionally attached to their motherland. They also tend to be sensitive to racial discrimination in this multicultural society. So, they tend to be offended when they see negative reporting of China. This is because they feel the hostility coming from the media per se; furthermore, they worry that this negativity may translate into racial discrimination on the part of the mainstream against them [first-generation migrants]. ”

Interview participant 9

4.1 Background

Research has shown that the general public's attitudes towards Chinese diaspora communities are directly correlated with how the *nation* of the PRC is reported in the media (author's emphasis).³⁰ Two recent and recurring themes in Australia's English-language media reporting about the PRC's role in the world have been 'undue influence'³¹ and 'undue global dominance'.³²

What impact has such reporting had on PRC migrants? Answers to this question will provide clues about whether people in these communities feel 'included' in the wider Australian community – an important benchmark of social cohesion.



Image credit: Lightspring / Shutterstock

4.2 Themes of ‘undue influence’ and ‘undue global dominance’ in Australian media reporting on the PRC

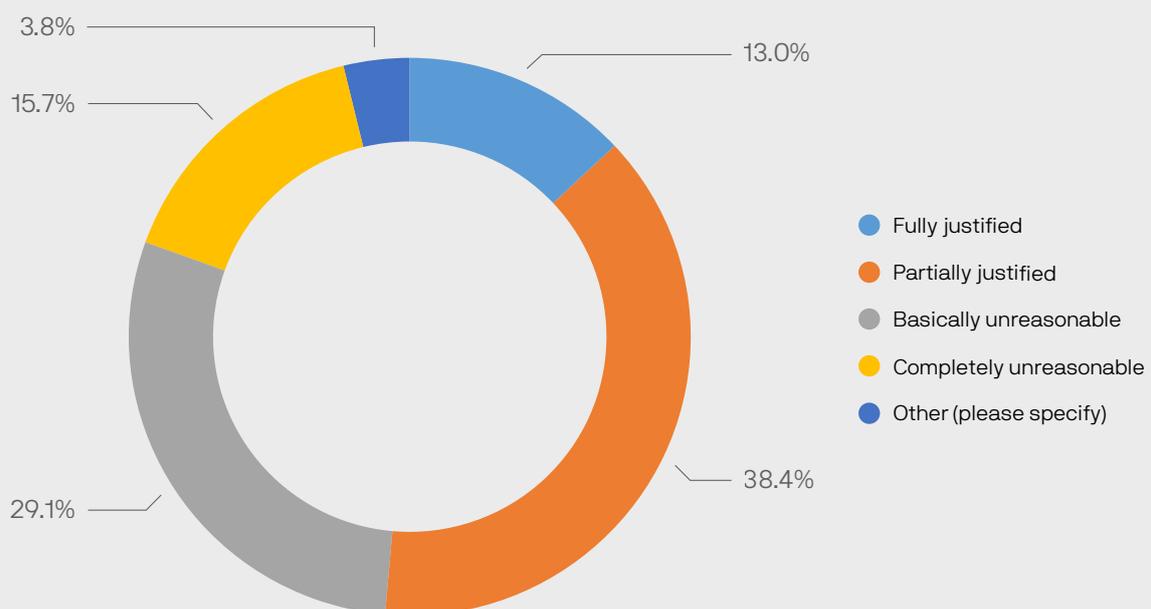
Survey respondents were asked:

‘Studies have found two common themes in the Australian English-language media’s recent reporting about the PRC’s role in the world: the theme of ‘undue influence’ and the theme of ‘undue global dominance’. Do you think the media’s choice of these themes is...’ (Respondents could choose one of five options).

Responses were polarised. While more than half (51 percent) thought these themes were either ‘fully justified’ (13 percent) or ‘partially justified’ (38 percent), another 45 percent thought the themes were either ‘basically unreasonable’ (29 percent) or ‘completely unreasonable’ (16 percent) (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Justification of the themes of ‘undue influence’ and ‘undue global dominance’ in Australia’s English-language media reporting on the PRC

Studies have found two common themes in the Australian English-language media’s recent reporting about the PRC’s role in the world: the theme of ‘undue influence’ and the theme of ‘undue global dominance’. Do you think the media’s choice of these themes is...



4.3 Assessment of ‘China threat’ reports in Australian media: Quantitative responses

Survey respondents were asked:

‘Please select the option that best describes your level of agreement with each of the following statements about reading ‘China threat’ stories in the Australian media’ (Respondents were asked to respond to each of six statements on a six-level Likert scale) (Figure 8).

4.3.1 Coverage of serious issues

‘Reading stories about the China threat in the media makes me feel that the Australian media are doing a good job of exposing serious issues’

Twenty-four percent of respondents said they either ‘strongly agreed’ (11 percent) or were ‘inclined to agree’ (13 percent) with this statement. Fifty percent either ‘strongly disagreed’ (27 percent) or ‘somewhat disagreed’ (23 percent). Twenty-seven percent remained ‘neutral’ (24 percent) or said it was ‘difficult to decide’ (three percent) (Figure 8).

4.3.2 Integration

‘Reading stories about the China threat in the media reminds me of the importance of becoming integrated into mainstream Australian society’

Nearly four in 10 respondents (38 percent) either ‘strongly agreed’ (16 percent) or were ‘inclined to agree’ (22 percent) with this statement. Twenty-eight percent either ‘strongly disagreed’ (16 percent) or were ‘inclined to disagree’ (12 percent), leaving 35 percent answering either ‘neutral’ (32 percent) or ‘difficult to decide’ (three percent) (Figure 8).

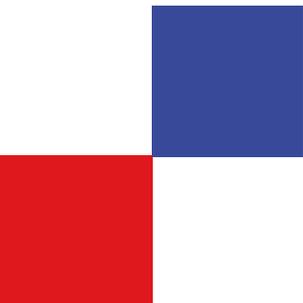
4.3.3 Belonging

‘Reading stories about the China threat in the media has diminished my sense of belonging to mainstream Australian society’

More people agreed than disagreed, in the same vein as the previous item (4.3.2): Forty-six percent of respondents either ‘strongly agreed’ (17 percent) or were ‘inclined to agree’ (29 percent), while 27 percent either ‘strongly disagreed’ (13 percent) or were ‘inclined to disagree’ (14 percent). Twenty-eight percent of people were either ‘neutral’ (26 percent) or said it was ‘difficult to decide’ (two percent), although this percentage was seven points lower than those who were non-committal on the previous item.

Additionally, the margin by which agreement surpassed disagreement on this item is notably greater here than on item 4.3.2. The margin was 10 percent (38 percent versus 28 percent) in the former item, whereas on this item it is 19 percent (46 percent versus 27 percent).

However, as with items 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, caution should be exercised in the interpretation of these results, because of the relatively high number of non-committal respondents (28 percent) (Figure 8).



4.3.4 Faith in democracy

‘Reading stories about the China threat in the media has diminished my faith in Australia’s democratic system’

Respondents were generally fairly split. Forty percent either ‘strongly agreed’ (19 percent) or were ‘inclined to agree’ (21 percent) with this statement. Thirty-four percent were either ‘inclined to disagree’ (15 percent) or ‘strongly disagree’ (19 percent) and 26 percent remained ‘neutral’ (24 percent) or ‘undecided’ (two percent).

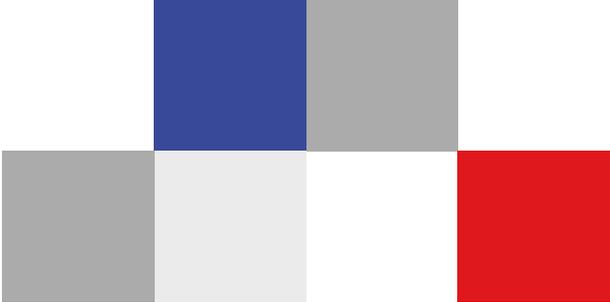
As with items 4.3.1 to 4.3.3, these figures point to a polarised response. While there were more people who felt their faith in Australia’s democracy was diminished by reading these stories than those who felt that it was not diminished, it was only by a margin of six percent (40 percent versus 34 percent). If those who remained neutral had been pushed to choose, the results could have fallen in either direction (Figure 8).

4.3.5 Faith in multicultural harmony

‘Reading stories about the China threat in the media has diminished my hopes for multicultural harmony in Australia’

Half of respondents (50 percent) either ‘strongly agreed’ (21 percent) or were ‘inclined to agree’ (29 percent) with this statement. Thirty-one percent either ‘strongly disagreed’ (17 percent) or were ‘inclined to disagree’ (14 percent) and 19 percent were either ‘neutral’ (18 percent) or said it was ‘difficult to decide’ (one percent).

These figures also point to a split, but there were fewer people who remained neutral here than on items 4.3.1 to 4.3.4. This item thus sharpened participants’ feelings one way or the other compared with earlier items. Half of them said that reading media reports portraying the PRC as a threat had had a negative impact on their optimism about Australia’s capacity to achieve or maintain social cohesion and multicultural harmony. But it is also noteworthy that almost one-third of respondents felt no impact on their hopes for multiculturalism, and it is worth bearing in mind that many of the 18 percent who remained neutral may have chosen this option precisely because they felt the net impact on their hopes for cultural harmony was neither positive nor negative (Figure 8).



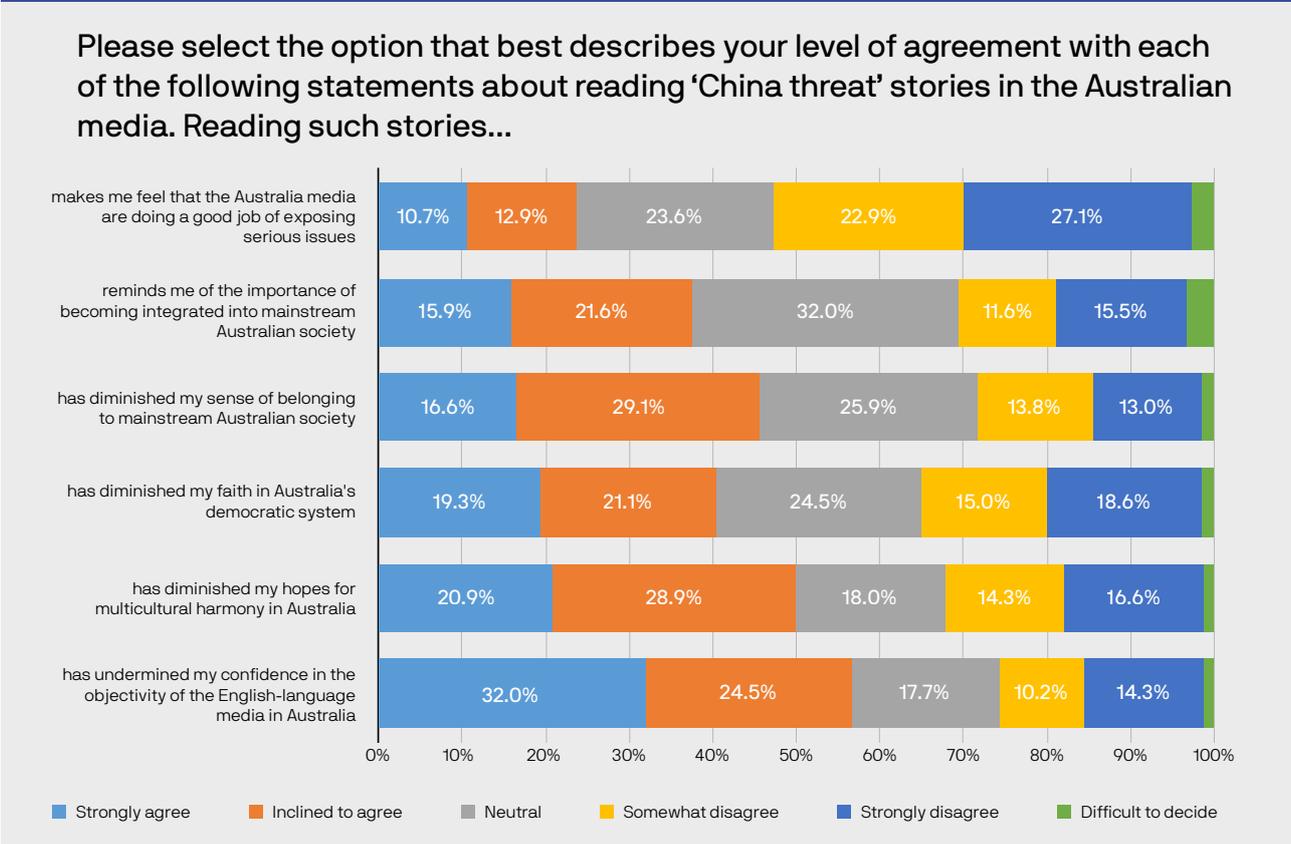
4.3.6 Faith in the objectivity of journalism

‘Reading stories about the China threat in the media has undermined my confidence in the objectivity of the English-language media in Australia’

More than half of respondents (56 percent) either ‘strongly agreed’ (32 percent) or were ‘inclined to agree’ (24 percent) with this statement. Twenty-four percent either ‘strongly disagreed’ (14 percent) or were ‘inclined to disagree’ (10 percent) and 19 percent were either ‘neutral’ (18 percent) or said it was ‘difficult to decide’ (one percent).

This item elicited the most decisive response of any of the items in this question. More respondents were prepared to commit themselves to either agreeing strongly or disagreeing strongly with the statement than on any other item, and the combination of those who agreed strongly with those who were inclined to agree was more than twice the number of those who disagreed to some extent (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Reactions to reading ‘China threat’ stories in Australia’s English-language media



4.4 Assessment of ‘China threat’ reports in Australian media: Qualitative responses

While discussing his views on the ‘China threat’ reports in Australia’s English-language media, IP20 shared a screenshot of a comment from his WeChat feed, which was in response to a racist attack on a Korean couple that had taken place in Brisbane on ANZAC Day:³³

Received this from my friend living in Brisbane. He wrote: Australia used to be a great example of multiculturalism in the past, this is what happens when the media continues to fuel anti-China hatred 24/7. For the mentally weak, sick and ill informed, it not only endangers the Chinese but Asians in general: ‘Korean man who was just fishing accused of being Chinese “spy”!’

