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Chinese Australians Face a Foreign Influence Panic

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Over the past two years, Australia has been embroiled in a campaign against alleged interference by China in Australian politics and public life. The debate over Chinese influence is largely dominated by a few government agencies and media outlets, and its tone is very one-sided. Among the many flaws of this official discourse, its most disturbing aspect is the extent to which the successful integration of Chinese immigrants in Australia has been linked to China's suspected infiltration of every layer of Australia's political landscape. New espionage and foreign interference laws were hurriedly debated and received parliamentary approval in June 2018.

Australia's ethnic Chinese population has increased rapidly, from around 200,000 in the mid-1980s to about 1.2 million in 2016, and now constitutes just under 5 percent of the total population, according to the latest census. This massive increase was partly a result of a historic 1993 decision by Prime Minister Paul Keating to allow tens of thousands of Chinese students to settle in Australia permanently after fleeing political turmoil in China. Their settlement and the surge of immigration that followed resulted in a series of changes to the ethnic Chinese community in Australia, from its size and demographic composition to its economic activities, associations, and political identities.

The sudden and substantial increase in the number of Chinese Australians is also a consequence of two larger-scale historical trends that have unfolded in recent decades in the Asia-Pacific region. The first is Australia's shift toward Asia, which was

initiated by the center-left Labor Party government led by Edward Gough Whitlam from 1972 to 1975, continued by the center-right coalition government of the Liberal and National Country parties led by Malcolm Fraser from 1975 to 1982, and more actively advocated by the next two Labor prime ministers, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating. The second major trend is China's post-1978 economic transformation and opening to the outside world, especially to Western industrial economies, the full and long-term impact of which has been felt strongly by Australia in recent years.

At the juncture of these two historical trends, economic and political interests, philosophical beliefs and worldviews, and everyday attitudes and psychological mindsets, as well as cultural and racial heritage, have closely interacted and at times collided. In the 1970s, multiculturalism was introduced in Australia as a concept and practice, and enshrined in law by the 1975 Racial Discrimination Act (banning discrimination against people on the basis of their race, color, descent, or national or ethnic origin).

The 1993 decision by the Keating government to allow around 45,000 Chinese students to stay in Australia, after the violent crackdown on demonstrations in Beijing's Tiananmen Square and surrounding areas, coincided with a new phase of Chinese economic reforms that followed Deng Xiaoping's inspection tour of southern China in 1992. Since then, Australia has not only prospered without a recession but has achieved a higher growth rate than any other Western economy.

The main reason behind these achievements is that Australia has strategically linked itself with China's post-1992 economic boom, expanding trade on all fronts—from exporting iron ore and other raw materials to providing services, especially tourism and education. Since China overtook Japan

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as its largest trading partner in 2007, Australia has increased its trade with China to around 30 percent of its total exports, making itself the most China-dependent economy in the developed world.

Public opinion polling conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 found that 64 percent of Australians now have a favorable view of China, a higher approval rating than in all but two of the 38 countries surveyed. Yet Australia has suddenly been dragged into another episode of Sinophobia. Australia's anxiety about the potential threat posed by China is a chronic condition that is periodically inflamed. The previous major episode took place in 2008, when the Olympic torch relay in Canberra was the scene of clashes between Chinese students and pro-Tibet and human rights protesters. The difference this time is that some members of the Chinese community and students from China have been depicted as foreign agents who are undermining the sovereignty of Australia.

The current government, led by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, commissioned an inquiry in August 2016 to assess China's intelligence and interference activities in Australia. This step may have been prompted by shock over sizable public protests that summer by some Chinese community groups in support of China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. The inquiry concluded that China has attempted to compromise Australia's political system for a decade and that there has been infiltration at every layer of government. However, lacking in-depth knowledge of the changing Chinese community and adequate language skills, the inquiry was obviously rushed and careless.

