

An ex-SAS soldier has his sights on politics. But how do Chinese Australians feel about his new book?

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Mark Wales may not be a stranger to many Australians. A former Special Air Services (SAS) soldier who served in Afghanistan, he later won the reality show *Australian Survivor* in 2022. Recently, he won Liberal [preselection](#) for the federal seat of Tangney in Perth.

This victory isn't surprising, given he projects an aura of self-confidence and daring. However, despite his promising candidacy, his preselection is already stirring controversy.

The incumbent for Tangney is [Sam Lim](#), a Malaysian-born former police officer of Chinese heritage. In the [2022](#) federal election, Labor received swings — largely courtesy of the Liberals' anti-China rhetoric — in Tangney in Perth, Chisholm in Melbourne, Reid in Sydney and Bennelong in northern Sydney, all electorates with large percentages of voters with Chinese heritage.

A migrant and former dolphin trainer fluent in 10 languages, Lim has a modest demeanour that starkly contrasts with Wales. Lim managed to turn Tangney, traditionally a Liberal marginal seat, to Labor, winning with 52.4 percent of the vote and causing a significant swing towards the ALP of 11.9 percent. He is known for his outspokenness against [racism](#) and his advocacy for justice.

According to posts in a WA-focused WeChat group, Lim is quite popular, described as 'warm', 'grandfatherly' and 'skilled at communicating with people from all walks of life' — possibly natural attributes that were further honed during his time as a police officer.

In Tangney, 16 percent of the population has some form of Chinese heritage, including Mandarin-speaking migrants from China, as well as Singaporean and Malaysian Australians who identified with their Chinese heritage in the last census. Many members of these communities have experienced anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Meanwhile, Wales has written a novel, titled *Outrider*, that features China as an invader at war with Australia, which the media has been [reporting](#) will soon be published.

Will some voters possibly see this book as contributing to the already widespread fear and anxiety about China? Given that the Liberals' post-election number-crunching [indicated](#) the party had a 'China problem', will the controversy surrounding Wales' book cruel his chance of electoral success?

Wales' preselection was not the result of a captain's pick; he won it with a clear majority. Those participating in the preselection process were apparently not concerned that publishing a novel with an anti-China subplot could harm his chances.

But as a Perth-based Malaysian Australian of Chinese heritage told *Crikey*, even though some Malaysian Australians in Tangney may not be offended by Wales' novel, they may still choose to vote for Lim.

Wales is confident that the book won't jeopardise his political aspirations. He [cites](#) several reasons for his confidence: his novel is fictional, and the war with China serves only as the backdrop against which a civil conflict in Australia unfolds.

Yet one Tangney Chinese-Australian voter was not assured. He was concerned with the possible negative impact this may have on social cohesion, and saw the novel as Wales' 'de facto pledge of his loyalty and proof of credentials to the Liberal Party'.

Another Perth resident shared this concern about the book, but offered a different perspective. He told *Crikey*:

There's nothing wrong with writing a novel, and it matters little what he writes — only his reputation is at stake. However, if you run for Parliament on a mandate of economic security, you need to demonstrate a basic understanding of the foreign country you're writing about. Lack of understanding of our largest trading partner could potentially affect our economic well-being, which is a serious concern for voters.

Wales is backed by his '[mate](#)', a fellow former SAS soldier and Liberal hawk, shadow minister for defence Andrew Hastie.

Peter Hartcher, *The Sydney Morning Herald's* chief China critic, who previously alarmed the nation by reporting on [predictions](#) that there would be a war with China within three years, has also written a [piece](#) defending Wales. Hartcher sees Australia as fortunate to have individuals like Wales, who embrace creative expression and free speech and reject self-censorship, rather than 'cowering before Beijing'.

Yet neither of Wales's arguments — that his novel is fictional and that the war with China is only background — seems to alleviate the anxiety, even anger, among some Chinese-Australian voters in the Tangney electorate and beyond.

Wales may indeed be taking a political gamble by running for Parliament, but then again, he's a soldier and a survivor; taking risks is what he does well, isn't it? But even if he loses, his book may nevertheless become a bestseller. As for potentially offending Chinese Australians, some are apparently not worried. Hartcher, for one, is already praising creative individuals in Australia like Wales for not fearing 'upsetting someone or some minority'.

One way or another, Tangney will be an interesting space to watch in the lead-up to the next federal election.

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