IP4 also expressed the fear that ‘China threat’ reports in Australia’s English-language media could have a direct impact on his community:

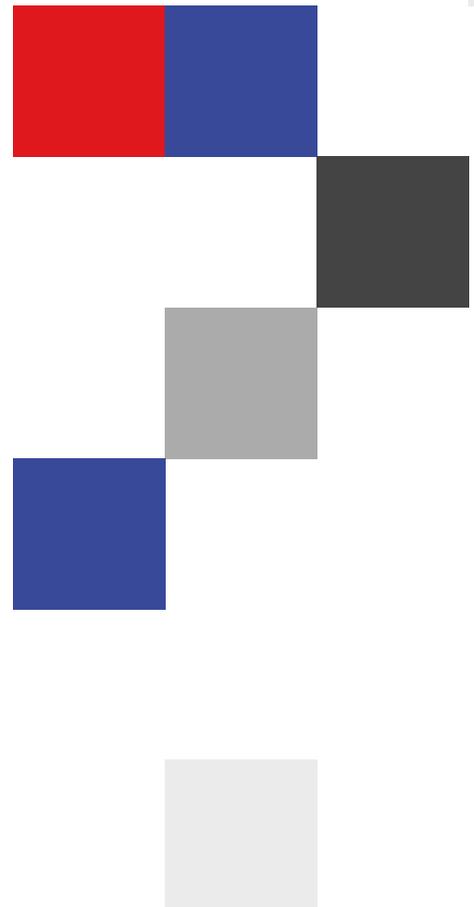
The media play a significant role in shaping public opinion, especially in times of conflict or war. The way that news stories are framed and presented can influence how people perceive events, the likelihood of war, and the potential consequences.

IP9, a prominent Chinese-language blogger who is well known in the mainlander community in Australia, discussed why these types of reports worry the community:

For first-generation migrants who come from the PRC, they are still very emotionally attached to their motherland. They also tend to be sensitive to racial discrimination in this multicultural society. So they tend to be offended when they see negative reporting of China. This is because they feel the hostility coming from the media per se; furthermore, they worry that this negativity may translate into racial discrimination on the part of the mainstream against them [first-generation migrants].

4.5 Conclusion

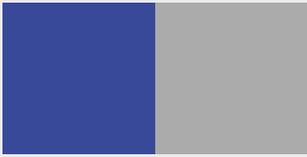
Survey respondents revealed a high level of ambivalence and complexity when asked to consider how 'China threat' reporting impacts on their views about a wide range of issues, including their sense of inclusion and belonging, their faith in the democratic system, and their faith in the policy of multiculturalism. Nevertheless, overall their responses point to a substantial loss of faith in the objectivity of Australia's English-language media in its reporting of PRC-related matters, despite attempts by news outlets and politicians to distinguish the CPC and the PRC from Chinese-Australian communities.





5

Feelings of acceptance and rejection



“ I don’t want to take sides.
What matters is whether the story is fair and balanced. ”

Survey respondent^{iv}

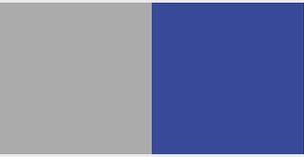
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“ Of course, as a mainlander, it makes me feel uncomfortable each time I see China being portrayed in a bad light. After all, nobody wants to see their dirty laundry aired in public. I especially hate to see China being represented as being in conflict with Australia, whether the reporting is baseless or based on facts. But please don’t get me wrong. I’m not simply blaming the media for reporting on China – the media need to report on problems and issues. I understand that at a rational level, although at an emotional level, I find it difficult. However, difficult though it is, I think I would be more accepting and understanding at a rational level if our media’s China reporting was fair and balanced, and not simply from a singular point of view. But after several years’ observation, I believe that’s not the case. This is what upsets me. ”

Interview participant 6

■

iv The quantitative survey for this report employed a non-probability sample of 689 first-generation PRC migrants aged 18 years or over, and was conducted in simplified Chinese. The survey was implemented online using Survey Monkey, and participation in it was promoted via WeChat.



“ Just because I feel unhappy with our mainstream media on China doesn’t mean that I side with China.

I do so as an Australian who is concerned that our cherished values, such as a fair go, are being undermined.

I worry because I have considered Australia home, and I don’t want to see the morally corrosive impact of such bad journalism on our society. I worry because of the fact that I am an Australian, and I have already developed a strong sense of belonging to Australian society. ”

Interview participant 1

■

“ Yes, it’s possible that some people are influenced by Chinese propaganda – I don’t deny that. But I don’t think that applies to the majority. ”

Interview participant 10

■

“ In my view, those who read media content simultaneously from both [Chinese and Australian] sides and who come up with their own analyses after comparing and contrasting perspectives from both sides are not easily influenced by either side. This group of people are only loyal to facts and evidence.

As a member of the Chinese-Australian community, I’m concerned with the small amount of evidence-based reporting I can find... I think this kind of reporting [that portrays Chinese-Australians as ‘brainwashed’] is potentially misleading. I abhor this kind of reporting, not because I’m influenced by Chinese propaganda, but because, if such reporting continues, the cumulative negative outcome would be increased hatred and prejudice towards Chinese-Australians. ”

Interview participant 13

5.1 Background

Research on migrant minorities and media representation has identified a close connection between media consumption and cultural identity.

For instance, the cultural identity of a society's mainstream news journalists has a considerable impact on how they represent international actors, events and issues in their coverage of foreign affairs.³⁴ Some scholars have argued that since diasporic minority groups use the media in complex ways that feed back into their sense of cultural and political belonging, it is important to examine how these minorities use the media to make sense of the world around them.³⁵ Furthermore, media sociologists have found that media practices that help build links between various social groups in a society will contribute to social cohesion, whereas media practices that damage or demolish links will jeopardise such cohesion.³⁶

These insights point to the significance of asking about the extent to which the media enable members of the PRC migrant community to forge links with, and be accepted by, the general public.



Image credit: Longkong / Shutterstock

5.2 ‘Choosing a side’ on media reports: Quantitative responses

Survey respondents were asked:

‘When a media program portrays China as a hostile force, which side do you identify with?’

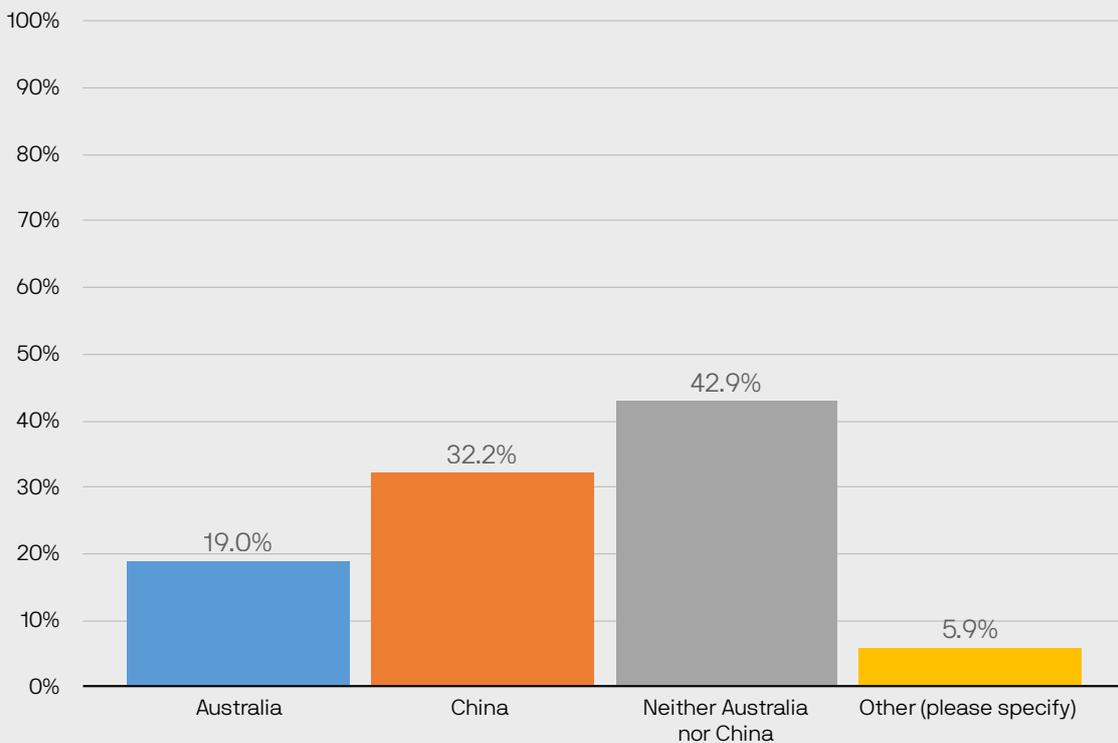
Forty-three percent of respondents said they would identify with neither Australia nor China. Thirty-two percent said they would identify with China, while 19 percent said they would identify with Australia (Figure 9).

Six percent of respondents chose ‘Other (please specify)’, and made the following comments:

- ‘I don’t want to take sides. What matters is whether the story is fair and balanced.’
- ‘Why do I need to take sides? Why can’t you assume I’m capable of independent thinking?’
- ‘I side with whichever side that presents facts and evidence.’
- ‘I’m on my own side.’
- ‘Australia shouldn’t treat China as a hostile nation.’
- ‘I will change channels.’
- ‘I’m worried about the future of Australia; after all, this is where my children and grandchildren live.’

Figure 9. ‘Choosing a side’ on media reports

When a media program portrays China as a hostile force, which side do you identify with?



5.3 Who trusts Australian media reporting on the PRC the most?: Quantitative responses

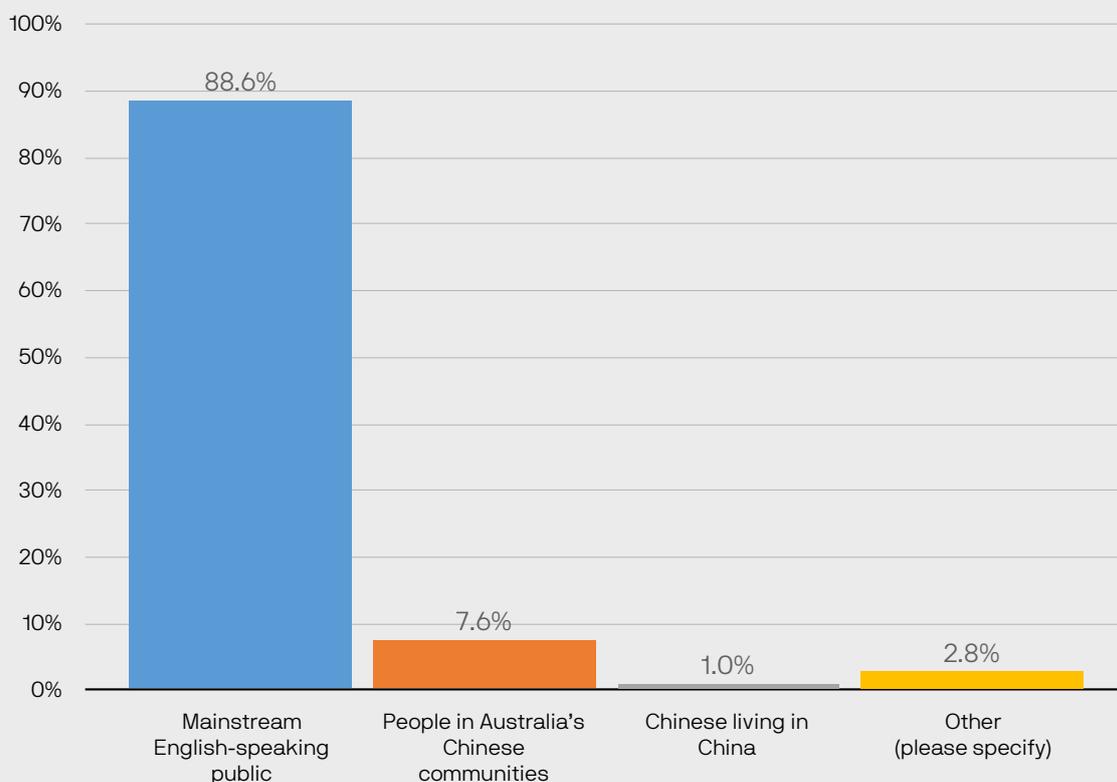
Survey respondents were asked:

‘Which audience group do you think is most likely to trust the Australian media’s reporting about China?’

An overwhelming majority (89 percent) judged that the ‘mainstream English-speaking public’ were more likely to trust the Australian English-language media’s reporting on the PRC. Only eight percent nominated ‘people in Australia’s Chinese communities’ and one percent nominated ‘Chinese living in China’ (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Perceptions on which audience group is most likely to trust the Australian English-language media’s reporting on the PRC

Which audience group do you think is most likely to trust the Australian media’s reporting about China?



