

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Telling the stories of China well? The perception of China's rise by second-generation Chinese immigrants in an Australian University

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## Abstract

China's rise has been discussed in various ways, but only recently has scholarship started to examine it in relation to overseas Chinese, as politicians and commentators outside China, as well as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself and some scholars on "smart power" have come to realize their importance as political messengers of China. This paper analyses interview results with second-generation Chinese immigrants in Australia in tertiary education to examine how they are "telling the China story". The results reveal this cohort's complex attitudes towards China's rise. On the one hand, they are proud of China's rise, especially in economic terms, and their socio-cultural attachment to it. On the other, they critically evaluate political and social issues in China, and are aware of their marginal position in Chinese society. These findings argue against the oversimplistic approach that regards Chinese immigrants as a homogenous group acting as political messengers of the CCP.

**Keywords:** CCP; China's rise; Chinese Australia; interview; second-generation immigrants

"I hope all Chinese will continue to carry forward Chinese culture and draw strength from it, while promoting exchanges between Chinese civilization and other civilizations. Let us tell the stories of China well, and make our voices heard."

– Xi Jinping, at the meeting with delegates of the 7th Conference of Friendship of Overseas Chinese Association, 2014.<sup>1</sup>

"[We] need to rapidly construct the China discourse and the China narrative... in which [we] need to be careful with the tones to sound both open and confident, and modest and humble. [We] need to make an effort to present an image of a credible, loveable and respectable China".

– Xi Jinping, at the Chinese Communist Party Politburo study meeting, 2021.<sup>2</sup>

China's rise has been discussed in various ways, but only recently has the scholarship started to examine it in relation to overseas Chinese migrants and their descendants (Wong and Tan 2018). Looking back at the history of modern China, overseas Chinese have continuously played an important role in the political economy in their home country, which we have seen in their participation in and devotion to the Xinhai Revolution (Brophy, Garnaut and Tighe 2012; Lee and Lee 2011), the

<sup>1</sup><http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202006/0a154627b1474b0eab0c354af4d2e56e.shtml> (accessed 25 September 2021).

<sup>2</sup>[http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-06/01/c\\_1127517461.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/leaders/2021-06/01/c_1127517461.htm) (accessed 15 June 2022).

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socialist construction in the early 1950s (Godley 1989), and China's economic reform and opening since 1978 (Bolt 1996).

In recent decades, as a result of China's economic development and the Chinese state's relaxation of its control over emigration, the number of outbound Chinese migrants have been growing significantly in every continent. At the same time, China's economic rise comes with important implications for world politics. When the authoritarian great power is seen as seeking to reshape the international order (Acharya 2014; Pan 2014), Chinese diaspora is often regarded as agents of such efforts overseas (Economist 2021). But is this indeed the case? When the development of communications and transportation technologies shortens the distance between their host and home countries, do overseas Chinese nowadays relate to China's political and economic development the same way as their predecessors did in the early and mid-twentieth century? How do they perceive China's rising power? How does China's rise impact on them? This paper intends to answer these questions by drawing upon the findings of a pilot study of second-generation Chinese immigrants in Australia.

### Chinese immigration to Australia

Migration from China to Australia started in the mid-nineteenth century, when Chinese miners came in large numbers in search of a better life during the gold rush (Ip 2017). In 1861, some 3.4% of Australia's population were China-born, making the Chinese the second largest immigrant group in Australia.<sup>3</sup> This soon triggered anti-Chinese sentiments among the public, which led to a series of policies and law being introduced to limit the number of non-white immigrants, including the Immigration Restriction Act 1901 (known as the White Australia Policy). It was not until the White Australia Policy was abolished in the 1970s that the Chinese community in Australia started to grow again (Wong and Ang 2018). Since then, socio-political changes in both countries, such as China's economic reform and development, the 1989 Tian'anmen Incident and Australia's introduction of skilled migration policy and education visas, have constantly driven the growth of Chinese migration. No doubt the label of "Chinese Australian" covers a very diverse group of people migrating at different times from different countries, speaking different languages and practicing different cultural rituals. All the same, most recently the number of immigrants from mainland China has increased significantly. According to the 2021 Census data, 2.3% of the Australian population was Chinese-born<sup>4</sup> and 2.7% speak Mandarin (*putonghua*) at home,<sup>5</sup> which makes China the third most common country of birth and Mandarin the second most common language spoken in Australian homes (Fig. 1).

The growing number of Chinese immigrants means that this group has come to play an increasingly important role in Australia's economy and politics. Not only are they business and property owners (Collins 2002; Rogers, Wong and Nelson 2017; Wong 2017), but they also participate in Australian politics through community activism, voting and more recently running for office (Gao 2020; Sun and Yu 2020; Wyeth 2021). Moreover, the size and influence of the Chinese Australian community in Australian society has made its members targets in competition for their votes by the major political parties and potential agents of Australia's public diplomacy (Gao 2020; Sun 2019; Sun, Fitzgerald and Gao 2018).

Despite this, Chinese immigrants' connection with their home country has led to concerns about its national security consequences. Clive Hamilton (2018, pp. 37–38) in his book *Silent Invasion* states:

It is reported domestic intelligent sources accusing Australia of attempting to persuade Chinese overseas to "defect" (more specifically to switch sides and spy for Australia). It used the word *huaren*, meaning all people of Chinese ethnicity...First generation migrants living abroad and their children, even if they do not speak Mandarin and know little about China, are targeted for recruitment.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/mca/files/2016-cis-china.PDF> (accessed 27 September 2021).

<sup>4</sup><https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/2021> (accessed 18 July 2022).

<sup>5</sup><https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/cultural-diversity-census/latest-release> (accessed 18 July 2022).