The contentious debate over Chinese influence has also split the community of China scholars in Australia. Submissions were made by two groups of researchers during parliamentary deliberations over the new national security legislation. One group argues that there is no evidence showing that China is intent on exporting its political system to Australia, while the other believes that Chinese interference has become aggressive.

Although there has been no decrease so far in the number of Chinese tourists and students coming to Australia, who are vital sources of revenue, the controversy has reminded many of Australia's past. Until the mid-twentieth century, Chinese and other non-European immigrants were barred by

the White Australia policy from entering or settling in Australia.

OLD FEARS

Fear has been part of the psyche of European settlers in Australia since the time when the continent was first occupied by a scattered group of colonies, whose inhabitants were far from their homelands. And China has long loomed as a threat in the Australian imagination.

As proud subjects of the British Empire, most Australians devoted little serious effort to learning more about their Asian neighbors, leaving them with a simplistic, vague, and biased view of the region and its peoples. The first large group of Chinese migrants came to Australia in the 1850s. Since then, Chinese settlers have been portrayed in varying ways, ranging from aliens who were unable to assimilate in the early decades to hard-working citizens and a national economic asset in recent years.

In his 2005 book *Ways of Seeing China* the scholar Timothy Kendall argues that in the minds of many Australians, China has been represented by different colors at different times. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China was seen as the source of the yellow peril or yellow horde. Before and during the Cold War, it was portrayed as a red communist menace. It was feared as a nation of fanatical blue ants during the Maoist era. In recent decades it has turned into a new gold mine.

Australian anxieties are caused partly by China's growing power and influence, and partly by Australian elites' lack of knowledge about a rapidly modernizing China. In a 1964 book, *The Lucky Country*, the eminent Australian critic Donald Horne criticized his country's elites for relying on their inherited access to British markets, industrial knowledge, and governance structures, rather than intellectual vigor and entrepreneurial abilities. More than five decades later, his critique still holds true. Aside from a small group of business professionals, bureaucrats, and scholars who are well-informed about the region, much of their knowledge of China, as well as other Asian countries, is still far too simplistic and fanciful, and of little use for devising effective policies rather than spreading fear and Sinophobia.

China generally kept its door closed to the outside world from the early 1950s to the late 1970s

Some observers seem to believe that all Chinese Australians' activities are motivated by geopolitics.

and was preoccupied by a succession of political purges and infighting that consumed most of its attention and energies. But fears of communist China in Australia were not eased. A bizarre conspiracy theory surrounded the disappearance of Prime Minister Harold Holt, who went for a swim in the sea in 1967 and never returned, allegedly because he was abducted by a Chinese submarine. This obvious drowning incident at one of the most dangerous beaches outside Melbourne pushed the nation's anxiety about an impending Chinese invasion into the realm of paranoia.

Recent revivals of Australia's invasion anxiety include an element of national narcissism—the feeling of being a lucky and important country in the region, if not the world. In the eyes of many Australians, their country is so comfortable and prosperous that poor people in overpopulated China must want to come and stay. This imagined superiority leads to a distorted view of themselves and regional realities. But regardless of whether it is driven by fear or narcissism, Australia's attitude toward China has fluctuated in recent decades. The current deterioration of the bilateral relationship has been described by Graeme Dobell, a veteran Australian journalist, as the fifth “icy age” in the postwar evolution of Sino-Australian relations.

Many commentators have identified a link between Australia's periodic fear of China and its defense strategy reviews, which normally result in a new white paper every decade or so. Whenever the government reviews the nation's security environment, the process reminds political elites of the important role that the United States plays in protecting it. Australia is now also living with the fear of losing America's support in the Trump era, which is characterized by an unprecedented level of unpredictability and uncertainty. What is largely absent from the current China debate, however, is an adequate recognition of Australia's decades-long strategic shift toward Asia, a trend that has troubled some sections of Australian society.