5.4 ‘Having a say’ in public discussions: Quantitative responses

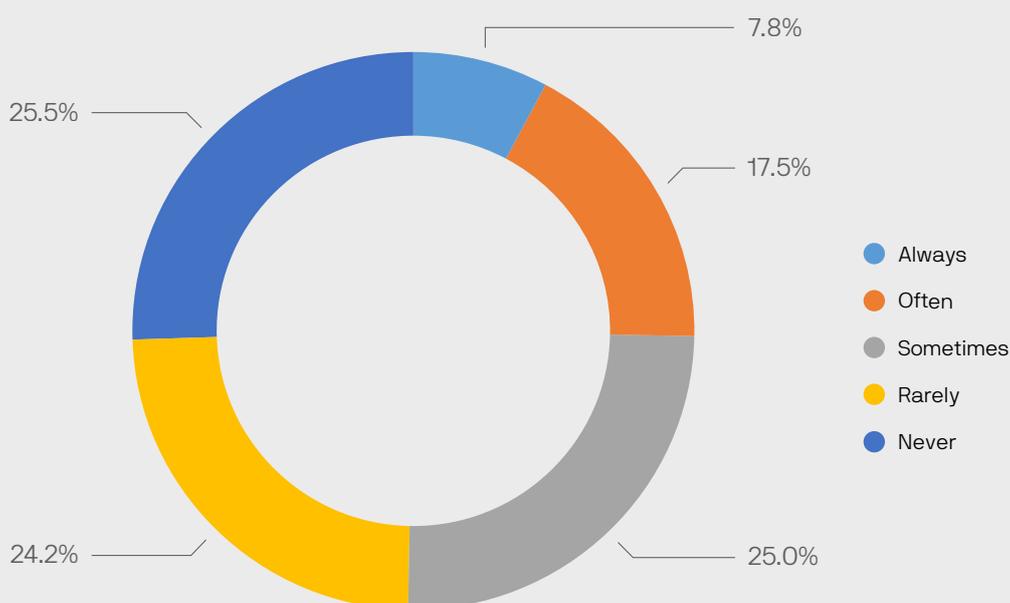
Survey respondents were asked:

‘As a first-generation migrant, do you believe you have the same right as members of the general public to have a say in things?’

Twenty-five percent of respondents said they either ‘always’ (eight percent) or ‘often’ (17 percent) believed they had ‘the same right as members of the general public to have a say in things’, with a further 25 percent answering ‘sometimes’. Fifty percent said they either ‘rarely’ (24 percent) or ‘never’ (26 percent) felt they had the same right (Figure 11).

Figure 11. An equal right to ‘having a say’ in public discussions

As a first-generation migrant, do you believe you have the same right as members of the general public to have a say in things?



5.5 Identification with Australian media reporting on the PRC: Qualitative responses

Interviewees were asked whether they were able to identify with the Australian English-language media's reporting on the PRC. IP6, a middle-aged woman originally from Shanghai, said that reading news about the PRC was often a painful and alienating experience. In explaining why this was so, she stressed that her sense of alienation came not just from seeing her motherland constantly portrayed in a negative light, but, equally importantly, from her belief that this negative reporting was more often than not a result of the media failing to apply principles of fairness and balance:

Of course, as a mainlander, it makes me feel uncomfortable each time I see China being portrayed in a bad light. After all, nobody wants to see their dirty laundry aired in public. I especially hate to see China being represented as being in conflict with Australia, whether the reporting is baseless or based on facts.

But please don't get me wrong. I'm not simply blaming the media for reporting on China – the media need to report on problems and issues. I understand that at a rational level, although at an emotional level, I find it difficult.

However, difficult though it is, I think I would be more accepting and understanding at a rational level if our media's China reporting was fair and balanced, and not simply from a singular point of view. But after several years' observation, I believe that's not the case. This is what upsets me.

Several interviewees stressed that their inability to identify with the Australian media's coverage of the PRC was not because they are incapable of, or unwilling to, integrate into Australian society and adopt its values. Instead, it is because they believe that 'unprofessional' practices of reporting on PRC-related issues are likely to be corrosive to Australia's democratic values. Melbourne-based IP1, a senior engineering scientist running a department in a Melbourne-based research company, has lived in Australia for 38 years. He said that he disagrees with the Australian English-language media on their reporting on the PRC, not in spite of the fact that he has long considered Australia to be his home, but precisely because of this:

Just because I feel unhappy with our mainstream media on China doesn't mean that I side with China.

I do so as an Australian who is concerned that our cherished values, such as a fair go, are being undermined. I worry because I have considered Australia home, and I don't want to see the morally corrosive impact of such bad journalism on our society. I worry because of the fact that I am an Australian, and I have already developed a strong sense of belonging to Australian society.

5.6 On being ‘brainwashed’: Qualitative responses

Those interviewees who were critical of the Australian English-language media’s reporting on the PRC were aware of a common perception of them: that their unfavourable assessments would be seen as a consequence of, and evidence for, Chinese influence on them and their thinking. In anticipation of this perception, interview participants offered a range of responses.

IP17 said ‘Chinese influence would be a polite way of putting it’, as she had had worse things said to her, such as ‘You’ve been brainwashed by the CPC’ and ‘You sound like a communist’. IP19 said she believed that if people held this view, it meant that ‘they have been influenced by anti-China propaganda, not us’.

IP10 thought the ‘brainwashed’ interpretation was a ‘very simplistic and lazy way’ to interpret a very complex issue:

Yes, it’s possible that some people are influenced by Chinese propaganda – I don’t deny that. But I don’t think that applies to the majority.

IP2 (Jimmy Li) did not believe that many people in Australia read the *People’s Daily* or the *Global Times*, or watch CCTV:

They usually get news from commercial Chinese media in Australia and English-language media outlets.

IP10 also believed that people from a ‘multicultural’ background generally tend to be more critical and judgemental about things of which they have had some personal experience. This is because:

They’ve seen both sides of the story and will compare the media comments they read against their own experiences.

IP13 believed it was possible that some people could be easily influenced by Chinese media propaganda, but he believed these people usually would not pay attention to what the Western media say in general; nor would they be interested in what the Western media say about China in particular:

In my view, those who read media content simultaneously from both [Chinese and Australian] sides and who come up with their own analyses after comparing and contrasting perspectives from both sides are not easily influenced by either side. This group of people are only loyal to facts and evidence.

As a member of the Chinese-Australian community, I’m concerned with the small amount of evidence-based reporting I can find... I think this kind of reporting [that portrays Chinese-Australians as ‘brainwashed’] is potentially misleading. I abhor this kind of reporting, not because I’m influenced by Chinese propaganda, but because, if such reporting continues, the cumulative negative outcome would be increased hatred and prejudice towards Chinese-Australians.

At the end of the day, if your reporting does not affect me, I won't be concerned, but if your reporting is affecting my life or livelihood in Australia, I have a valid reason to be critical and concerned.

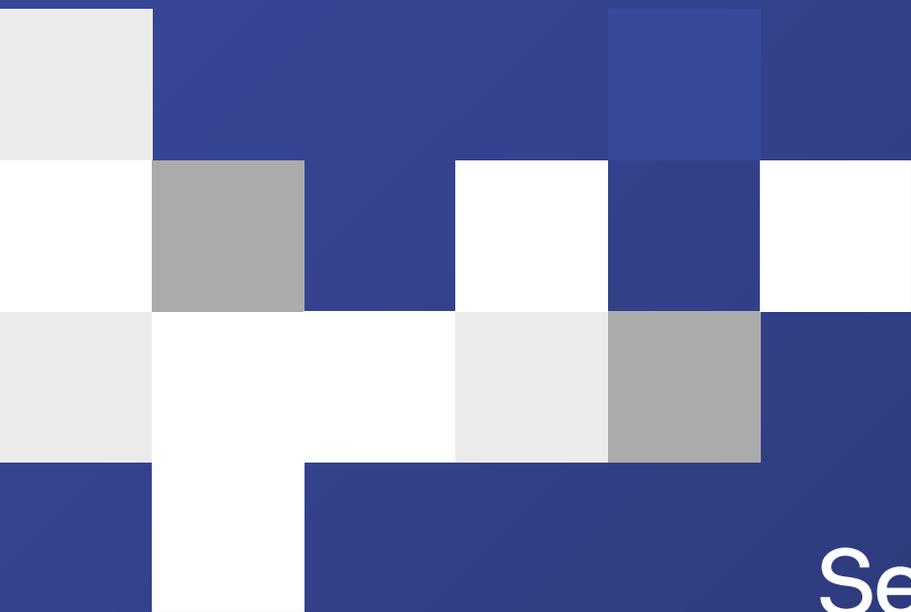
IP12 believed that people from the PRC, who grew up in the environment of propaganda, long ago learned to read Chinese propaganda 'oppositionally' by default – that is, to adopt an alternative or subversive interpretation instead of the intended reading. But she believed that many people may be more susceptible to accepting media content at face value when it contains strong nationalist sentiments.

IP20 chose to see the Mandarin-speaking community's unfavourable assessment of media coverage as a 'natural response from individuals who are not happy with the status quo':

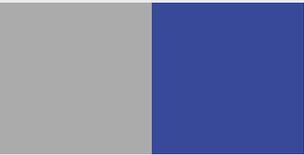
People seek alternative perspectives, particularly when it comes to geopolitically sensitive topics like China. In an era of information abundance, people have access to a wide range of news sources, including independent journalism, social media and personal networks. They actively seek out diverse viewpoints to form a more balanced understanding.

5.7 Conclusion

The quantitative and qualitative data in this report show that the focus on geopolitical tensions between Australia and the PRC in reporting by Australia's English-language media, as well as the media's tendency to depict the PRC as a hostile country, have posed serious challenges for PRC migrants in their efforts to be accepted into Australian society, and to express a dual identity as Chinese-Australians. A large majority of survey respondents (76 percent) say they either rarely or never feel they have a say in shaping public discourse. This points to a potentially significant issue for Australia regarding social inclusion and justice.



Sense of worth



“ How do I know whether it’s fair or accurate? I can’t trust China’s media either.
So I see a credibility problem on both sides. ”

Survey respondent



“ They can criticise but they shouldn’t demonise. ”

Survey respondent

6.1 Background

A key dimension of social cohesion is people's capacity to feel that their views are heard, that they have equal opportunity to express their disagreement with the government and powerful institutions, including the media, and that they can register their unhappiness on certain issues in the form of a boycott, protest or petition.³⁷ To gauge this capacity, the survey in this report asked respondents if they felt empowered to speak up and express their points of view publicly.

Communication researchers have considered the impact of 'presumed media influence'.³⁸ This line of inquiry generally focuses on attitudes and perceptions related to minorities. It largely operates on the logic, as these authors put it, that 'if what [the] media say about me and my life has an impact on how I believe I am judged by others, then it should also affect how I view myself and my relationship to the surrounding society'.³⁹ Researchers have also found that if a minority believes that majority opinion towards them is negative, this may lead them to experience feelings of alienation from 'mainstream' society.⁴⁰

In light of these insights, respondents were asked several questions aimed at identifying the dominant sentiments they experienced when regularly exposed to 'hostile media content', as well as the extent to which they felt comfortable about communicating their views with people outside their community when they knew such views were at odds with the general public's opinions.

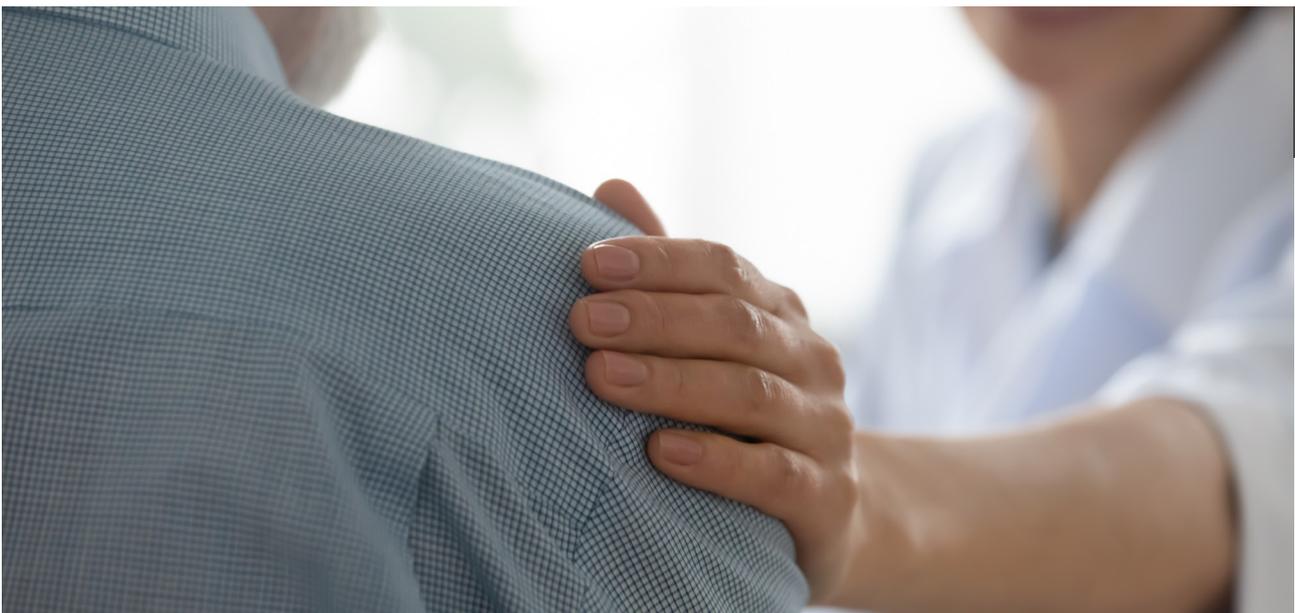


Image credit: fizkes / Shutterstock

6.2 Emotional reactions to perceptions of unfair or inaccurate media reports

Survey respondents were asked:

‘What are your main emotional reactions when you see media reports about China that you believe are not fair or accurate?’

