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INSTITUTE  
ANALYSIS

# Translating tension: Chinese-language media in Australia

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SEPTEMBER 2021

## TRANSLATING TENSION: CHINESE-LANGUAGE MEDIA IN AUSTRALIA

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This report is a publication from the Lowy Institute's Multiculturalism, Identity and Influence Project, funded by the Australian Department of Home Affairs. Responsibility for the views, information or advice expressed in this report are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Lowy Institute or the Australian government.

## KEY FINDINGS

- Chinese-language media outlets in Australia are more likely to support Australian government policy than Chinese government policy when reporting on tensions in the Australia–China relationship, but editorialise to soften or remove criticism of China and the Chinese government.
- This is, in part, because Chinese-language media outlets in Australia produce little original content, and instead translate and reproduce the majority of their content from Australian, rather than Chinese, news sources. Chinese-language media professionals say they prefer to re-publish Australian content because this helps Chinese migrants integrate into society.
- However, self-censorship is embedded in these media organisations' editorial processes. This is particularly the case for Chinese-language media outlets whose content is distributed to mainland China via WeChat, news apps, and websites. Outlets self-censor out of concerns for a loss of market share and reprisals from Beijing.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is one of the first to provide insight into the published content of Chinese-language media organisations in Australia. It examines the production and representation of news stories covering bilateral tensions between Australia and China during 2020, the perceived links between Chinese-language media and the Chinese Communist Party, and the potential of Chinese-language media to shape the views of Chinese-Australian communities. Based on content analysis of more than 500 articles across three Chinese-language news outlets and interviews with senior media professionals, this report presents three major findings.

First, Chinese-language media outlets in Australia are more likely to implicitly support Australian government policy than Chinese government policy when reporting on Australia–China tensions, despite published content often being moderated to remove direct criticism of China and the Chinese government. Second, the same media organisations predominantly translate and reproduce news articles sourced from Australian outlets, rather than producing original content. Third, interviews with Chinese-language media professionals in Australia reveal that the primary aim of translating content from Australian outlets is to assist Chinese migrants integrate into Australian society. However, self-censorship is involved in the news translation process as Chinese media professionals are concerned about the potential penalties that Beijing might impose on their employees, their families, and the revenue of their media organisation.

## INTRODUCTION

*Approximately four per cent of Australians speak a Chinese language at home and consume Chinese-language media to varying degrees.*

Chinese-language media<sup>i</sup> outlets have come under increased public scrutiny for potential links to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and their effect on shaping the views of Chinese-Australian communities.<sup>1</sup> Due to language barriers, Chinese-language media is not subject to the same level of monitoring and regulation as English-language media in Australia.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Chinese-language media platforms are able to produce and repurpose a substantial amount of content outside the purview of Australian media regulators, politicians, government bodies, and mainstream media outlets, as well as the broader Australian community, who cannot read it.

Approximately four per cent of Australians speak a Chinese language at home and consume Chinese-language media to varying degrees.<sup>3</sup> The Lowy Institute's *Being Chinese in Australia* survey found that three-quarters of Chinese-Australians consume Chinese-language online news and more than half read printed Chinese-language newspapers.<sup>4</sup> Given the regular use of Chinese-language media by a significant proportion of the Chinese-Australian population, the question of the independence and impartiality of Australian Chinese-language news platforms is an important one to answer for policymakers and the wider public.

Based on a study of 501 articles commenting on the Australia–China bilateral relationship, published across three Chinese-language outlets, this report examines the production of Chinese-language media content, how material is repurposed from Australian and Chinese mainstream media, and how issues are framed for the domestic Chinese-language market in Australia.<sup>5</sup>

The articles were sourced from three daily Chinese-language media publications: *Daily Chinese Herald* (澳洲日报), *Australian Chinese Daily* (澳洲新报), and *Media Today* (今日传媒). The findings were supplemented by several in-depth interviews with media professionals from Chinese-language media outlets in Australia.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> For the purposes of this study, the term “Chinese-language media” refers to outlets established by Chinese migrant media entrepreneurs operating in print and online in Australia. Chinese migrants and Chinese businesses in Australia are the primary audiences of these media organisations.