PIVOT TO ASIA

While many Chinese have indeed migrated to Australia since the 1990s, it is important to keep in mind the historical context. Australia has long been more actively engaged than other countries in linking its economy more closely to China. Whitlam beat Richard Nixon's historic 1972 trip to China by getting there the year before. In the early 1980s, Australia became China's fifth-largest trading partner, while its trade surplus increased

by about 25 percent annually. In the early 1990s, Australia's economic integration with Asia accelerated, and now more than 60 percent of its trade is conducted in the Asia-Pacific region. The shift has become irreversible.

The strong reorientation of Australia's trade toward Asia, especially China, has slowly changed established patterns in the distribution of employment opportunities, wealth, and political influence in Australia. These changes have been intensified by a shift in immigrant selection policies, with an emphasis on education, skills, and ability to contribute to the economy. As a result, trained, skilled, and well-off Chinese have been attracted to Australia—and Chinese Australians have been better positioned than many others to prosper in changing economic conditions.

Inevitably, tensions have built up between established communities and new arrivals. The increasingly active and conspicuous role in the Australian economy of the Chinese who were once seen as aliens has occasionally aroused hostile responses from descendants of European settlers and critical commentary in the mainstream media.

Such strong resistance is epitomized by what has come to be called Hansonism. Pauline Hanson was a single mother and a fish-and-chip shop operator in rural Queensland before being elected as an independent member of Parliament in 1996. In her maiden speech, often quoted ever since by sympathetic media, she warned that Australia was in danger of being “swamped by Asians,” who “have their own culture and religion, form ghettos, and do not assimilate.”

John Howard, the Liberal prime minister at the time, agreed that her view was representative of the grievances of people who were missing out economically. Nonetheless, despite being sympathetic to Hansonism and getting off to a bad start in dealing with China, the Howard government soon formed a China policy of separating trade from geopolitics, which helped thaw a period of icy relations within a few months. Howard expressed enthusiasm for an economic strategic partnership during his first visit to China in March 1997. Yet this raised the question of whether Australia could be both an ally of the United States and a friend to China.

Among the undesirable impacts of Hanson-inspired racism in Australia are widespread ignorance and fear of the country's Asian neighbors—especially China. The massive economic benefits that Australia has reaped from China's growth since the early 1990s have been a decisive turn-

ing point in the history of Chinese immigration to Australia: Chinese immigrants are finally seen as a national economic asset and welcomed as a matter of policy. But this has not been very helpful in changing the way that a vocal minority of Australians see China and its people. Instead, the huge gains from conducting more than a quarter of the nation's trade with China, exceeding its combined trade with the United States, Japan, and South Korea, have made many Australians increasingly fearful of upsetting Washington and risking the loss of its security guarantees.

ENTREPRENEURIAL DRIVE

Many Australians prize a laid-back attitude—in the words of John Howard, being “comfortable and relaxed”—as a national way of life. However, many Asian immigrants, particularly those from China, have different mindsets and life situations that have resulted in different behavior. As part of their strategy to survive and thrive in their adopted country, many become more involved in business and community activities and build more extensive networks than settled groups. This kind of energetic attitude in immigrant communities should be encouraged and supported, or at least better understood.

Misunderstandings about the high level of social and political engagement among Chinese Australians are at the heart of Australia's China debate. In addition to being new to Australia, Chinese immigrants are often inspired by what has taken place in their home country, where many people have achieved rapid upward social mobility, and they are driven by similar aspirations in their new land. Over the past few decades, the transformed Chinese community has demonstrated a very high level of entrepreneurship, and has helped Australia become closely linked to China's economy. Any discussion of Chinese influence should take into consideration the constructive role of this entrepreneurialism in Australia's recent prosperity.

Ambitious Chinese Australians have started hundreds of entrepreneurial associations that organize numerous networking activities. Some have also been encouraged by local political groups to participate in various noneconomic activities, from events held by Chinese community and neighborhood associations to meetings organized by Australia's major political parties. Some analysts and journalists in Australia have simplistically tried to explain all these activities according to what the Chinese Aus-

tralian media scholar Wanning Sun has called the preexisting narrative: Chinese communities are often presumed to be controlled by Beijing. But their Australian patriotism is largely overlooked.