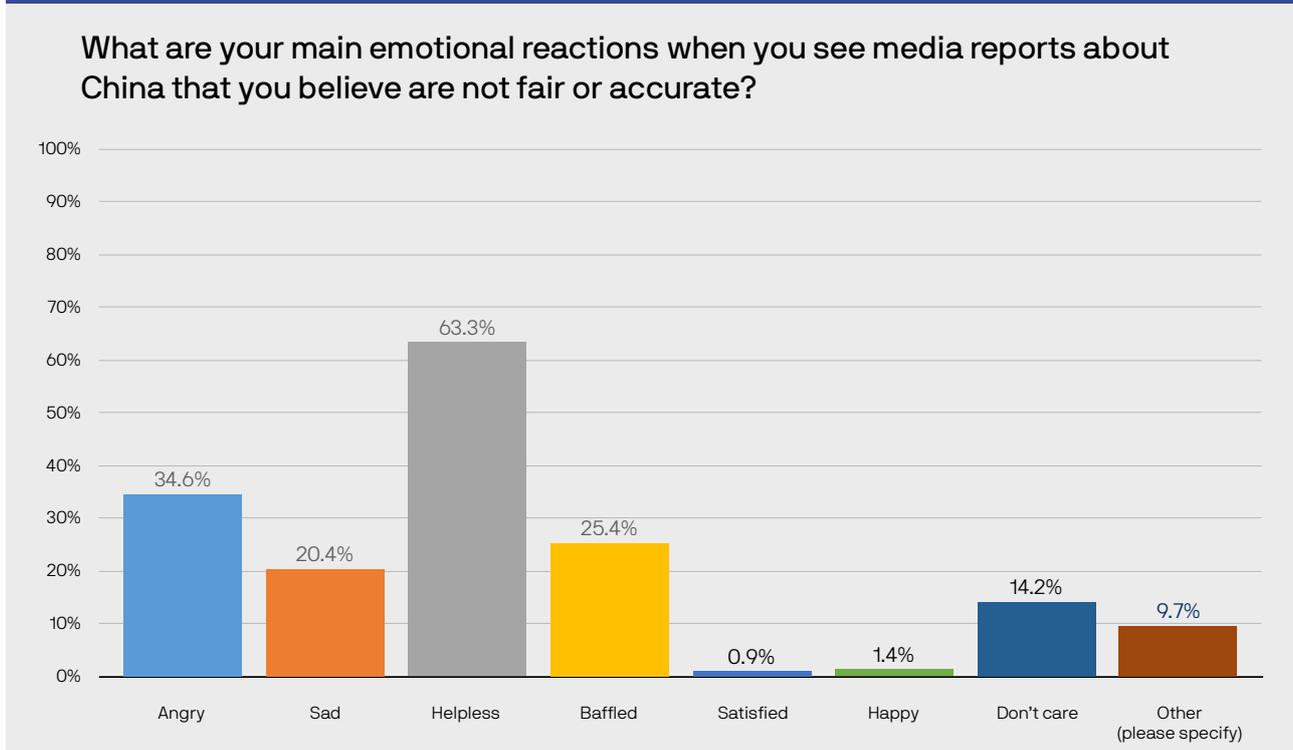
Respondents could select more than one answer from eight options.

By far the dominant reaction was of feeling ‘helpless’, with 63 percent of respondents choosing this. The next most frequent response was of feeling ‘angry’ (35 percent), followed by those who said they felt ‘baffled’ (25 percent). Twenty percent said they felt ‘sad’. Fourteen percent said they ‘don’t care’. One percent said they were ‘happy’ and one percent said they were ‘satisfied’ (Figure 12).

Ten percent of respondents chose ‘Other (please specify)’, and made the following comments (Figure 12):

- ‘My reaction is: ‘So, this is what Western democracy is like?’ Because we have no discursive power, we can only put up with being demonised.’
- ‘How do I know whether it’s fair or accurate? I can’t trust China’s media either. So I see a credibility problem on both sides.’
- ‘I haven’t come across unfair reporting. I’ve almost admired the Western media’s truthful reporting on social issues including the Ukraine-Russia war and the Covid-19 pandemic.’

Figure 12. Emotional reactions to media reports about the PRC perceived to be unfair or inaccurate



6.3 Dissatisfaction with Australian media reports – Actions taken: Quantitative responses

Survey respondents were asked:

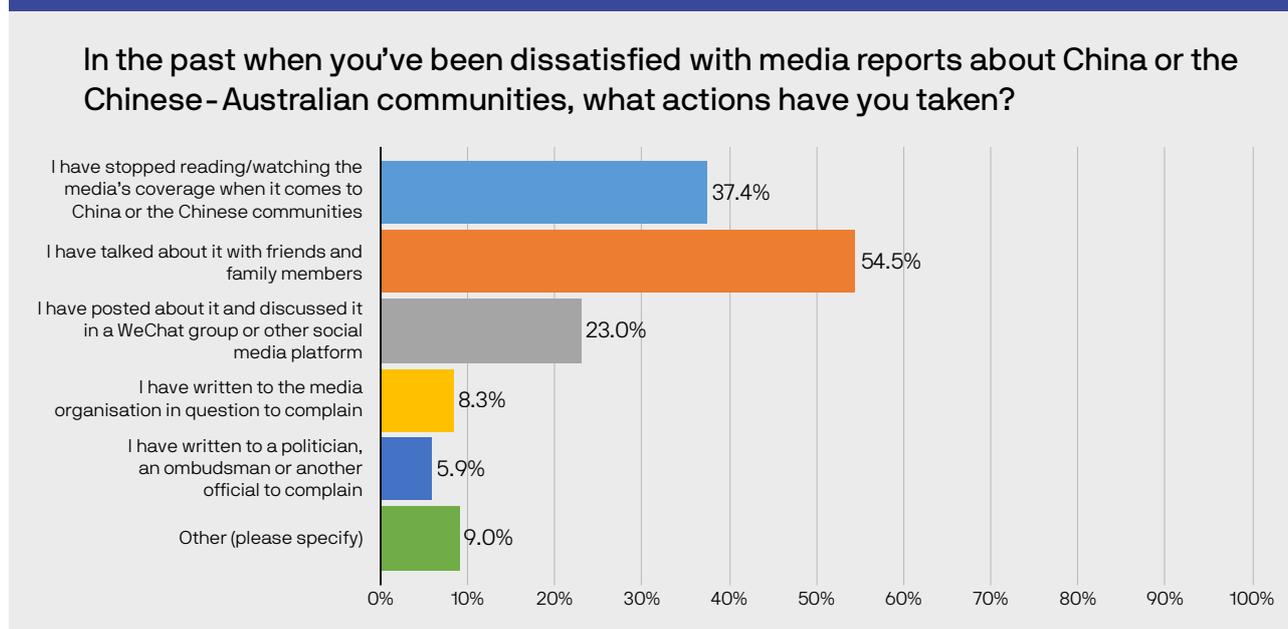
‘In the past, when you’ve been dissatisfied with media reports about China or Chinese–Australian communities, what actions have you taken?’ (Respondents could select more than one option).

Thirty-seven percent said they no longer read or watch Australian English-language reporting about the PRC and Chinese–Australian communities. Nevertheless, more than half (55 percent) said they had discussed such reports with friends and family members, and 23 percent said they would repost reports on WeChat or other social media platforms and discuss them with other people there. Eight percent said they had written to the relevant media organisation to complain and six percent said they had written to politicians, government officials or ombudsmen to complain (Figure 13).*

Nine percent of respondents chose ‘Other (please specify)’, and made the following comments (Figure 13):

- ‘On the whole, I think the reporting is fair, with only a few exceptions whereby they are too positive about China.’
- ‘I will tell my children and their children not to trust anything [the] Australian government says about China.’
- ‘Up to now, I haven’t seen that many unfair reports about Chinese communities.’
- ‘They can criticise but they shouldn’t demonise.’

Figure 13. Dissatisfaction with Australian media reports – Actions taken



* The original version of this report said that ‘Around 14 percent said they had written either to the relevant media organisation to complain (eight percent), or to politicians, government officials or ombudsmen (six percent)’. This has been updated for clarity and accuracy.

6.4 Dissatisfaction with Australian media reports – Actions taken: Qualitative responses

Interviewees discussed the range of actions individuals might take in response to their dissatisfaction with particular media reports on the PRC or Chinese-Australians.

IP17, a Melbourne-based young woman and a staunch Labor supporter, was inclined to take action. She also said she was more hopeful that ‘rational voices’ in mainstream Australian society might prevail over ‘biased media narratives’. Commenting on the publication of the *Sydney Morning Herald’s* ‘Red Alert’ series,⁴¹ IP17 said:

Upon reading the articles, my initial response was to write a letter to my federal MP expressing my fear and concerns. I wanted to make it clear that if the political party I voted for failed to take action on this issue, they would lose my vote.

She then shared the letter she had written to her MP, the Member for Chisholm, Carina Garland. She ended the letter by saying: ‘Could you help me and many Chinese-Australians express this fear? This is the daily life we are living right now and it is scary.’ Upon receiving her letter, Dr Garland’s office reassured her that her letter had been ‘escalated to the Caucus support group’.

However, not everyone was as prone to take action as IP17 did. Perth-based IP13 shared the concerns of IP17, but was less inclined to take action. He said that most people he knew couldn’t be bothered to do anything because there was little point:

To think about doing something about it is one thing, but to actually take action is another.

Most people I know do have a problem with China reporting, but very few do anything about it. Why? I think there are four reasons: first, they’ve tried but it turned out to be futile; second, it’s hard to make others understand since we’re clearly dealing with two entirely different ways of thinking; third, people don’t want to stick their necks out; and fourth, they’re resigned to thinking, ‘What difference can I make? I can only cop it and put up with it.’

So it’s not that they don’t have a problem; it’s that they are unwilling, too lazy, too wary, or too resigned to do anything about it.

6.5 Handling disagreements with colleagues, friends and acquaintances from non-PRC backgrounds about issues concerning the PRC: Quantitative responses

Survey respondents were asked:

‘In relation to issues concerning China, what are you most likely to do when you disagree with colleagues, friends and acquaintances who do not have a mainland Chinese background?’

Respondents could choose more than one option.

About one-third (32 percent) said, ‘I’d tell them they should realise that they have been misled by the media’; nearly half (48 percent) said, ‘I’d tell them what I think, in the hope that they are open to accepting a different point of view’; 22 percent said, ‘I wouldn’t express my disagreement because I wouldn’t want to start an argument or cause embarrassment’; and four percent said, ‘I wouldn’t express my disagreement because I’d be afraid

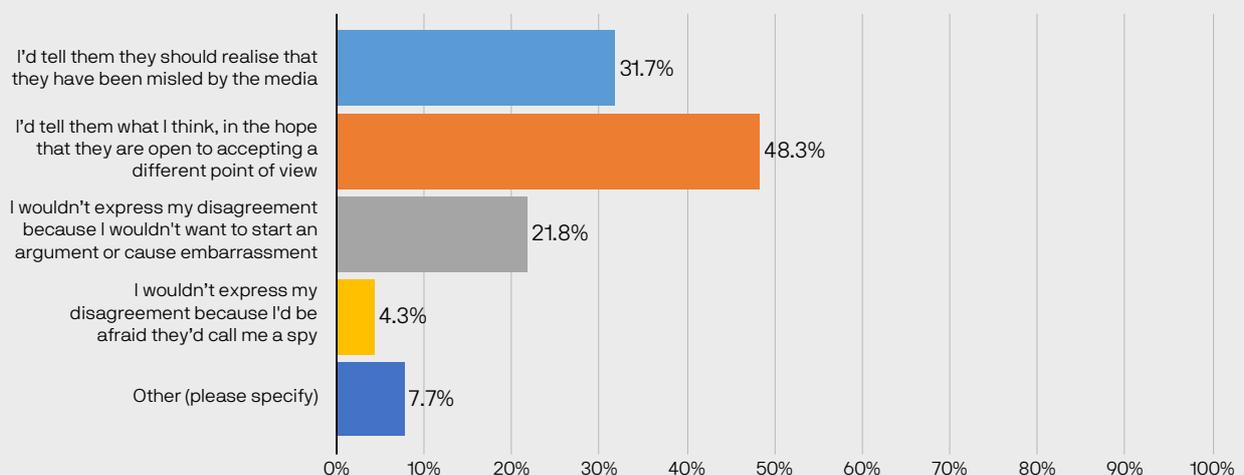
they’d call me a spy’ (Figure 14).

Eight percent of respondents chose ‘Other (please specify)’, and made the following comments (Figure 14):

- ‘I seldom have different views from them.’
- ‘I mostly agree with them.’
- ‘I don’t say anything to them, because it’s normal for people to have different opinions.’
- ‘It depends on who I’m talking to. If they are close friends or colleagues, I’d be frank with them, but if they’re just acquaintances, I wouldn’t tell them they’re being misled.’
- ‘Most of the time, I avoid conflicts. Worry about being called a spy is a consideration, but on the whole, I think people are very uninformed and stubborn, and I wouldn’t want to waste my time on them.’

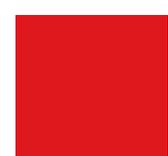
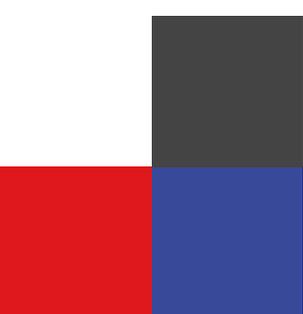
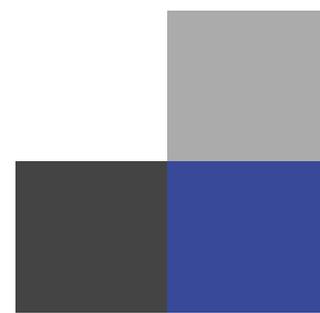
Figure 14. Handling disagreements with colleagues, friends and acquaintances from non-PRC backgrounds about issues concerning the PRC

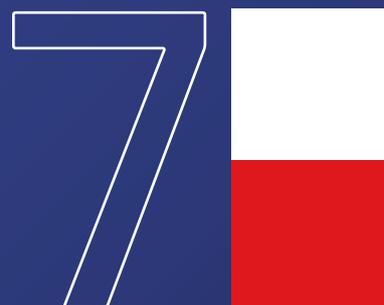
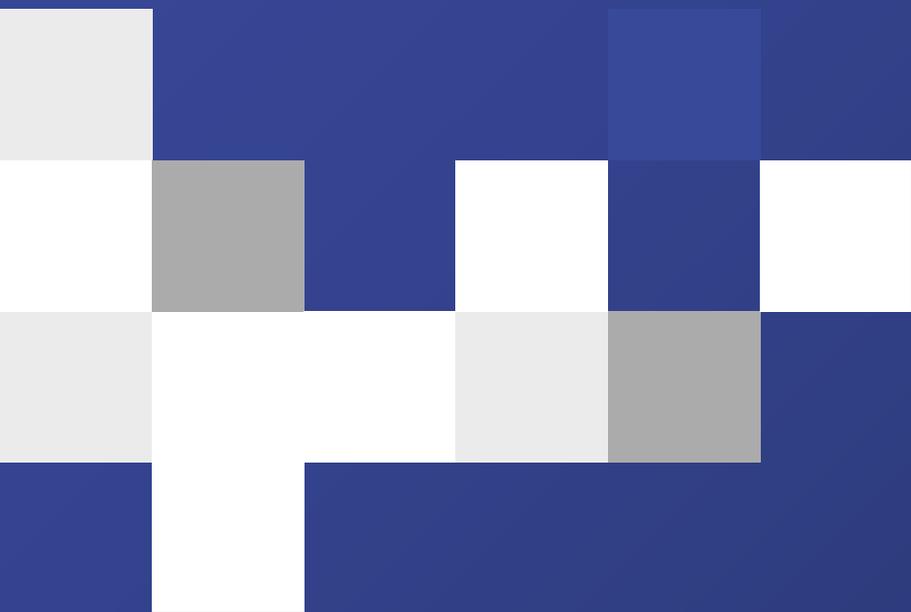
In relation to issues concerning China, what are you most likely to do when you disagree with colleagues, friends and acquaintances who do not have a mainland Chinese background?