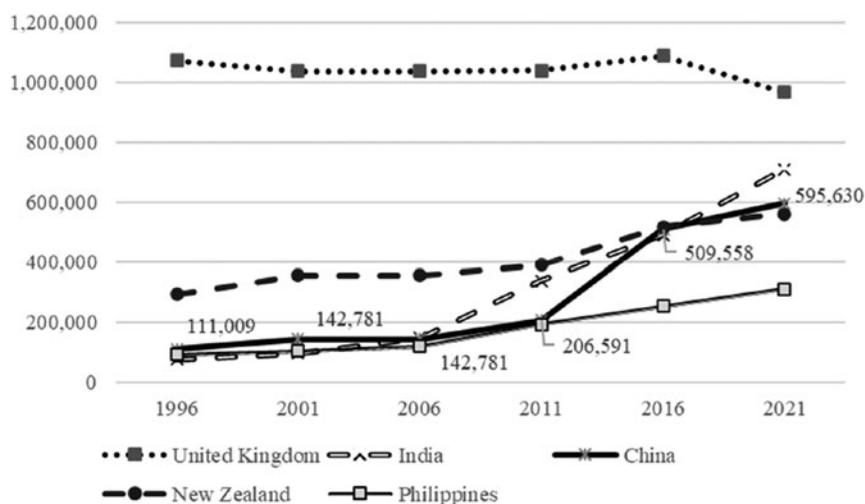


Figure 1. Changing number of immigrants in Australia: 1996–2021.

Source <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/australias-population-country-birth/latest-release>

In October 2020, Senator Eric Abetz asked three Chinese Australians testifying at a Senate Committee to “unconditionally condemn the Chinese Communist Party dictatorship”.<sup>6</sup> During elections in 2022, New South Wales Labor candidate Jason Yat-sen Li and Federal Labor candidate Sally Sitou, both of Chinese heritage, had to defend themselves from suggestions that they were not completely loyal to Australia.<sup>7</sup>

In 2018, a series of laws were passed by the Australian Parliament “to deter and counter foreign interference”, including: the National Security Legislation Amendment (Espionage and Foreign Interference) Act, the Foreign Influence Transparency Scheme Act, and the Security of Critical Infrastructure Act.<sup>8</sup> In 2019, a Counter Foreign Interference Taskforce was established.<sup>9</sup> Here, activities of foreign interference are seen as “undermin[ing] Australia’s national security, open system of government and sovereignty” and being present in a range of sectors, including “culturally and linguistically diverse communities”.<sup>10</sup> Although the counter foreign interference legislation and taskforce does not focus on any specific country, the then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was reported to have “referred to ‘disturbing reports about Chinese influence’ as justification for the measures” (Packham and Westbrook 2018).

In 2020, tensions between the two countries escalates when the then Australian Federal Government under Scott Morrison called for an investigation into COVID-19’s origins and cancelled the Victorian State Government’s agreements with China to join the Belt and Road Initiative. Responding to the comment “if you make China the enemy, China will be the enemy”, China imposed a series of sanctions on Australian exports, including barley, coal and wine.<sup>11</sup> Although the current

<sup>6</sup><https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/race-baiting-mccarthyism-eric-abetz-slammed-for-asking-chinese-australians-to-denounce-communist-party-during-diaspora-inquiry/n59s7t1p>.

<sup>7</sup><https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/it-s-not-ok-strathfield-candidate-takes-a-swing-at-racism-in-campaign-20220213-p59w0j.html>; <https://time.com/6176970/australia-election-china/>.

<sup>8</sup><https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-foreign-interference/resources-and-related-links> (accessed 6 July 2021).

<sup>9</sup><https://www.pm.gov.au/media/stepping-australias-response-against-foreign-interference> (accessed 6 July 2021).

<sup>10</sup><https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/countering-foreign-interference> (accessed 9 July 2021).

<sup>11</sup><https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/if-you-make-china-the-enemy-china-will-be-the-enemy-beijing-s-fresh-threat-to-australia-20201118-p56fqs.html>.

Australian Federal Government has indicated its intentions to stabilize the bilateral relationship,<sup>12</sup> its 2023 Defence Strategic Review describes China's military build-up as a security threat (Australian Government 2023).

### Immigration and national security

In contemporary history, it is not uncommon for immigration to be considered as having an impact on a nation's security, and such a perception has often driven policy making (see e.g. McCann and Boateng 2019; Rudolph 2006). Immigration has been seen as a national security threat, particularly when the home and the host countries have incompatible interests and values. For instance, German Americans' political loyalty was questioned by American society during the First World War (Luebke 1974) and during the Second World War, US-born Japanese were sent to internment camps where their loyalty to the United States was assessed (Hayashi 2008). More recently, the 9/11 attack has led the identity and loyalty of Muslim immigrants around the world to be questioned and challenged (Kerwin 2005; Modood 2013). In addition, advanced technologies such as information technology and lowered travel costs nowadays have made it easier for migrants to maintain their connections with and sense of belonging to their home countries, which have been regarded as a security threat to their countries of settlement (Vertovec 2010).

From a theoretical perspective, scholars are concerned with the impact of immigration on democratic values. For example, Fukuyama (2006, p. 5) has pointed that immigrant groups bring "long-term challenges" to liberal democracies. Macedo (2003, p. 12) argues the beliefs and commitments of different groups and communities might not be consistent with democratic values so much so that diversity can be "sources of fear and violence". Huntington (1997, p. 29) warns that the lack of assimilation of immigrants erodes the American creed of "liberty, equality, democracy, constitutionalism, liberalism, limited government, private enterprise" and thus poses a threat to American national interest. Smith (2000) provides examples of immigrant groups successfully organizing to advocate for foreign interests.

This literature seems to support the suspicion of Chinese immigrants' loyalty to Australia, particularly because of their transnational ties, the non-democratic political system of their home country, and the recent misalignment of interests of the home and host countries. Adding to these is the Chinese Party-state's explicit articulation of its intention to mobilize the Chinese diaspora as agents to promote China's interests and policy goals overseas. Indeed, some commentators criticizing China's use of "sharp power" (Cole 2018; Walker 2018) to influence Australian politics appear to assume that Chinese immigrants and their descendants in general are a target for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) mobilization. However, so far there lacks any systemic research on China's so-called "foreign interference" through Chinese immigrants. This research analyses this empirical gap and its findings shed a critical light on the possible correlation between immigration and national security.