Australian society's “fair-go” ethos (which promotes equality of opportunity) has provided many Chinese immigrants with chances to climb the social ladder. The country has seen more students with Asian backgrounds excel in education. Chinese families have more purchasing power in property markets than previous generations of Chinese immigrants. All these developments have occurred while growing numbers of students and big-spending tourists have come from China to Australia. Just as established elites fail to understand the entrepreneurship and activism of the Chinese community, some ordinary Australians who have no firsthand knowledge about these changes are inclined to blame Chinese immigrants for driving up housing prices and increasing competition for better educational opportunities.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

One major aspect of the question of China's influence in Australia is rather new, and does not get much attention: Australian political parties' determined courtship of ethnic Chinese groups. Australia's major parties have all been coping with dwindling membership, a problem that is more acute for the Labor Party than for the Liberal Party. All the major parties have reached out to immigrant groups in their efforts to recruit new members, form supporter networks, attract donations, and win elections.

These efforts are made both by party organizations and by outside groups, in direct and indirect ways. Motivated by the aspiration of integrating into mainstream society, many Chinese Australians have heeded the invitations and have begun to regularly attend political events. Such conduct appears to have been misconstrued as evidence of a covert influence campaign by the Chinese government.

The unexpectedly high level of post-migration Chinese activism helped the Labor Party in the 2007 federal election, a turning point that sowed some seeds for the current Chinese interference debate. In that election, the Liberal government of John Howard was voted out of office after 11 years in power. The most surprising individual result in Labor's landslide victory was the loss of the parliamentary seat held by Howard himself since 1974 in Sydney's Bennelong district.

The electoral swing was a result of the changing ethnic makeup of the district, especially the growing numbers of voters of Chinese and Korean descent. They made up about 18 percent and 4 percent, respectively, of the electorate. Both groups were drawn by appeals from the Labor Party. They went to the polls to punish Howard for his past attitude toward Asians and his sympathetic view of Hansonism.

After the 2007 election, several pro-Labor Chinese community groups launched a nationwide push to encourage greater participation in politics. Since then, Chinese Australians have become more active in local politics than ever before. However, their involvement is in response to appeals from vote-seeking political parties in Australia, not at the behest of any external forces.

The debate about Chinese interference became all the more politicized and confrontational in another campaign in Bennelong in late 2017. This was a by-election for the seat that became vacant when John Alexander, the Liberal incumbent, resigned after being accused of illegally holding British dual citizenship. The Turnbull-led Liberal government had just a one-seat majority in Parliament, so the fate of the party—and of Turnbull himself—hung on the outcome of the race to fill the seat, which had been held by the Liberal Party since 2010.

The China debate in Australia was already simmering, heated up by a July 2016 ruling by an international tribunal in The Hague rejecting China's territorial claims to most of the South China Sea. Protests by some Australian-Chinese community groups against the ruling not only deepened Australia's fear of a more aggressive Chinese foreign policy in the region, but also led many analysts and journalists to suspect that many Chinese agents and sympathizers are living in Australia. The China debate threatened to boil over during the campaign last fall when talk turned from the South China Sea to allegations that Australian political parties, universities, and other institutions have been infiltrated by Chinese government agents.

The issue of alleged Chinese interference posed a quandary for the Liberal Party in the Bennelong by-election, given that the electorate in the district is now more than 21-percent ethnic Chinese, nearly a quarter of whom were born

in China. In response, Turnbull adopted a risky tactic—the equivalent of what is referred to in a Chinese proverb as killing the chicken to scare monkeys. He warned that the government had evidence of foreign meddling in domestic politics and that people should act accordingly. Alexander renounced his British citizenship and was reelected.

DAMAGING MESSAGES

The Turnbull government survived; the foreign-meddling debate not only continues but has intensified, partially due to Beijing's strong responses criticizing the Australian government for being irresponsible and spreading anti-China hysteria. What has occurred in Australia can be regarded as one facet of a global response to China's rising influence.