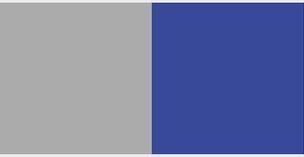
6.6 Conclusion

The data in this section point to a number of ways in which Australian English-language media reporting can diminish PRC migrants' sense of worth as a community. However, despite a high level of emotional distress when confronted with media reports they perceive to be unfair or inaccurate, most survey respondents still expressed a willingness to engage with colleagues, friends and acquaintances from non-PRC backgrounds on issues relating to the PRC if they disagree in some fashion, whether to let them know they believed they had been misled by media reporting and/or in the hope that the person in question would be open to accepting a different point of view. Notably, a markedly smaller percentage of respondents expressed a reluctance to communicate their disagreement.





Belonging



“ For migrants from China, especially those who have been here longer than, say, five years, 10 years or 20 years, they still appreciate the superiority of a democratic system. Sure, this democratic principle is mostly missing in the media’s reporting on China and our communities, and many of us are angry about it. But on the whole, if you take into account the general scheme of things, most PRC migrants still prefer Australia’s overall democracy, egalitarianism and respects for citizen’s rights. ”

Interview participant 6

■

“ Despite the negative media treatment, many Chinese-Australians may still feel a sense of belonging here if they feel valued and accepted by their local communities. ”

Interview participant 4

7.1 Background

The concept of belonging, referring to the extent to which people feel accepted, respected, included and supported by others, is often used as an important benchmark of social cohesion.⁴² Research shows that fairer and more inclusive representation of minorities in the media – both those media that minorities produce themselves and those that are widely available in society – is directly linked to minorities’ sense of belonging.⁴³ A strong sense of belonging is, in turn, an integral aspect of social cohesion.

Given that many of the first-generation PRC migrants surveyed here have made negative assessments of the Australian media’s coverage of their homeland and their communities in Australia, an urgent question is how their consumption of such media affects their sense of belonging.



Image credit: Varavin88 / Shutterstock

7.2 Commitment to staying in Australia

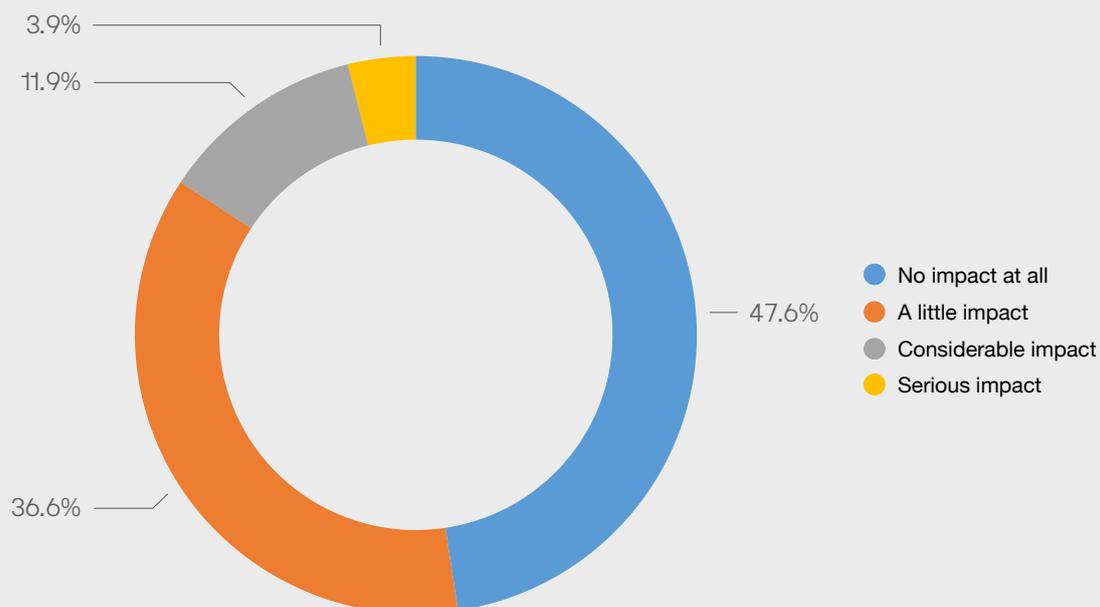
In relation to media reports about Chinese influence and the 'China threat', survey respondents were asked:

'Does reading such media reports about China and Australia's Chinese communities affect your thoughts about continuing to stay and live in Australia?'

Almost half (48 percent) of respondents said such reports had 'no impact at all' on their thoughts about continuing to stay and live in Australia. Just over half (53 percent) said reading such reports had either 'a little impact' (37 percent), 'considerable impact' (12 percent) or 'serious impact' (four percent) (Figure 15).^v

Figure 15. Impact of reading media reports on Chinese influence and the 'China threat' on thoughts about continuing to live in Australia

Does reading such media reports about China and Australia's Chinese communities affect your thoughts about continuing to stay and live in Australia?



^v The percentages here do not add up to 100 percent because of a rounding error.

7.3 To stay in Australia, or to leave?

As a follow-up to the previous question, the 16 percent of survey respondents (86 individuals) who said that reading Australian English-language media reports about Chinese influence and the ‘China threat’ had had either ‘considerable impact’ or ‘serious impact’ on their thoughts about staying in Australia were asked an additional question:

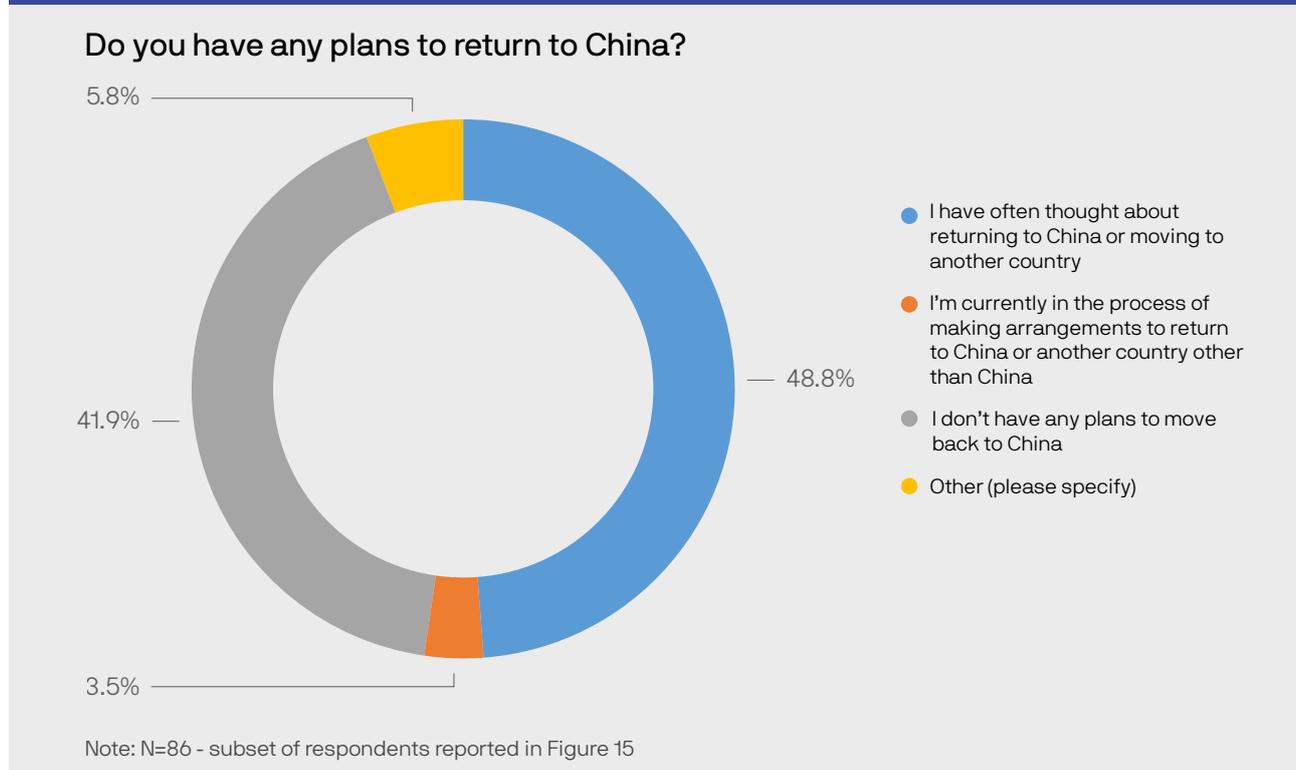
‘Do you have any plans to return to China?’

Almost half of this subset of respondents (49 percent) said they often considered going back to China or to another country, while 42 percent said they currently have no such plans. Three respondents (three percent) reported that they were making plans to move back to China or to another country (Figure 16).

Six percent of this group (five individuals) chose ‘Other (please specify)’, and made the following comments (Figure 16):

- ‘We have already moved back to China.’
- ‘It depends.’
- ‘I really want to be Chinese again but that’s not possible any more. I just hope that after I retire, I can spend more time in China.’
- ‘Not sure yet.’
- ‘I really don’t know.’

Figure 16. Thoughts about returning to the PRC or moving to another country



7.4 Sense of belonging in Australian society: Quantitative responses

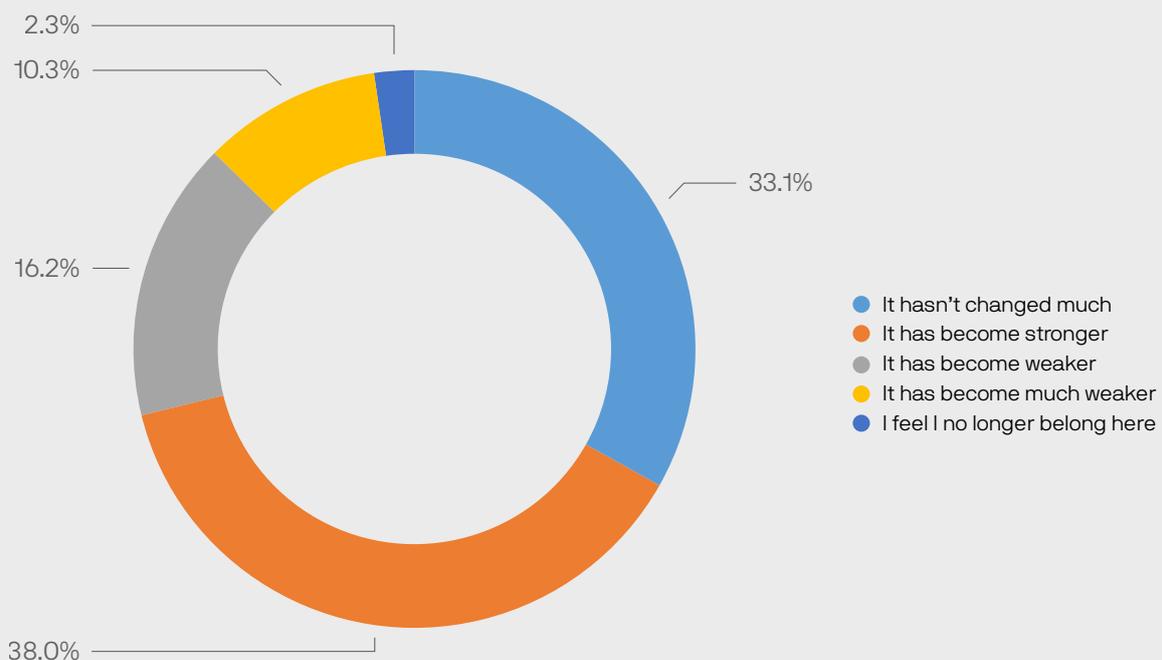
Survey respondents were asked:

‘Compared with five years ago, is your sense of belonging in Australian society now stronger or weaker?’

One-third of respondents (33 percent) said their sense of belonging ‘hasn’t changed much’, and 38 percent said that they now had a ‘stronger’ sense of belonging than five years ago. By contrast, 16 percent said they felt their sense of belonging here was ‘weaker’ than five years ago, while 10 percent said it was now ‘much weaker’. Two percent said they felt they ‘no longer belong here’ (Figure 17).

Figure 17. Sense of belonging in Australian society at present, compared with five years ago

Compared with five years ago, is your sense of belonging in Australian society now stronger or weaker?