### The CCP's United Front Work and its "sharp power"

Under various socio-political circumstances, the CCP has seen overseas Chinese people as a force to be incorporated, for example in the early years of socialist construction (Fitzgerald 1972) and when China started to open itself to global economy in the early 1980s (Thunø 2001). Under President Xi Jinping overseas Chinese have been expected to play an important role in the CCP state's efforts to project its soft power abroad (Ding 2015, 2017; Liu and van Dongen 2016; Sun 2019). In 1995, as the Party Secretary of Fuzhou City, Fujian province, Xi raised the concept of *da qiaowu* (great overseas Chinese work) suggesting that in order to bring the resources of the overseas Chinese population into full play, the CCP's work should not be confined by the boundaries of administrative territories and limited to specific state organs; instead, overseas Chinese work should become the focus of the

<sup>12</sup><https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/australia-china-relations-the-outlook-for-2023/>.

Party-state at all levels and in all sectors. In his article, Xi (1995) argues that “because of linguistic, cultural and familial connections, the wide overseas Chinese community tends to agglomerate towards China... All overseas Chinese and Chinese diaspora have Chinese ancestry. Therefore, we should not shirk the responsibilities to work with every and each one of them” (Xi 1995).

Under Xi’s presidency, this grand plan has been guiding the organization of the CCP’s overseas Chinese work. Nowadays, the administration of overseas Chinese affairs is coordinated between various state organs and state-sponsored organizations at different levels, including but not limited to the CCP’s United Front Work Department (UFWD), the State Overseas Chinese Affairs Office, the Federation of Returned Overseas Chinese, the People’s Congress, the People’s Political Consultative Conference and the China Zhi Gong Party.<sup>13</sup> Central to this complex picture is the CCP’s UFWD that manages the Party-state’s overseas Chinese policy (Suzuki 2019). Mao had famously referred to the United Front Work as “a magic weapon” of the party to “unite all possible revolutionary classes and stratum in all possible circumstances” in order to achieve success.<sup>14</sup> Over decades, this magic weapon has played an important role in mobilizing and transforming all possible forces and social sectors in not just the CCP’s consolidation of power, but also China’s socialist transformation and economic reform and opening. Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, it has been reformed, expanded and developed as a useful tool of the CCP to complete its grand task of national rejuvenation. In this new vision, the UFWD system has received more investment, employment and senior leadership appointments (Suzuki 2019; Wang and Groot 2018). Moreover, the new leadership published the *Chinese Communist Party’s United Front Work Regulations (Trial)* in 2015 and the formal *Regulations* in 2021. Not just a symbolic action to show support, this document has been the CCP’s first internal law that defines the governance, organization and responsibilities of its United Front work.

Who are the target members of the overseas Chinese community in the CCP’s reformed and expanded United Front Work? This has not been specified in the *Regulations* or any other of the CCP’s publicly available documents related to either United Front Work or the Overseas Chinese. In 2014, when meeting with delegates of the Seventh Conference of Friendship of Overseas Chinese Association, Xi said, “the vast majority of overseas Chinese, with their strong patriotic feelings, solid economic foundations, profound intellectual resources, broad business networks, is an important force in realizing the China dream”.<sup>15</sup> It is unclear who Xi considered as those with patriotic feelings, economic foundations, intellectual resources and business networks. But a review of Chinese-language literature on the issue has provided some useful insight. In general, the existing Chinese scholarship discussing China’s overseas Chinese policy has highlighted four groups of overseas Chinese, including business owners (Cao and Zhang 2012; Qi 2007; Wang 2020), community leaders (Yu and Zhu 2020; Zhang 2020), professionals (Liu 2010; Yu and Zhu 2020) and overseas Chinese students (Zhou 2020). Notably, second-generation Chinese immigrants are not one the key targets here. The literature argues that these key groups could be co-opted and mobilized to: invest in China (Li and Tong 2020; Wang 2020; Yu and Zhu 2020), contribute to charity (Chen, Yin and Guan 2020; Wang 2020), bring technologies and management skills (Liu 2010; Yu and Zhu 2020), facilitate Chinese enterprises to go global (Cao and Zhang 2012; Wang 2020; Chen 2021), promote China’s economic initiatives overseas (Chen 2021; Wang 2020; Yu and Zhu 2020), promote China’s national reunification (Qi 2007) and “tell China’s story well” (Li and Tong 2020; Zhang 2020; Zhou 2020). Therefore, it seems safe to conclude that of the vast and diverse overseas Chinese community, the CCP has chosen to focus on several key target groups and left the rest, including second generation of Chinese immigrants who are future political and business leaders, out of its current work agenda. In other words, the findings of the literature review reject the blanket approach assumed by

<sup>13</sup>One of China’s eight minor political parties, with its membership mainly comprised of overseas Chinese who return to the mainland, relatives of Chinese nationals living broad as well as other with close connections with overseas Chinese. See: [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/02/c\\_136795413.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-12/02/c_136795413.htm) (accessed 8 October 2021).

<sup>14</sup><http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65718/4456287.html> (accessed 29 September 2021).

<sup>15</sup><http://cpc.people.com.cn/xuexi/n/2015/07/17/c397563-27322408.html> (accessed 9 July 2021).

politicians and commentators that regard the Chinese Australian community as a monolithic unity that invariably acts as agents of the Chinese state. Instead, it is important to recognize the diversity and heterogeneity within this vast group that incorporates different languages, traditions, cultural practices, local identities and socio-economic conditions.

Drawing on young second-generation Chinese immigrants on the university campus as a case study, this research endeavours to reveal some of the missing nuance in this discussion of Chinese Australians' identity and loyalty. Why are these future leaders not the target group when the Chinese state is looking to promote the Chinese values to the world through certain key target groups of overseas Chinese? Can they be expected to play such a role as political messengers of the CCP's official narratives, by "telling the China story, communicating the Chinese voice well" according to their perception of China and its rise? And how do they negotiate two different political and social value systems in their daily life? This paper uses the data from a pilot research project to begin to answer these intriguing questions.

### Research design

This research is a spin-off from the Asian Student Survey (Third Wave) project, which was carried out in 2018, targeting 200 students in a flagship university in Asia who were asked how they perceived the rise of China (Sonoda 2021, p. 269).

