

Media treatment of Chinese Australians a useful study in ‘social cohesion’ debate

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As the situation in Gaza continues to polarise the Australian public, ‘social cohesion’ has become a key phrase in political debates about how the government should respond to the ongoing crisis.

Like ‘[national interest](#)’, social cohesion lends itself as a potent rhetorical weapon to politicians on both sides — not despite its opaque meaning but because of it. For instance, former prime minister John Howard [cited](#) the risk of losing social cohesion as a way of advancing his argument against diversity and multiculturalism.

Labor is fond of [criticising](#) the Coalition for endangering social cohesion. But as the war in Gaza drags on, Labor is broadening its target, [accusing](#) those on the left, especially the Greens, of ‘dividing the Australian community’ and playing partisan politics, such as when the Greens criticise the government for being soft on Israel.

But one question about social cohesion is seldom asked: who gets to declare that we have a social cohesion problem, and why are some issues considered to cause social cohesion concerns, while others are not?

An example of how social cohesion has not, but perhaps should, become an issue for the government can be found in the sentiments of a particular Chinese-Australian community: those born in mainland China.

According to the 2021 [census](#), around 550,000 people who listed Australia as their usual place of residence were born in China. They thus comprise 2.2 percent of the Australian population, and just a little less than half of these PRC-born individuals are Australian citizens.

This community was unfairly targeted by the [Coalition](#) when it was in power. By contrast, Labor has generally adopted a more principled approach. It has continued to stand firm on China’s human rights violations and to advocate on behalf of [Chinese Australians](#) detained or jailed in China — its rhetoric on China, however, has also been quieter and calmer, and Labor politicians have at times acknowledged Chinese Australians’ positive contributions to Australia.

But media narratives about Chinese Australians live on, and the [alarmist media talk of a war](#) with China has only alienated this community further. This tendency is unlikely to change, given the larger geopolitical context of the US-China rivalry, and Australia’s decision to maintain and strengthen its alliance with the US.

To understand the dominant sentiments of this group, particularly regarding how they felt about being portrayed in the media, last year I conducted an extensive [study](#) comprising a quantitative survey of almost

700 individuals, 20 one-on-one, in-depth interviews, and three group discussion groups, in Melbourne, Sydney and Ballarat.

Many study participants said they felt alienated by English-language media and commentary about them or their homeland. More than half of the respondents (51 percent) believed Australia's English-language media were either 'relatively distrustful' (42 percent) or 'completely distrustful' (9 percent) of Chinese-Australian communities. Seventy per cent of respondents thought the media tended to perceive them with suspicion and distrust.

Similarly, many survey respondents felt they were not sufficiently included as equal members of the Australian general public. About six in 10 said they felt frustration and powerlessness — even anger or anguish — in response to the media's portrayals of their community, and that this media reporting had led to a low level of acceptance of their community by the Australian public.

Group discussions and in-depth interviews suggest that while many study participants may not support the Chinese government, at the same time they may not share the views of those dissidents who are vocal critics of the Chinese government. They know they will stand to benefit from a good relationship between Australia and China, and they will be the first to suffer from a bad bilateral relationship. Survey data also show that despite having strong cultural and familial attachments to China, they are equally committed to Australia, and to raising their children and paying their taxes here. The vast majority of them feel lucky to be living in Australia.

But Australian public opinion of this cohort, shaped by media and public commentary, often does not make much space for such complex sentiments. Our media tends to portray this group in a simplistic, bifurcated way. On the one hand, they tend to be represented as [pro-China](#), [agents of Chinese influence](#), or even Chinese [spies](#). On the other hand, they are portrayed as being vulnerable to the Chinese government's [intimidation](#) and [surveillance](#), and thus in need of our 'protection'. Their agency and their complex sense of belonging are often not recognised.

As a result, many feel misunderstood and suspected by the media and the wider community. Many survey participants said they felt too scared to speak up, for fear of appearing too close to the Chinese government, and hence running the risk of having their loyalty to Australia questioned. RMIT academic [Haiqing Yu](#) summed this up: 'The moment you are not vocally anti-China, you are then portrayed as pro-China.' And as one interviewee in the study said, 'People like us have an original sin — of simply being born in China.'

Concerns about such undue suspicion and distrust of Chinese Australians have been raised by Chinese-Australian opinion leaders such as [Yun Jiang](#) and [Osmond Chiu](#), both of whom were interrogated by [Eric Abetz](#) in a Senate committee hearing. Abetz went as far as to demand proof of their loyalty to Australia by denouncing the Chinese Communist Party.

But for myriad reasons, people in the PRC migrant cohort typically do not complain. They don't stage public rallies, or protest in public spaces, let alone dream of forging solidarity with the wider community. As a result, the sentiments they expressed in the survey remain largely invisible to the government and the wider Australian public. In this sense, they are a silent majority.

But does their silence mean all is healthy on the social cohesion front? It would seem not, if you apply each of the several criteria of social cohesion that have been identified in the Scanlon-Monash [Mapping Social Cohesion 2022](#) report, with particular reference 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.

Social cohesion is a sociologically useful concept, but its deployment is often political. Professor Andrew Jakubowicz, who has spent several decades writing about multiculturalism and social cohesion, believes that too often, what is or is not a social cohesion problem is from a government point of view. In other words, he described to *Crikey* the logic behind the government's approach to social cohesion this way:

If people are creating problems for me, there's an issue with social cohesion. If the minorities are making me feel uncomfortable, then there's a problem of social cohesion. If the government/ establishment are making the minorities community uncomfortable, it is their problem.

Social cohesion is undoubtedly crucial in a multicultural society like ours. But in light of Jakubowicz's insight, we should pin down exactly how the term is used, by whom and for what purposes, and whether these uses risk excluding and silencing certain people. We need to get past the cosy feeling it generates when bandied about by politicians and the media, and identify what issues are being conveniently swept under the carpet to preserve the status quo.

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