7.5 Sense of social inclusion

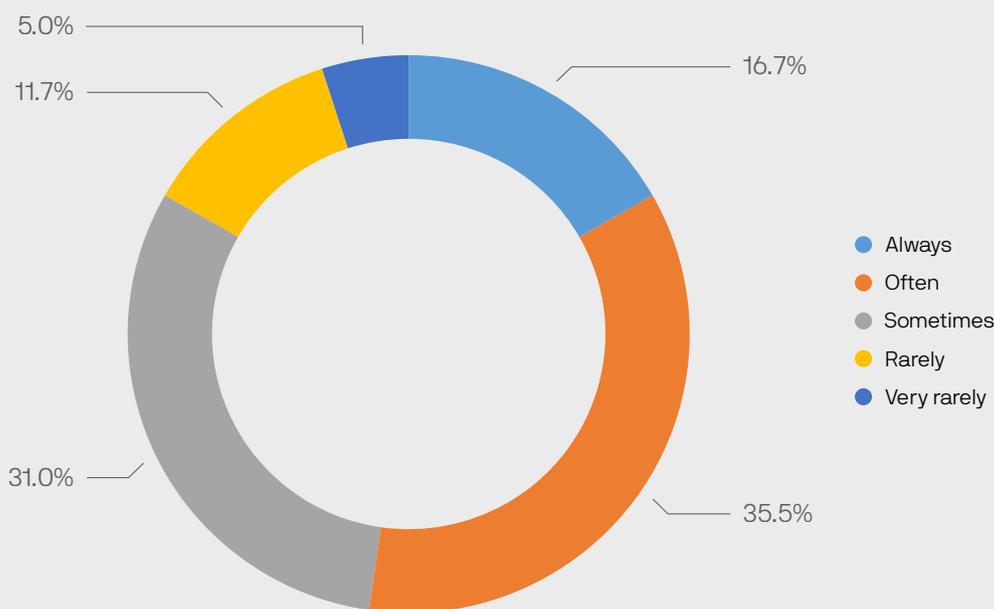
A key component of belonging is whether people feel included by the wider society. To gauge respondents' perceived level of inclusion, the survey assessed one important measure of inclusion – a sense of being accepted as an equal:

'As a first-generation migrant, do you think the mainstream Australian community considers you to be an equal member of that community?'

Seventeen percent of respondents said that they think they are 'always' viewed as equal members of the mainstream Australian community, 36 percent answered 'often', and 31 percent said 'sometimes'. Twelve percent answered 'rarely', and five percent said they 'very rarely' felt as if they were viewed as equal members (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Perceptions on being considered an equal by members of mainstream Australian society

As a first-generation migrant, do you think the mainstream Australian community considers you to be an equal member of that community?



7.6 Sense of safety and comfort as a minority: Quantitative responses

Another key component of belonging is whether individuals feel safe and secure in their environment, and comfortable about their minority identity as PRC-born migrants. To gauge their level of comfort in this respect, survey respondents were asked:

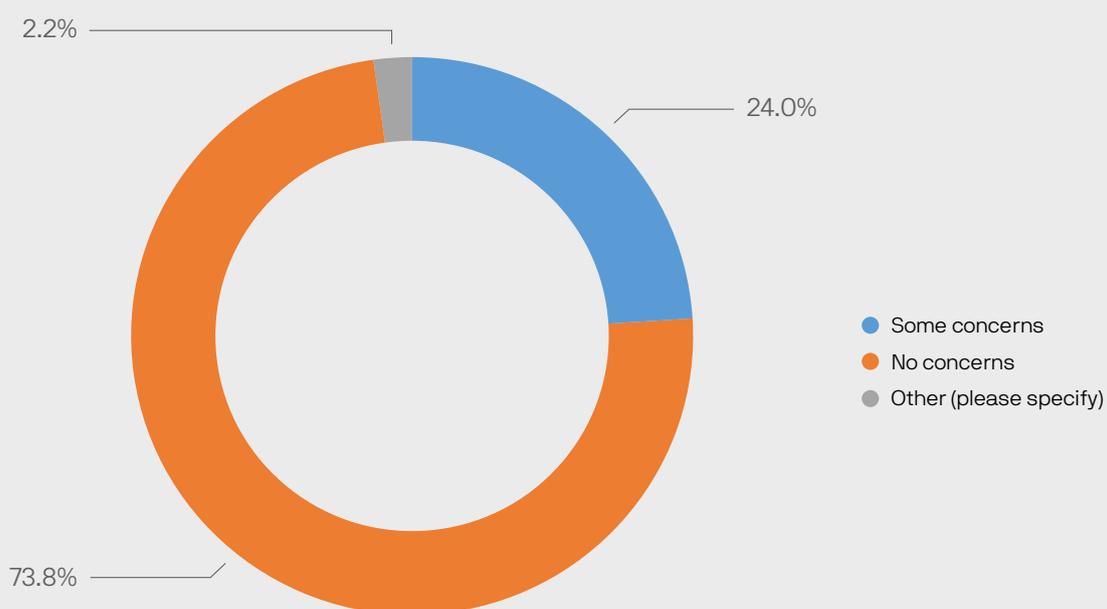
‘Do you have any concerns about revealing your PRC background in the presence of those who are not Chinese-Australians?’

Nearly three-quarters of respondents (74 percent) said they have ‘no concerns’. Twenty-four percent said they had ‘some concerns’.

Two percent selected the ‘Other (please specify)’ option, with the majority of these respondents stating that it would depend on whom they were interacting with (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Concerns about revealing a PRC background in the presence of those who are not Chinese-Australians

Do you have any concerns about revealing your PRC background in the presence of those who are not Chinese-Australians?



7.7 Sense of belonging: Qualitative responses

In discussing first-generation PRC-born migrants' sense of belonging in Australia, interviewees touched on the fact that most survey respondents' sense of belonging and commitment to living in Australia did not seem to have been seriously affected by negative media reports on the PRC. They expressed a number of different opinions on why this might be the case.

IP6 said:

For migrants from China, especially those who have been here longer than, say, five years, 10 years or 20 years, they still appreciate the superiority of a democratic system. Sure, this democratic principle is mostly missing in the media's reporting on China and our communities, and many of us are angry about it. But on the whole, if you take into account the general scheme of things, most PRC migrants still prefer Australia's overall democracy, egalitarianism and respects for citizen's rights.

IP6 also pointed out some possible differences between individuals:

For some people, especially young people who have recently come to Australia, they may be less enchanted by Australia's democratic values. Also, the way some migrants feel on the question of belonging could be shaped by whether they simply focus on themselves, or whether they think about the future of their children. Finally, some migrants may decide whether they belong or not in Australia based on their positive view of Australia's political system on the whole, as well as on their view of the media's reporting on China, while others may be prepared to focus on the positive side and remain optimistic about the future.



Interviewees said that some PRC migrants may feel a sense of belonging in Australian society despite the perception of being marginalised by media and politicians, because they believe that belonging arises more from being able to make a positive contribution to society and being able to be part of their local community. For example, IP4, a permanent resident and an engineer, said:

Most migrants often have a strong desire to integrate into their adopted country and to contribute to its development. This sense of belonging can be strengthened when they feel they are making a positive contribution to Australian society, such as through their work, volunteer activities or social networks. Therefore, despite the negative media treatment, many Chinese-Australians may still feel a sense of belonging here if they feel valued and accepted by their local communities.

This sentiment was echoed by many interviewees, although some expressed it in more terse ways. When asked to explain the discrepancy between media alienation and a strong sense of belonging, IP16 said that it was not hard for many people to feel a sense of belonging in Australia, because:

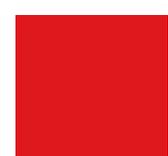
They were not happy with the status quo in China. That's why they left China in the first place, isn't it?

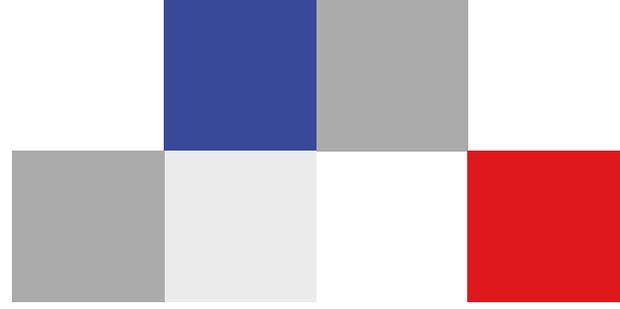
Some other interviewees also said they thought a sense of belonging needed to be understood in the context of why migrants from the PRC decided to come live in Australia. For instance, IP7, a young academic specialising in international relations and politics, thought that the majority of PRC migrants came to Australia primarily to enjoy a more comfortable life:

Many Chinese people with elite jobs and elite career ambitions have opted to go to the US. After all, that's where Silicon Valley, Wall Street and the high-profile universities are.

In contrast, most people who decide to come to Australia do so because they're attracted by Australia's lifestyle, its clean and beautiful environment, and its relaxed way of life. Many come here and work, make money and send their kids to good schools, but they're not really a politically motivated group.

This is a key characteristic of the Chinese migrant group in Australia. These people have a high threshold for rights infringements, and unless they're pushed into extremely and intolerably difficult circumstances, they're not likely to feel discontented.





Interviewees also said they thought another factor explaining a strong sense of belonging, despite an awareness of their marginalisation, is the respondents' individual circumstances. Based on observations of her friends, IP12, who recently completed a PhD in anthropology, said she believes that many migrants from the PRC equate making a home in Australia with achieving a sense of belonging:

Although your [survey] question was about people's sense of belonging to Australian society, I suspect they interpreted it as their sense of belonging to Australia as a place they now call home. Many people migrated here, made themselves a home here, had children, and established an extensive network of friends. Some have even been joined by their parents. To them, when you ask them about their sense of belonging to Australian society, the things that immediately come to their minds are their families, relatives and friends in Australia.

Another interviewee, IP10, supported IP12's view, but approached it from the perspective of the size of the PRC-born cohort. When she was invited to discuss why media alienation has not caused a decrease in a sense of belonging, IP10's theory was that, although Australia's migrant community from the PRC is technically a minority group, it is large enough for people in the community not to feel isolated:

If you're in Sydney or Melbourne and you walk around, a lot of the time you don't feel like a minority.

Another somewhat sobering interpretation of the data about belonging was proposed by IP19, a public servant in Canberra, who suspected that, to some extent, respondents felt they needed to inflate their sense of belonging for 'self-protection':

They may not want to risk being accused of disloyalty to Australia.

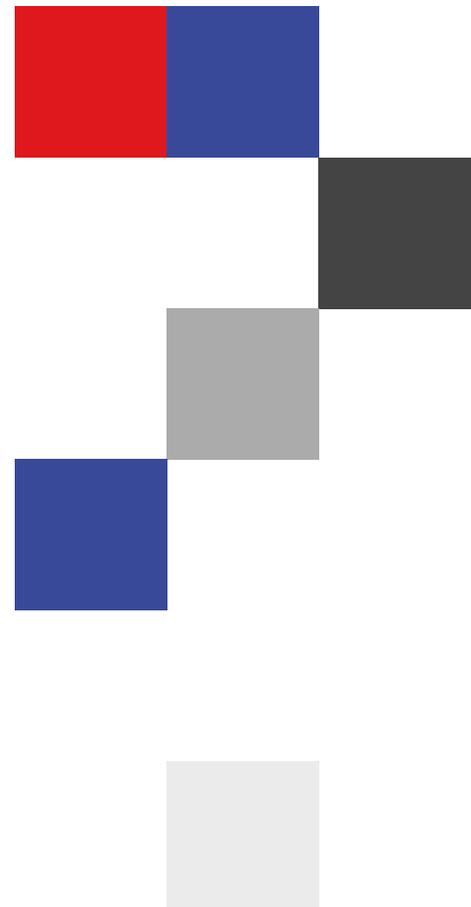
This was echoed by IP14, based in Perth, who said he thought the strong sense of belonging to Australia reported by many respondents could be aspirational rather than real. He also said he thought that respondents might exaggerate their sense of belonging in the survey, as they may be concerned that a low level of belonging on this sort of survey could be used by the public or politicians as evidence that they are not loyal citizens. For this reason, IP14 said that it may be missing the point to poll people about their sense of belonging:

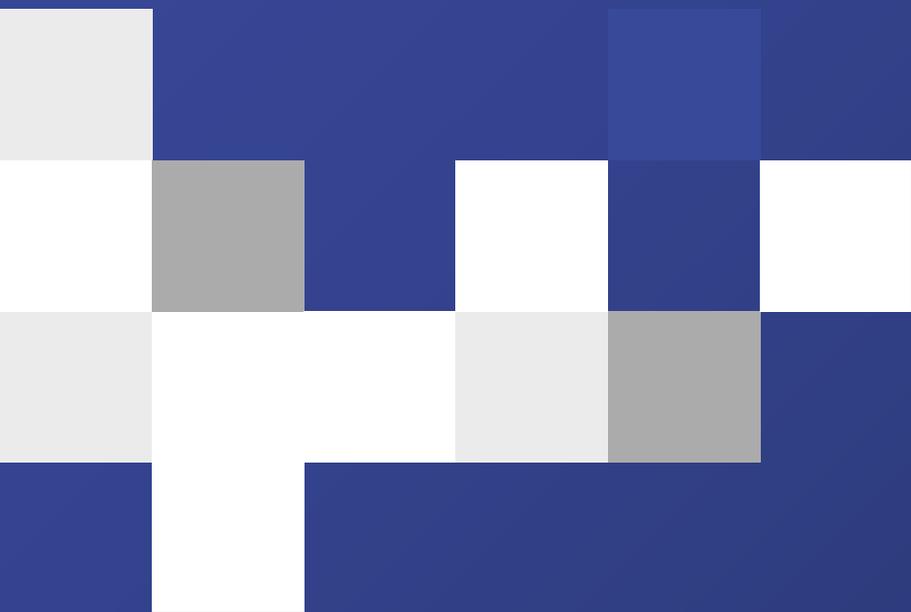
The focus should be on retaining and advancing Australia's inclusiveness, not on developing a sense of belonging. As long as Australia advocates multiculturalism and promotes equality among all races, the sense of belonging will increase for the vast majority of Australians, no matter where they were born.