The research team conducted semi-structured interviews in 2018–2019 with thirty second-generation Chinese immigrants, who were current students or recent graduates of an Australian University. Second-generation Chinese immigrants in this research are defined as those who were born in Australia or had immigrated as dependent children of Chinese immigrant parents.<sup>16</sup> The interviewees were recruited through convenient sampling (snowballing) according to selection criteria. Participants were limited to those (a) born after the end of the Cold War in 1991; (b) whose parent(s) is/are permanent resident(s) or citizen(s) in Australia and (c) who received education at least to the secondary level in Australia. During the interviews, the interviewees were asked a series of questions about China's domestic politics and international relations, as well as their own reflections on the future development of China's economy and politics.<sup>17</sup> The interviews included multiple choice questions taken from the Asian Student Survey (Sonoda 2021)<sup>18</sup> and prompt to then provide open interpretations and explanations for their responses.

In this research, we interviewed fifteen males and fifteen females. Thirteen of the interviewees were born in China and seventeen born in Australia. Twenty-five of them were citizens of Australia, and the remaining five did not reveal their citizenship (see the Appendix). The vast majority (twenty-seven out of thirty) majored in humanities and social sciences subjects, including political science, law, management, Asian studies, economics, finance, sociology and so on.<sup>19</sup> We are aware that our research data are not representative of the second-generation Chinese immigrant community in Australia.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, the sample provides insight into the nuanced nature of the issue of how Chinese immigrants perceive the rise of China.

### Evaluations of China's rise and their implications

Interview results firstly reveal how a rising China, its impact on the global order and its relationship with Australia are assessed by the second-generation Chinese immigrants. During the interviews, the

<sup>16</sup>Part of the result for adopting this definition is to allow the data to be compared with another dataset from the same project in a later analysis. See Sonoda (2022, p. 7).

<sup>17</sup>As our research design was not aiming to use informant's background as explaining variable but to capture overall traits of their views of the rise of China, we did not collect detailed information of the respondent's socio-economic background.

<sup>18</sup>Since second wave of Asian Student Survey in 2013, questions on the student's perception of the rise of China have been asked in ten Asian countries including Hong Kong and Taiwan.

<sup>19</sup>The total number of majors does not add up to thirty, because some interviewees had double majors.

<sup>20</sup>We are aware of the limitation of the samples. According to Tsubota (2021), university students are more successfully assimilated to their host society than those who are not, which results in different ties with China. If this is the case in Australia, our results will show results closer to the general Australian population. We suggest that the student population is itself important, and to not intend to generalize our findings to Chinese second-generation immigrants in Australia.

interviewees were asked an open-ended question, “what do you think of when you hear the rise of China?” Two-thirds (twenty out of thirty) answered that they thought of China’s rise mainly in economic terms.<sup>21</sup> Seven saw China as a growing political power and only two considered China as a rising military power. Six of them associated it with a changing global order where China is playing an increasingly important role. It is important to note that almost a third (nine out of thirty) of them revealed that the rise of China brought about negative sentiments and/or issues, including remembrance of the Tian’anmen Square Incident, the anti-CCP protests in Hong Kong and issues of Taiwan, as well as the “China threat” discourse in Australia and elsewhere. One of them commented, “as Chinese people move across the globe with the attitude they have now, which I would say is overconfidence at sometimes, they feel the right to be authoritative and do whatever they want”.<sup>22</sup> Another participant worded their disagreement more strongly: “I perceive China’s rise as being quite forceful and aggressive, and the way that they have achieved this rise has been on a path that has disregarded the values of other countries”.<sup>23</sup>

Most (eighteen out of thirty) of the interviewees agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “The rise of China has been threatening the global order” (Fig. 2).<sup>24</sup> Eleven of them attributed this to the tensions between China and the United States. When asked why, one interviewee commented that “a lot of institutions today, such as the UN, are based on Western liberal ideals and US-led values. I think China will challenge this as it gets more powerful”.<sup>25</sup> Another explained that “I think this is pretty evident if you look at the news. It’s dominated by the trade war between US and China. This is because it is significant how China, the emerging power, is challenging the US, the existing power”.<sup>26</sup>

Several respondents (five out of thirty), while disagreeing with the statement, were careful to point out that China’s rise “changes” or “challenges”, rather than “threatens” the global order, because “China’s main goal in rising is more for economic reasons rather than political”<sup>27</sup> or simply “if ‘threatening the global order’ refers to war or more extreme things, then I’m not sure if I agree”.<sup>28</sup> A couple of them disagreed that China’s rise is a threat, because the global order is an always-changing dynamic.

When it comes to the bilateral relationship between China and Australia, an overwhelming majority (twenty-four out of thirty) agreed or strongly agreed that China’s rise will change its relationship with Australia (Fig. 3). While many thought the change would happen or was already happening, in the circumstances of 2018/2019, six respondents thought the changes would lead to a more “friendly”, “robust” and “deepened” bilateral relationship, largely due to the strong economic ties between the two countries at the time. However, a few of them saw negative tensions arise and gave examples such as Australia’s ban on Huawei’s 5G network equipment,<sup>29</sup> and Australian communities’ resistance to wealthy Chinese immigrants and their investment in the local real-estate market.<sup>30</sup>

Intriguingly but not surprisingly, a third (ten out of thirty) of the interviewees evaluated Australia’s relationship with China as trilateral, rather than bilateral, “since China is our main economic partner while the US is our main political ally”.<sup>31</sup> The relationship between China and Australia changes with China’s rise, because “we can’t just be in the middle and be indifferent to things... We need to come to a strong position, which may potentially change our relations with China or the US”.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>21</sup>This finding is similar to that of research on second-generation of Chinese immigrants in Japan (Sonoda 2022, p. 18).

<sup>22</sup>Case 10.

<sup>23</sup>Case 22.

<sup>24</sup>This finding is similar to that of students in Japan, South Korea and Vietnam which has some territorial issues with China, while the case of Singaporean and Indonesia students shows a different pattern (Sonoda 2021, p. 273).

<sup>25</sup>Case 8.

<sup>26</sup>Case 3.

<sup>27</sup>Case 2.