It is common for countries to be on alert for foreign interference. But few do it in the same open and messy way as Australia, which has virtually turned the issue into a political campaign.

Chinese Australians have been directly and indirectly implicated as a threat by critics unfamiliar with Chinese migrants' entrepreneurialism and their ways of doing business and interacting with others. Some observers seem to believe that

all Chinese Australians' activities are motivated by geopolitics or guided by China, and that the networking activities of business people, which have been encouraged by many institutions and businesses in Australia, large and small, are signs of Chinese interference in Australia's domestic affairs.

Many observers also fail to realize that China's fast-expanding economy has produced a substantial number of blowhards and swindlers. Some assert that they are well connected with officials in high positions in China, while others exaggerate their miseries in China for sympathy or more tangible benefits. They have become part of the global scene, complicating China's relations with many countries, mainly in the developed world. Also, some new Chinese immigrants still believe in the power of money and connections in their business dealings in their host country and may do what they did in China, such as dining out with local elites or politicians and making donations. But many Chinese Australians are unable to understand why illegal acts in such instances are

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not dealt with on a case-by-case basis, and why those who ask for and receive illegal donations are not punished.

The most disturbing aspect of the debate is the impact it is having on Chinese Australians who want to successfully integrate into Australian society. They have been linked to what is portrayed by the mainstream media as China's comprehensive infiltration of Australia, including governments at all levels, universities, businesses, and professional associations. Australia is a country of immigrants, and sweeping generalizations about a certain group of them will weaken the foundation of national integration. What is even more unhelpful is that these generalizations reveal persistent racial biases.

The debate has implicitly sent two very damaging messages: that whatever Chinese immigrants say must have been influenced by China, and that whatever they do always constitutes interference on behalf of the Chinese state. Those messages are reminiscent of past eras in Australia, when policies effectively barred immigrants of non-European descent and the rights of Chinese settlers already in the country were restricted.

Chinese Australians have been coping with anti-China sentiment in several ways. Those who are familiar with the history of the Maoist political purges in China keep silent because they believe that no political madness can last long. Those from younger generations remain focused on their own goals and lives; they are not as fearful as members of older generations who suffered numerous forms of discrimination either in China or in Australia.

The controversy has given some Australians a chance to show their discontent with the country's strategic shift toward Asia, but it is also eroding Australia's standing as a successful immigrant nation. This runs a real risk of alienating many Chinese Australians who should instead be encouraged to contribute to building a twenty-first

century economy that makes the most of a diverse society.

Although a range of new policies to deregulate and restructure the economy has been introduced since the 1980s, Australia has not achieved its goal of building a smart economy—making all sectors innovative and productive, and growing a bigger technology sector. Aside from the Asia policy of the Hawke-Keating governments and the lucky ride on China's boom during the Howard years, political leaders and economic elites have been preoccupied with noneconomic issues. Traditional industries have been dismantled, and Australia has gradually increased its reliance on exports of raw materials—what is described as digging up the dirt and shipping it to China. Many Australians have become worried about being dominated by China and losing US support.

Australia would do better to put its fears aside and welcome the integration of non-white immigrants into society. Alleged Chinese attempts to exert political influence in Australia could be flagged earlier, or even prevented from occurring, if the constructive role of Chinese immigrants in Australia is truly valued and effective communication is established, instead of allowing the issue to be sensationalized. The current episode of Sino-phobia never would have happened if instances of interference were properly defined and dealt with on a case-by-case basis, without implicating the entire community.

If anything, this debate has demonstrated that in the twenty-first century such issues require a more sophisticated approach in order to avoid damaging community cohesion in a multiethnic society. The bridging role of Chinese immigrants between China and Australia could be more fully utilized if Australia focused on making socioeconomic progress. Mutually beneficial relations need to be nurtured, and Chinese Australians, as productive community members, can contribute to Australia's success. ■