7.8 Conclusion

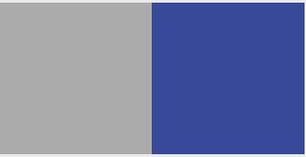
There seems to be a discrepancy between the survey data and the in-depth interviews on questions relating to belonging. This is the only area in the study where such a marked discrepancy has occurred. Interviewees raised the possibility that survey respondents may have interpreted the questions about 'belonging' in the survey to mean their level of identification with Australia's lifestyle, their level of connection with their immediate families, and how safe and comfortable they feel about living in metropolitan cities such as Sydney or Melbourne, which have large populations of Chinese-Australians and many others of Asian appearance. In other words, despite the fact that they reported relatively low levels of feeling included, accepted and respected in the political and social senses (as discussed in the previous sections of this report), there nevertheless may have been a countervailing high level of appreciation of Australia's lifestyle, and the opportunity open to them to carve out a comfortable living environment in which they can successfully build a career, support a family, and develop an extensive network within their own community.

The discrepancy between the survey data and the in-depth interviews points to the need to engage in further research in order to understand the complexity of this issue. Some interviewees' comments hinted that there may be cross-cultural differences in respondents' understanding of what 'belonging' means, and of how to measure it. Also, as discussed above, at least two interviewees speculated about a hidden motivation for survey respondents reporting a stronger sense of belonging than they experience in reality. Future research should take into account the complexity surrounding the sociological concept of 'belonging', especially when applied to the context of ethnic or cultural minorities.





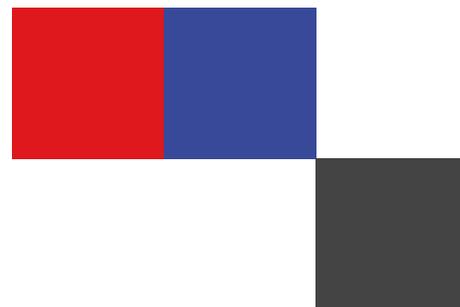
Reaction to speculation about war with the PRC



“ Nobody wants to be in a situation where the two countries that matter to them most – the motherland and their adopted country – are at war. I’m simply too scared to think about what it would mean for me. ”

Interview participant 6

8.1 Background



Over the past two years, media speculation about an imminent war in which the PRC and Australia are on opposing sides has gathered momentum.⁴⁴

To some observers, the ‘media hype of war’ has overlooked the possible negative impact on Australian society.⁴⁵ Others have also expressed a concern that stoking fears of war could serve Beijing’s goals.⁴⁶

Research in media studies in general has already shown that the ways in which the media report on conflicts – actual or potential – between nations may have crucial implications for social cohesion, given that the racial minorities whose motherland is being cast as the nation’s enemy are likely to be alienated or even targeted by such reporting.⁴⁷



Image credit: Hung Chung Chih / Shutterstock

8.2 Speculation about war with the PRC in Australian media: Quantitative responses

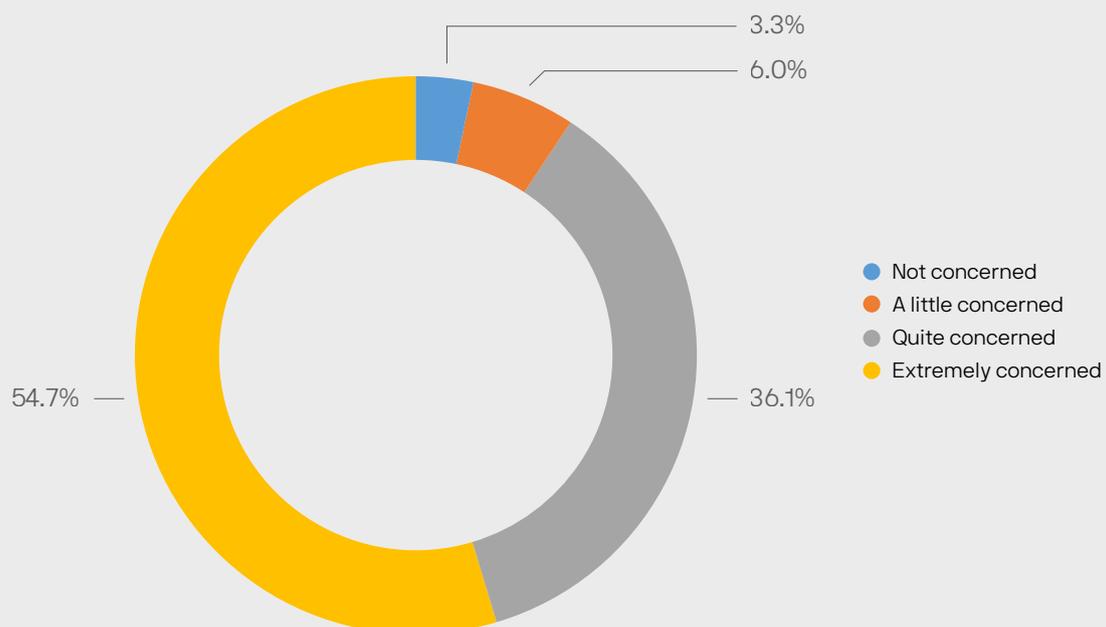
Survey respondents were asked:

‘How concerned are you about what might happen to you if Australia went to war with China?’

The overwhelming majority of respondents (91 percent) expressed some level of concern, with more than half (55 percent) of respondents saying they were ‘extremely concerned’, while another 36 percent said they were ‘quite concerned’ about what might happen to them. Nine percent said they were either ‘a little concerned’ (six percent) or ‘not concerned’ (three percent) (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Concerns about personal impact in the event of a war between Australia and the PRC

How concerned are you about what might happen to you if Australia went to war with China?



8.3 Speculation about war with the PRC in Australian media: Qualitative responses

Interviewees expressed a deeply felt anxiety about the Australian English-language media's tendency to 'talk up' the likelihood of war. IP2 said that such reports can cause 'harm and hurt':

The recent reports in the media regarding a potential war with China have been very unsettling. The sensationalistic language and images used in these articles promote warmongering and do not contribute to a peaceful atmosphere.

As a member of the Chinese-Australian community, I'm deeply concerned about the harm and hurt this kind of reporting may cause. It's crucial that responsible media outlets feature a diverse range of perspectives and opinions, particularly from those who have a deeper knowledge and understanding of China's history, culture, and people.

By promoting mutual understanding and peaceful dialogue, we can work towards lasting peace. War is a devastating event that should be prevented at all costs.

IP7 suggested that a range of factors such as 'ideology, racial differences, the 'yellow peril' narrative, and media hype' all contributed to an exaggerated fear of a war over Taiwan. He said:

I know that Taiwan did a large survey asking Taiwanese people whether they thought the CCP would invade Taiwan, and soon after that I noticed that [the] Lowy [Institute] did a survey asking mainstream Australians a similar question. It turns out Australians are more concerned about a war with Taiwan than people in Taiwan.

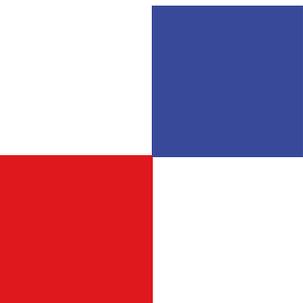
Surely, if a war with Taiwan breaks out, it poses more of a threat to Taiwan than to Australia, right? We're thousands of miles away, while Taiwan is right next to China. So, we can tell Australia's concern is a consequence of the public being fed exaggerations.

IP1 also said that the constant discussion in the media about the potential for war with the PRC was likely to 'desensitise' the public's reaction to war talk, and therefore 'normalises' it:

It stands to reason: if you keep talking about it all the time, it may lead to people feeling that it's not that scary; they're psychologically primed to accept war as inevitable.'

IP1 also thought that Australia would be unwise to buy into the idea of a war:

The US has a lot to answer for all this. They want a war with China and Australia would be dumb to follow the US. In fact, come to think of it, international relations is much like how people behave in their neighbourhood: the US is the big guy on the block but Australia is just a small guy, so it should keep out of things. But no, it doesn't keep out. Instead, it behaves like a small yapping dog, barking loudly and darting in all directions in anticipation of some real action.



IP6 was deeply concerned about war talk:

Of course I'm worried about the prospect of a war but, to be honest with you, I don't dare to imagine what it actually would mean for people such as us. It's too horrible even to contemplate. I may have to take sides. I don't know if I would be able to protect myself. I believe I'm not the only one in our community who feels this way. Nobody wants to be in a situation where the two countries that matter to them most – the motherland and their adopted country – are at war. I'm simply too scared to think about what it would mean for me.

IP8, a middle-aged accountant from Sydney, echoed this worry:

I don't know what to say to my daughter. One time she came home from school and she asked me, 'Mum, is China going to invade us?' She said others in her school were talking about this in class. I tried to calm her down but I'm worried myself. Human beings are not rational, especially if there's a war. Look at what happened to Jewish people. Would we be able to trust the government to protect us?

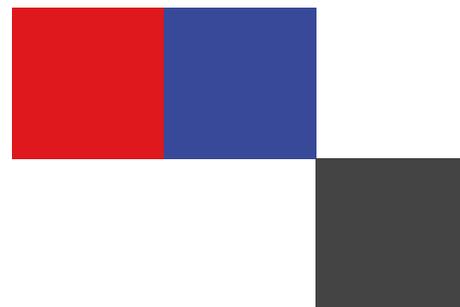
IP4 expressed a similar concern and stressed that his concern was out of a fear for his current level of safety:

When I hear media stories about the possibility of a war, I just feel concerned and anxious about personal safety and well-being. Some Chinese-Australians, including me, worry that they could be unfairly targeted in the event of a conflict, due to their perceived connections with China. They argue that the government must take swift action to prevent discrimination and ensure the safety and well-being of all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity or national origin.

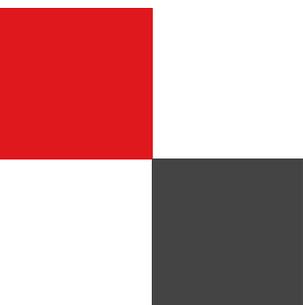
IP16 said that a war with the PRC would be a bad outcome for all Australians, not just for Chinese-Australians:

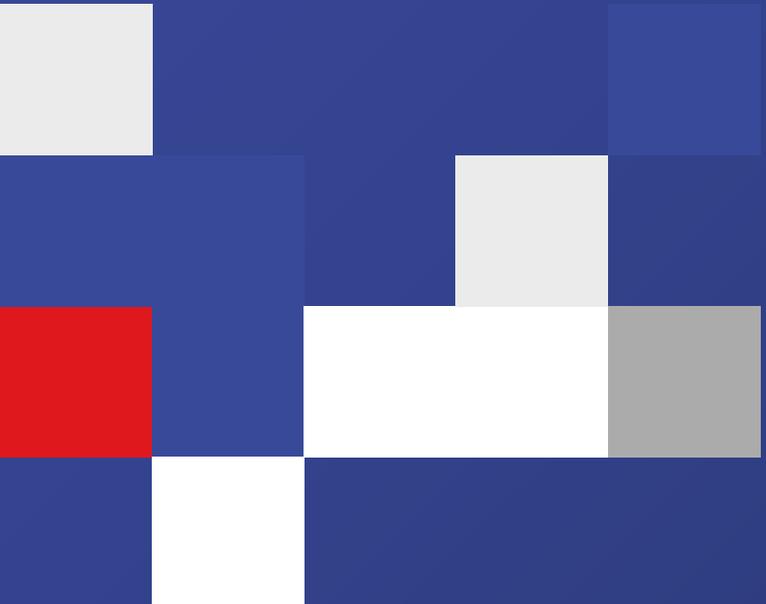
In times of war, no one is safe, and everyone's well-being is in danger. Australia's refusal to get involved in a war would be to the benefit of *all* Australians; there's no need to distinguish the degree of harm of a war based on people's cultural heritage.

8.4 Conclusion



Despite a commitment to remaining in Australia, and because they see Australia as a better place than the PRC to build their lives, an overwhelming majority of respondents (91 percent) voiced concerns that Australia's English-language media have a tendency to engage in speculation about war with the PRC, primarily because respondents believe such speculation has the potential to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. These figures make it clear that the possibility of a war with the PRC weighs heavily on the minds of most of those surveyed. They are equally concerned about how Chinese-Australians would be treated should Australia find itself at war with the PRC.





Methodology



Background

As discussed in the Introduction and Part 1 of this report, the Lowy Institute conducted a series of three polls of Chinese-Australians, as well as a wider poll of Australian adults between 2020 and 2023.^{vi} The three surveys of Chinese-Australians included individuals of various backgrounds: different histories and trajectories of migration, countries of origin, length of time in Australia, dialect groups, English-language proficiency, and professional profile. The 2021 survey tried to address a concern about ‘the over-representation of younger, highly acculturated, second-generation respondents’ that had been identified in the 2020 survey. Respondents in the 2021 poll were given the option of completing the survey in English (24.9 percent), simplified Chinese (62.9 percent) or traditional Chinese (12.3 percent), and quotas were set in terms of age and country of birth.⁴⁸ Similar conditions were applied in the 2023 survey.⁴⁹

However, it is notable that despite these conditions, none of the Lowy Institute reports was in a position to comment directly and specifically about Australia’s largest cohort of Chinese-Australians: first-generation migrants from the PRC. This report goes some way towards filling this lacuna, with particular focus on the issue of *social cohesion*.

Australia’s PRC-born community: Population demographics

The 2021 Census found that just under 550,000 respondents were born in the PRC, comprising 2.2 percent of the overall population,⁵⁰ with 227,414 (41 percent) of these PRC-born individuals reporting Australian citizenship.⁵¹ This reflects an increase in the number of PRC-born migrants by just over 40,000 since the previous census – the fourth most rapidly growing group behind India, Nepal and the Philippines. At the 2016 census, China was the second most common country of birth for migrants, behind England. But as of 2021, it is now in third position, with English (3.6 percent), and Indian (2.6 percent) migrants more numerous.