<sup>28</sup>Case 19.

<sup>29</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/feb/17/china-accuses-australia-of-discriminating-against-huawei> (accessed 9 July 2021).

<sup>30</sup><https://thenewdaily.com.au/finance/property/2016/08/16/chinese-buyer-crackdown/> (accessed 9 July 2021).

<sup>31</sup>Case 12.

<sup>32</sup>Case 33.

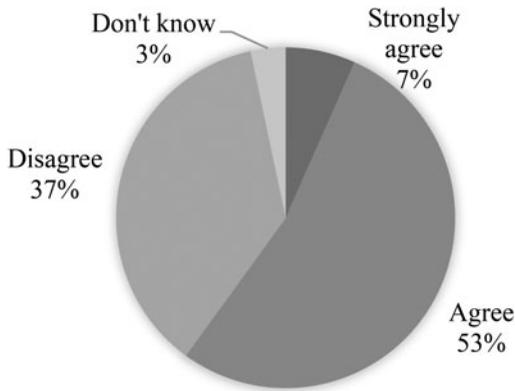


Figure 2. The rise of China has been threatening the global order.

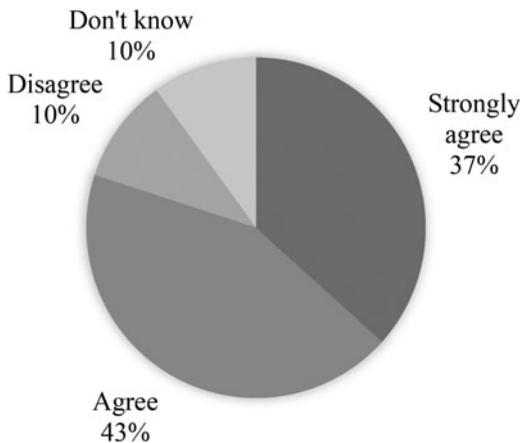


Figure 3. The rise of China will change relations with Australia.

Thus, in the eyes of these second-generation Chinese immigrants, China is rising as a major economic power. Accompanying this is an increasingly important role in global politics. While rejecting an indiscriminating “China threat” discourse, they did comprehend a rising China with caution and believed it would challenge the US-dominant world order and impose changes to the Sino–Australia bilateral relationship.

### *Patriotic feelings and transnational ties*

During the interviews, we asked these second-generation immigrants the question “how does China’s rise relate to you?” When it comes to a personal level, a rising China is perceived favourably. When answering this question, as many as half of them revealed a strong identification with China. One commented, “my sense of identity is very tied towards China’s rise. I think the concept of having a Chinese identity has become very normalized in Australia. This is because the number of people of Chinese immigrant background has increased. ...There are many students of Chinese background at all levels of education in Australia, so you just have more cultural representation and it becomes a more normal identity to have”.<sup>33</sup> Another interviewee revealed, “the way I’m perceived has changed. Before, if I said I’m from China, people would view it as an underdeveloped Asian country. Now people view it as ‘wow okay, that’s a big country’”.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Case 1.

<sup>34</sup>Case 21.

Understandably, at least for some of them, such a strong identification could come with a sense of pride associated with China's rising power and status. Indeed, five of the interviewees mentioned the word "pride" when answering this question. One reflected, "The rise of China makes me feel quite validated in myself, because I think that feeling proud of your heritage, now that China is rising, is really important. Something that I've noticed as a second-generation Chinese immigrant, when I talk to other second-generation immigrants from other parts of Asia, I feel that I can sense that immigrants from other countries are a lot prouder of their culture than the average second generation Chinese person. .... I think this is because of China's reputation as a filthy, despotic, communist nation, so Chinese Australians haven't been too engaged with their culture, and hopefully the rise of China will encourage them to do so".<sup>35</sup>

The Chinese identification of these second-generation Chinese immigrants is likely the result of their strong connections with their or their parents' home country. Half of them pay annual visits to China.<sup>36</sup> Seventeen per cent (five out of thirty) visit every 2–3 years (Fig. 4). Among those who did not visit China frequently, three said they used to pay a visit every 1 or 2 years and another revealed that there was no need to go to China now, as their grandparents who they used to visit had moved to Sydney already. When asked about the reason for the visits, an overwhelming majority (twenty-two out of thirty) mentioned visiting family in China and the rest had travelled to China for study, work or tourism.

When asked to self-evaluate their Chinese language skills, most of these young Chinese Australians turned out to be Chinese speakers (Fig. 5). The majority (57%, seventeen out of thirty) describes themselves as somewhat fluent in Mandarin. Four assess themselves as "OK" or "passable". Twenty-seven per cent (eight out of thirty) spoke another dialect of Chinese other than Mandarin. Only one of all the thirty interviewees revealed that they did not speak any Chinese at all.

Such a strong sense of belonging explains, to an extent, why the second generation of Chinese Australians is missing on the current agenda of the CCP's overseas work, because they already harbour the patriotic feelings and identification with China that the UFWD endeavours to cultivate among the Chinese diaspora communities. More importantly, research results show that these young people see themselves so intertwined in China's future prosperity, that it is unlikely that they will oppose the country's rise as an economic power.

### *Personal opportunities and career prospects*

In response to the question "how does China's rise relate to you?", almost a half (fourteen out of thirty) of these young people expects that China's rise comes with personal opportunities and future career prospects.<sup>37</sup> They see themselves as being in a good position to benefit from China's economic growth, because of their Chinese heritage and language skills.

Such career prospects could be sought either in China or in Australia. One interviewee explained that "I'm in a good position because I'm Chinese in background and I can converse in Mandarin and Cantonese, and I have the inside knowledge of Chinese cultural aspects and nuances, even though I grew up in Australia. I would say if more Chinese people came to Australia, I would be able to act as a bridge between Chinese people and Aussies professionally and socially".<sup>38</sup>

This perspective helps us better understand why second-generation Chinese immigrants have not become a target of the CCP's efforts to unite and mobilize all possible forces and resources as of now. Although brought up in a foreign country, these young people still share a strong Chinese identity, as the result of their familial and cultural connections. The rise of China garners the sentiment of pride, and even an extent of loyalty, among these young people. They do not need to be further "mobilized",

<sup>35</sup>Case 9.

<sup>36</sup>These data were collected prior to the travel disruption of the pandemic.

<sup>37</sup>This finding is similar to that of research on second-generation of Chinese immigrants in Japan as well (Sonoda 2022, p. 18).

<sup>38</sup>Case 23.

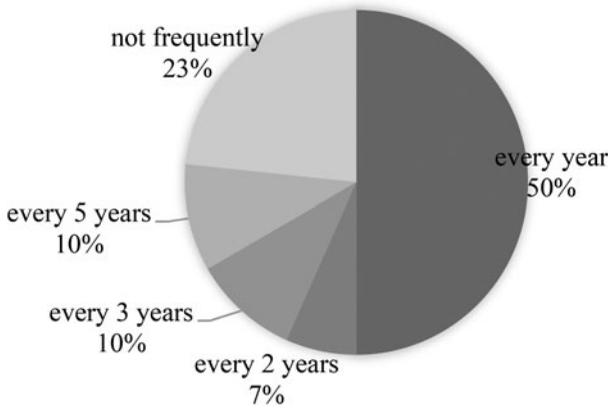


Figure 4. How frequently do you visit China?.

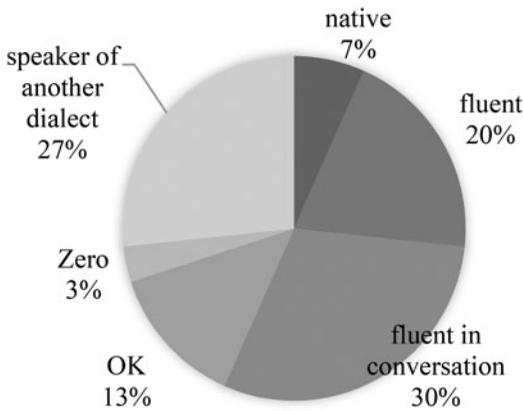


Figure 5. How fluent do you think you are in Mandarin?.

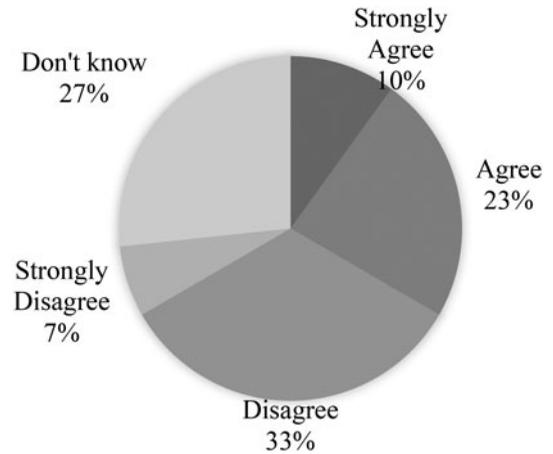
because they expect to benefit from China’s economic development, in that career opportunities and personal gains will come with China’s rise.

**Telling the China story?**

In addition to a close relation to China through family and linguistic connections, this cohort of second-generation Chinese immigrants appeared to be informed about Chinese politics and society, which is demonstrated through their assessment of China’s political system and social conditions. When asked if they agreed with the statement that “China is politically unstable”, 33% (ten out of thirty) of the interviewees said yes and 40% (twelve out of thirty) said no (Fig. 6). The rest answered that they were not interested in politics, they did not know much about politics in China or simply that they did not know the answer.

These responses are intriguing for several reasons. Firstly, this group of young people has more confidence in the stability of the authoritarian system than might be expected. Secondly, Chinese politics is not a black-or-white issue in their eyes. Instead, they understand its nuanced nature. Moreover, these young people take a critical perspective towards media coverage of China, and their knowledge about Chinese politics and society could come from their family and friends in China. Lastly, such nuanced understanding does not mean an indiscriminate acceptance of the Chinese narrative.

When asked to elaborate on their answers, those who saw Chinese politics as unstable cited many of the authoritarian system’s inherent problems, such as corruption, censorship, surveillance, and



**Figure 6.** In spite of rapid economic growth, China is politically unstable.

suppression of rights. Among those who believed in the system's stability, several (five out of thirty) attribute it to China's unprecedented economic growth. But interestingly, in the eyes of some, this economic growth is a source of instability itself. One informant explained that "In the long-term, I think with economic growth being a huge driver, it's going to be hard for the state when things are not going smoothly. I think inevitably the stability at the moment is created by a façade, and this façade is very hard to maintain once economic growth goes down".<sup>39</sup>

On the other hand, while deeming the Chinese system to be stable, none of these young people blindly embraced it without any critical reflection. Instead, most (eight out of twelve) saw such stability as a result of the CCP's coercive power. They believed that with this power, the CCP was able to crack down on corruption, control dissidents, suppress unrests and censor information in order to gain popular support. Four cited the Chinese people's "apathy",<sup>40</sup> "compliance"<sup>41</sup> and "acceptance"<sup>42</sup> as a major reason that explains the stability of China's political system, perhaps not without a sense of sarcasm. In the eyes of some, China's political stability was also seen as due to the lack of leadership change. One commented, "In Australia, we always hear about the Labor and Liberal parties and how they compete with each other. However, in China, you just have one party, so you just accept it".<sup>43</sup> Another said, "I think China is more politically stable than Australia. We [Australia]'ve had six prime ministers in the past few years".<sup>44</sup>

### *Critical evaluations of social and political issues in China*

A similar in-depth and nuanced understanding can be seen in these young people's accounts of Chinese society. When asked if they think that China is suffering from social problems due to its rapid economic growth, an overwhelming 73% (twenty-two out of thirty) agreed or strongly agreed (Fig. 7). The 10% (three out of thirty) that disagreed with the statement emphasized that while China's social problems exist, they are not necessarily by-products of China's economic growth. When asked to elaborate, many of these young people drew upon their observations in China and interactions with Chinese people. They listed many pressing issues that face Chinese society: income inequality and regional disparity, unemployment, environmental degradation and pollution, corruption, the lack of an efficient healthcare and welfare system, ethnic tensions, moral degradation, gender

<sup>39</sup>Case 34.