In the broader category of people claiming full or partial Chinese ancestry, the number grew from 1.2 million in 2016 to 1.4 million in 2021, making up 5.5 percent of the population. This cohort is now the fifth-largest segment of the population, behind those claiming English (33 percent), Australian (29.9 percent), Irish (9.5 percent) or Scottish (8.6 percent) origins.

Mandarin is the most prevalent language spoken in Australia other than English, with around 685,000 people (2.7 percent of the population) speaking Mandarin in the home. Nearly 26 percent of these Mandarin speakers said they had a low level of proficiency in English – the largest group of second-language speakers to report this. The majority of Mandarin speakers (62.7 percent) were born in mainland China.⁵²

vi 2021 (n=1,040); 2022 (n=1,002); 2023 (n=1,200).

Media consumption habits

Previous research on the media consumption habits of Mandarin-speaking Australians, including their patterns of social media usage, tells us that most people in this group access a variety of online outlets, including English-language Australian legacy media such as the ABC, SBS, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*.⁵³ However, this content is mostly accessed via digital devices, and generally through Chinese social media platforms, in particular WeChat.

This earlier research also identified a high level of interest in news and current affairs. Around 77 percent said they were interested in news about Australia, and slightly fewer (73 percent) said they were interested in news about the PRC. The same study also found that most Mandarin-speaking respondents did not regularly access news and information directly from mainland Chinese legacy media, such as newspapers, television and radio. Only 20 percent of participants said they regularly and directly accessed news from sources such as *Xinhua*, *People's Daily*, *China Daily*, *The Global Times* and CCTV. Nor did they regularly and directly access legacy English-language media in Australia for news and information.⁵⁴

Social cohesion: Research question

Growing ethnic and racial diversity is often believed to have a negative impact on social cohesion.⁵⁵ Policymakers in democratic societies are always concerned with enhancing social cohesion by encouraging integration of ethnic and racial minorities, and by building trust between various communities in the society.⁵⁶

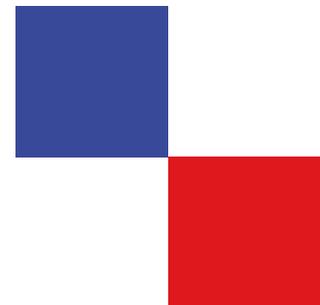
The Scanlon-Monash Index of Social Cohesion lists five key components against which social cohesion can be measured, with particular relevance here to minority groups: a sense of belonging; a sense of worth; a sense of social inclusion and justice; level of political participation; and level of acceptance or rejection.⁵⁷

The media play an important role in building social cohesion.⁵⁸ The concept of social cohesion is premised on the fact that societies need 'some sort of glue to sustain them over time'.⁵⁹ In this context, social cohesion refers to 'broadly shared orientations to the world among the populations', and one important site where it can be built or damaged is in the sphere of the media.⁶⁰ The core question that arises from these insights is: how does exposure to negative media content about the PRC and Chinese-Australian communities impact on the nation's social cohesion objectives?



Research approach

The data on which this report is based were generated using a combination of three research methods: a series of three focus group discussions; a quantitative survey; and 20 personal, in-depth interviews. The survey employed a non-probability sample of 689 first-generation PRC migrants aged 18 years or over,^{vii} and was conducted in simplified Chinese. The survey was implemented online using Survey Monkey, and participation in it was promoted via WeChat.



vii The completion rate for the survey was 77.8 percent (536 of 689 participants answered all questions). The attrition rate after the first eight questions (one quarter of the survey) was 12.9 percent; after 16 questions it was 18.7 percent; it reached its maximum (22.2 percent) at question 25.

Survey participants: Demographics

Citizenship or residency status:

- Australian citizens: 319 (46 percent)
- Permanent residents: 247 (36 percent)
- Short-term residents (a minimum of five years): 107 (16 percent)
- Other': 16 (two percent).

Gender:

- Male: 305 (57 percent)
- Female: 225 (42 percent)
- 'Other': six (one percent).

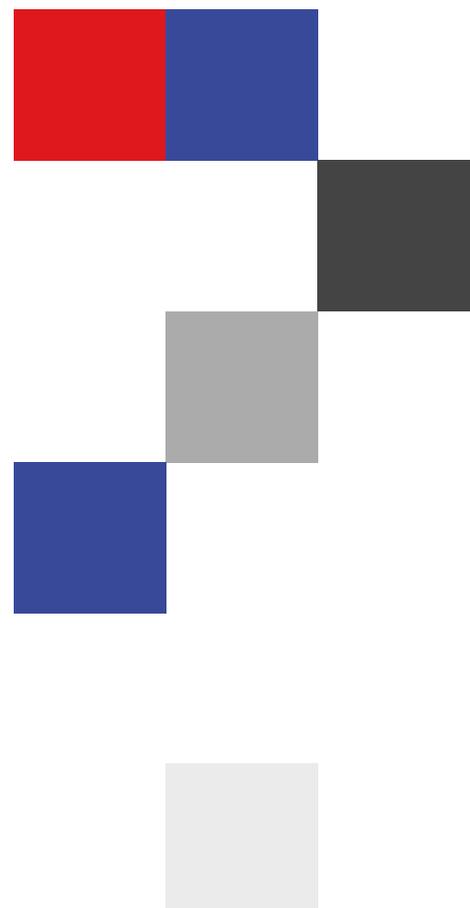
Age:

- 18-24: six (one percent)
- 25-34: 82 (15 percent)
- 35-44:165 (31 percent)
- 45-54: 131 (24 percent)
- 55-64: 107 (20 percent)
- 65 and over: 45 (eight percent).

Education:

- Primary school: one (less than one percent)
- High school: 12 (two percent)
- Bachelor's degree: 166 (31 percent)
- Graduate diploma: 66 (12 percent)
- Master's degree: 199 (37 percent)
- Doctoral degree: 92 (17 percent).

All percentages in this report are rounded to the nearest percent.



Phases of research

Phase 1: Focus groups

A series of three focus group discussions were held from November 14 to December 1, 2022: the first in Melbourne, with 15 participants; the second in Ballarat, with six participants; and the third in Sydney, with 12 participants. These discussions each lasted from two hours to four hours and were held with the aim of producing a broad-brushstroke picture of participants' main feelings and views on the Australian English-language media's reporting about the PRC and Chinese-Australian communities.

Phase 2: Survey

An online quantitative survey was conducted in the first week of January 2023. Informed by insights that emerged from the focus groups, the questions in the survey were framed with the aim of assessing the extent to which the judgements, fears and concerns of focus group participants were reflected in Australia's wider PRC migrant community.

A non-probability methodology (in this case, convenience sampling) was adopted for the second phase because a probability-based approach was beyond the timeframe and budget of the project, and therefore impracticable. Nevertheless, research indicates that although all convenience samples have less clear generalisability than probability samples, 'homogeneous convenience samples' – taking samples from a particular subpopulation group – have clearer generalisability relative to conventional convenience samples, and therefore homogeneous convenience samples are a positive alternative to conventional, heterogeneous convenience samples.⁶¹ A survey of recent publications in prestigious journals in developmental science shows that convenience

samples were the norm there, being over 16 times more likely to be used than probability samples.⁶²

Based on these considerations, the project adopted WeChat^{viii} as the primary platform for recruiting a convenience sample. A precedent for this approach can be found in the Scanlon Foundation's 2020 *Mapping social cohesion* survey, where WeChat was used to recruit a non-probability sample of 500 individuals.⁶³

The great majority of respondents to our survey had a tertiary qualification or higher: 12 percent had a graduate diploma, 31 percent had an undergraduate degree, 37 percent a master's degree, and 17 percent a doctoral degree. Also noteworthy is that the majority of interview participants tended to be older, with those 40 years or older dominating the sample.

Phase 3: In-depth interviews

Shortly after the survey, between February and April 2023, a series of open-ended, one-on-one interviews were conducted with 20 first-generation PRC migrants, each interview lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. A small number of participants who had difficulty finding a suitable time for a face-to-face interview opted to record extensive audio or written answers to the questions posed to them. The individuals in this third phase were selected on the basis of their higher-than-average level of interest in current public debates on Australia-PRC relations. A few were opinion leaders in the community, while others were everyday media consumers with a keen interest in news and current affairs, especially about matters relating to the PRC. While these interviews were open-ended and free-flowing, they were conducted with the aim of producing more fine-grain insights that would help make sense of the quantitative data generated from the survey.

viii WeChat (Weixin in the PRC) is the most popular Chinese-language social media platform across the globe. It is used daily by the vast majority of Australia's PRC migrants for a wide variety of purposes.

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About the author



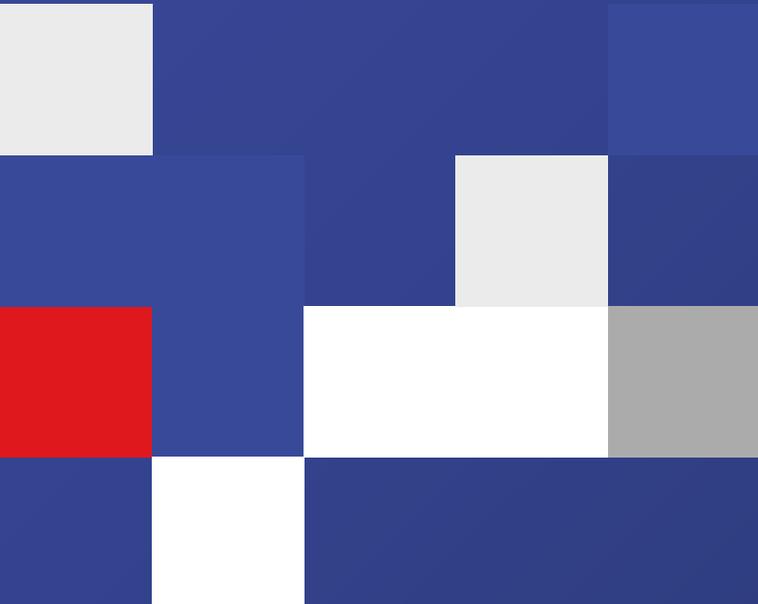
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A fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities since 2016, she is a member of the ARC College of Experts (2020–2023). In 2016, she published a significant report titled *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities*.

As an academic researcher, Professor Sun is best known for her ethnography of rural-to-urban migration in China, and for her study of transnational and diasporic Chinese media.

She has produced a significant body of research on the cultural politics of inequality in China. This work can be found in *Maid in China: Media, morality, and the cultural politics of boundaries* (2009); *Subaltern China: Rural migrants, media, and cultural practices* (2014); and her edited volume, *Love stories in China: The politics of intimacy in the twenty-first century* (2020, with Ling Yang). Her latest book on this topic is *Love troubles: Inequality in China and its intimate consequences* (2023, Bloomsbury).

Over the past two decades, Professor Sun has spearheaded global diasporic Chinese-language media as a distinct area of research, starting with the publication of her first book, *Leaving China: Media, migration, and transnational imagination* (2002), and three edited volumes on this topic: *Media and the Chinese diaspora: Community, communications and commerce* (2006); *Media and communication in the Chinese diaspora: Rethinking transnationalism* (2016, with John Sinclair); and *WeChat and the Chinese diaspora: Digital transnationalism in the era of China's rise* (2022, with Haiqing Yu). Her latest book on this topic is *Digital Transnationalism: Chinese-language Media in Australia* (2023, co-authored with Haiqing Yu).



Appendices



Appendix 1. Comparison with the Lowy Institute's data

Table 1. Respondents' assessments of Australian English-language media reporting about the PRC - Comparison of the survey findings of this report with the Lowy Institute surveys

	Sun 2023 PRC-born migrant in Australia (n= 689) (percentage of respondents)	Lowy 2020 Chinese- Australians (n= 1,040) (percentage of respondents)	Lowy 2021 Chinese- Australians (n= 1,002) (percentage of respondents)	Lowy 2022 Chinese- Australians (n= 1,200) (percentage of respondents)	Lowy 2022 General Australian public (n=2,006) (percentage of respondents)
Reporting is fair and balanced	24.7%	31%	33%	42%	61%
Reporting is too positive	4.2%	19%	9%	13%	10%
Reporting is too negative	53.4%	50%	57%	42%	26%
Uncertain/ Unsure/ Prefer not to say	17.7%	Fewer than 1%	1%	3%	3%

Appendix 2. Information about in-depth interviewees

Table 2. Demographics of individuals who took part in in-depth, one-on-one interviews

ID	Occupation	Age/Age range	Citizenship status	Years in Australia	Gender	Place of residence
IP1	Scientist	50-60	Australian citizen	38	M	Melbourne
IP2	Businessman	59	Australian citizen	27	M	Melbourne
IP3	Corporate professional	34	Australian citizen	18	M	Melbourne
IP4	Engineer	45	Permanent resident	12	M	Melbourne
IP5	Taxi driver	60-70	Permanent resident	35	M	Melbourne
IP6	Community volunteer	50	Australian citizen	4	F	Sydney
IP7	Academic	32	Visa-holder	14	M	Sydney
IP8	Professional service	45-50	Australian citizen	21	F	Sydney
IP9	Accountant and blogger	40-45	Permanent resident	6	M	Sydney
IP10	Consultant	26	Visa-holder	5	F	Sydney
IP11	Businesswoman	50-60	Permanent resident	10	F	Sydney
IP12	Casual academic	30-40	Visa-holder	8	F	Sydney
IP13	Businessman, Justice of the Peace	39	Australian citizen	22	M	Perth
IP14	Accountant	40-45	Permanent resident	16	M	Perth
IP15	Businesswoman	37	Australian citizen	9	F	Ballarat
IP16	Interpreter	55	Permanent resident	15	F	Sydney
IP17	Social worker	30	Permanent resident	5	F	Melbourne
IP18	Retired migration agent	50-60	Permanent resident	14	M	Adelaide
IP19	Public servant	50-60	Australian citizen	20	F	Canberra
IP20	Project management consultant	40	Australian citizen	14	M	Sydney

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