<sup>40</sup>Cases 1 and 3.

<sup>41</sup>Case 2.

<sup>42</sup>Case 4.

<sup>43</sup>Case 3.

<sup>44</sup>Case 4.

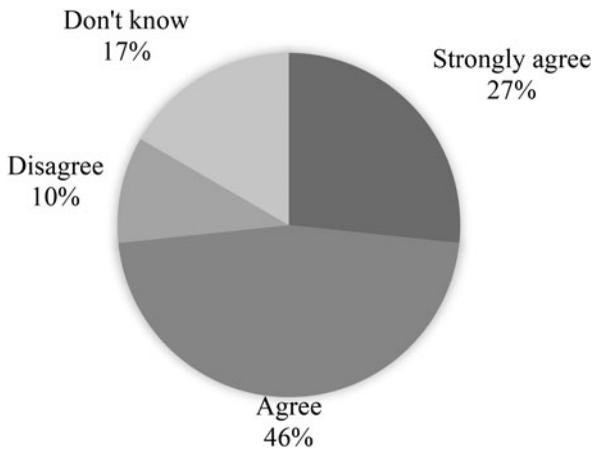


Figure 7. China is suffering from a lot of social problems due to her rapid economic growth.

discrimination and homophobia. They mentioned disadvantaged groups such as women, ethnic minority groups, displaced farmers and left-behind children.

We have noticed in the interviews that these second-generation Chinese immigrants often adopted a critical approach towards how Chinese social and political issues are covered by Western media. For example, one of them says, “a lot of what the media portrays and what the public opinion [about China’s political system] is quite skewed”.<sup>45</sup> Another described media in Australia as “quite biased” and went on to explain that it is “heavily influenced by our democratic and capitalist values, which means China is always analysed through Western angles. In terms of social problems, there are definitely social problems in China, but we are always looking at it from a very western point of view. The impression I get from my Chinese friends is that there are a lot fewer social problems than we think”.<sup>46</sup> Instead of relying on the media, several have revealed that their parents, and/or family and friends in China have been their major sources of information on Chinese issues.

A critical approach to the Western media’s China coverage for these young people does not equate to an indiscriminate acceptance of the Chinese narrative. Instead, they are concerned with media bias within China as well. As one interviewee said, “I do feel like the media in China is able to cover up certain news. And there is also a lot of fake news in China. For example, the media coverage of the Hong Kong protests in China. .... is very one-sided, and people can’t see the whole picture, leading them to feel angry towards Hong Kong”.<sup>47</sup>

### *Strong sense of marginality in Chinese-speaking communities*

Despite their Chinese ancestry, language skills, transnational ties and a somewhat shared Chinese identity, these second-generation Chinese immigrants are concerned that they would feel alienated when living in China. One of them explained, “I think it would be difficult to climb the ladder because they don’t see you as one of their own”.<sup>48</sup> This feeling of “I’m not one of them” is echoed in another interviewee’s comment that “If your face looks Chinese, they will treat you like an authentic Chinese, but inside I am not”.<sup>49</sup>

For nearly half of these interviewees (thirteen out of thirty), self/other differences are results of language barriers and cultural differences. Six interviewees have expressed concerns that their lack of native-level Chinese language competence will make them less competitive in a Chinese workplace.

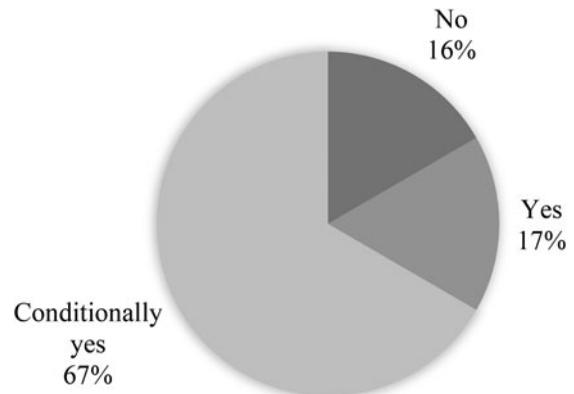
<sup>45</sup>Case 2.

<sup>46</sup>Case 19.

<sup>47</sup>Case 27.

<sup>48</sup>Case 5.

<sup>49</sup>Case 10.



**Figure 8.** Do you want to go back to China to find a job or to study?.

For example, one interviewee commented “I wouldn’t feel very competent working in a Chinese company, [because] the language barrier would be big”.<sup>50</sup> Another mentioned, “I don’t think I have a good grasp of the Chinese language to excel at the work I do”.<sup>51</sup> For the rest, Chinese culture is distinct, different and often less desirable. One interviewee points out its “focus on interpersonal relationships and age hierarchy”.<sup>52</sup> Another interviewee described it as “very traditional, old-fashioned and intense”.<sup>53</sup>

Such caution and scepticism can also be seen in these second-generation immigrants’ life choices. When asked if they would choose to move to China for work or study, these young people have again shown ambiguity (Fig. 8). Only four have revealed that they are willing to do so unconditionally. Another one-sixth straightforwardly negated the option. The rest have invariably expressed a level of hesitancy. As discussed previously, this is a group of young people who to a large extent identify themselves as Chinese and harbour patriotic feelings about China, but their attitude towards a possible future life in China clearly shows opposition to an indiscriminate acceptance of the Chinese state and the values it promotes.

### *Strong preference of Australian values and lifestyles*

When responding to the question of whether they want to go back to China to find a job or to study, the consensus among this group was that “I would go back to China for a certain period of time, ... but not for the rest of my life”.<sup>54</sup> Some of them would like to live in China to study Chinese language and or Chinese history and culture, as “it is quite difficult to grasp [these] from Australia”.<sup>55</sup> Others think China would be a great place to work, as “there are so many opportunities there and it seems like an exciting place to be”.<sup>56</sup>

Five interviewees voiced their political concerns when explaining their lack of motivation to move to China to live. For these young people, issues such as tense industrial labour relations, vulnerable minority rights and the lack of democratic values all matter to their life choices. One of them simply put it as “I’m not exactly keen to be watched by the government”.<sup>57</sup>

In the interviews many of these young people have expressed a strong preference for Australian culture and lifestyles. The interview results show that their Chinese background does not lessen

<sup>50</sup>Case 9.

<sup>51</sup>Case 28.

<sup>52</sup>Case 7.

<sup>53</sup>Case 18.

<sup>54</sup>Case 8.

<sup>55</sup>Case 7.

<sup>56</sup>Case 12.

<sup>57</sup>Case 33.

these second-generation immigrants' identification as Australians, even though "sometimes it is an internal conflict".<sup>58</sup> One of them commented that "as an Australian-born Chinese, I associate more with Australia, and I feel like China is such a different society to Australia".<sup>59</sup> An interviewee straightforwardly stated that "I am an Australian citizen now. I have lost my Chinese citizenship".<sup>60</sup> In the eyes of these young people, the Australian lifestyle is "better", with a "work-life balance", more "laid-back", less "intense" and less "consumerist". Even for the few interviewees that would consider living in China without hesitation, there is an implicit expectation of "coming back", as one of them explained "I'd definitely like to learn [about the way the Chinese operate and how they work] and translate it back to Sydney if possible".<sup>61</sup>

### Conclusion and discussion

The interview data from second-generation Chinese immigrants show complicated attitudes in relation to the rise of China. Due to their Chinese ancestry, language skills, cultural ties and a somewhat shared Chinese identity, many of them have positive evaluations of China's rise, especially in terms of economic development, and they have pride in China's rising power and status. The economic development of China presents them with personal opportunities and positive career prospects, which might be one of the reasons why the CCP is not intending to mobilize second-generation Chinese immigrants "to participate in China's economic reform" as of now.

But the results of interviews do not support the assumption that these young people are trying to promote China by "telling the stories of China well, making China's voices heard". They are fully aware of the nuanced nature of Chinese politics, looking with a critical, rather than a binary, perspective. As to the stability of Chinese politics, none of them blindly embraced it without any critical reflection. They are critical both of the Western media's China coverage and the Chinese government's propaganda. Most of them are aware that they are marginal in Chinese-speaking communities, and they have a strong preference for Australian culture and lifestyles.

Considering these characteristics, it is ethically as well as academically incorrect to assume that Chinese Australians, especially second-generation migrants in tertiary education, are invariably agents of the CCP-state's "silent invasion in Australia". When political tensions are rising between China and Australia, both countries might be tempted to look at Chinese migrants in Australia as a simple, homogenous and cohesive entity, but we should be aware of the diversity and nuance of the Chinese diaspora and their perception of China and its rise.<sup>62</sup> The Australian government, on the other hand, should not look at them as advocates of the Chinese state's overseas agenda, because these people do not indiscriminately accept the Chinese state's position. Simultaneously, the Chinese government should not look at the second generation as an easily manipulated or mobilized target, not least because of their critical approach when looking at Chinese politics.

Previous research on (second generation) Chinese immigrants has been concentrated in the areas of law, psychology, education, cultural studies, and sociology, mainly arguing over issues of social integration and ethnic identities. Approaches from political science have been rare. By highlighting the political implications of the increasing number of second-generation Chinese immigrants in Australia, we hope to enrich our knowledge of the political impact of this increasing diaspora group in the age of globalization. Preliminary analysis of the interview results of second-generation Chinese immigrants in Australia is the starting point of further research on Chinese diaspora to reveal the intersectionality between migration studies, political science and international relations.

<sup>58</sup>Case 10.

<sup>59</sup>Case 7.

<sup>60</sup>Case 16.

<sup>61</sup>Case 23.

<sup>62</sup>We understand there are some diversities even among the second-generation Chinese immigrants who are/were in tertiary education, but we found it more important to get vivid voice from the informants by conducting interview rather than to collect larger number of responses by conducting questionnaire survey to analyse how they are looking at the rise of China.

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## Appendix: Informant of the interview

ID	Gender	Major	Date of interview	Birth year	Grade	Timing of coming to Australia	Nationality
1	Female	Arts	2018/11/8	1997	2	Born	Australia
2	Female	Arts	2018/11/19	1998	2	Born	Australia
3	Female	Arts	2019/2/25	1998	4	2002	Australia
4	Male	Arts	2019/2/28	1998	4	1999	??
5	Male	Arts	2019/2/28	1997	4	Born	Australia
7	Female	Arts	2019/3/4	1997	4	Born	Australia
8	Female	Arts	2019/3/4	1998	4	Born	Australia
9	Female	Arts	2019/3/4	1998	4	1998	Australia
10	Female	Arts	2019/3/5	1998	4	Born	Australia
11	Female	Arts	2019/3/7	1998	4	Born	Australia
12	Female	Arts	2019/3/10	1998	4	Born	Australia
13	Female	Arts	2019/4/9	1998	3	2012	??
16	Male	Science	2019/6/14	1996	6	2002	Australia
17	Female	Arts	2019/6/27	1995	Master 1	2011	??
18	Female	Arts	2019/6/27	1997	5	Born	Australia
19	Male	Arts	2019/6/28	1998	3	2001	??
20	Female	Arts	2019/6/28	1997	4	Born	Australia
21	Male	Arts	2019/7/4	1996	5	1999	Australia
22	Male	Arts	2019/7/5	1999	2	2000	Australia
23	Male	Arts	2019/8/19	1995	Graduated	1997	Australia
24	Male	Arts	2019/8/20	1999	2	Born	Australia
25	Male	Science	2019/8/22	1998	4	Born	Australia
26	Male	Science	2019/8/27	1994	1	Born	Australia
27	Female	Arts	2019/8/27	2000	1	Born	Australia
28	Male	Arts	2019/9/6	1998	3	2007	Australia
29	Male	Arts	2019/9/10	1999	2	Born	Australia
30	Male	Arts	2019/9/20	1998	4	Born	Australia
31	Male	Arts	2019/3/28	1989	Graduated	2002	Australia
33	Male	Arts	2019/4/11	1992	PhD	2005	??
34	Female	Arts	2019/6/21	1989	Graduated	Born	Australia

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