All the articles examined refer to two case studies: the ongoing trade disputes between Australia and China, and the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s controversial “Afghan child” tweet — a propaganda image posted following the November 2020 release of the Brereton Report on misconduct by Australian Special Forces in Afghanistan. The doctored image of an Australian soldier holding a knife to the throat of an Afghan child prompted Prime Minister Scott Morrison to call for an apology from China.<sup>7</sup>

This Analysis is divided into three parts. First, the paper charts the development of the Chinese-language media landscape in Australia since 1989. Second, it examines how Chinese-language media frames issues in the bilateral relationship based on the author’s review of media coverage between April and December 2020. Third, it sets out recommendations for how Australia could better regulate and promote independent Chinese-language content in Australia.

Given the role of Chinese-language media in reaching 1.2 million Australians, neglect of this sector adds to the barriers to knowledge and participation for Chinese-Australians. Regulation and funding of this important sector would benefit and broaden both the Australian news landscape and the highly engaged media-consuming Chinese-Australian community.



## THE LANDSCAPE FOR CHINESE-LANGUAGE MEDIA SINCE 1989

*The rise of digital technologies disrupted the Chinese-language media industry, as it did the broader media sector.*

The development of Chinese-language media in Australia closely tracks the waves of Chinese migration since the gold rushes in the 1850s, when *The English and Chinese Advertiser* was founded in 1856. The rise of multicultural policies in Australia during the 1970s saw migrants of Chinese heritage arriving from different countries across Asia. In response, a diverse range of Chinese-language media outlets emerged.<sup>8</sup> These media organisations were established by media entrepreneurs from mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other Southeast Asian countries.<sup>9</sup> Their editorial agenda differed, depending on ownership. While the coverage from some outlets was positive towards the People’s Republic of China (PRC), there was also a significant amount of criticism of government policies and decisions taken by Beijing.

This landscape dramatically shifted in 1999 in response to China’s “Go Out” campaign (走出去战略), a state-sponsored drive to use Chinese-language media overseas to promote China’s views, and counter negative coverage of government policy in international media.<sup>10</sup> Similar strategies were adopted by Taiwan and other powers that sought to influence the Chinese diaspora, but with limited success.<sup>11</sup>

Beijing’s “Go Out” campaign offered financial assistance to media organisations as well as support in producing content. These offers were attractive to some Chinese-language media in Australia. Some even agreed partnerships with the Chinese authorities.<sup>12</sup> But the migrant communities in Australia also demanded original and Australia-relevant content. Chinese-language media faced the dilemma of satisfying community expectations on the one hand, and securing sponsorship from Beijing on the other.

The rise of digital technologies disrupted the Chinese-language media industry, as it did the broader media sector. Digital technologies significantly lowered the cost of operating media enterprises, and Chinese-language news websites took off in Australia. Among those that prospered were Yeeyi.com, 1688.com, and Sydneytoday.com. Online audiences quickly expanded beyond Australia to reach consumers in mainland China with an interest in Australian education, immigration, investment, or property.<sup>13</sup>

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In the late 2000s, the then nascent Chinese social media platforms Weibo and WeChat also started to play a role in the Australian media landscape. Since the launch of WeChat in August 2013, the cost of establishing Chinese-language media outlets decreased again. WeChat offered a low-cost and scalable model for news dissemination that appealed to global Chinese-speaking communities. In Australia, hundreds of WeChat Official Accounts have been launched since 2012, operated by a wide range of entities, including individual bloggers, Chinese international students, conventional Chinese-language media organisations, and migrant business entities.



## FRAMING THE TENSIONS

### SOURCES OF CONTENT

Due to resource constraints and their low-cost business models, the vast majority of content produced by Chinese-language media outlets in Australia is translated and reproduced from mainstream media sources,<sup>14</sup> and as this study has found, largely from Australian outlets.<sup>15</sup>

The three media outlets selected for the study — *Daily Chinese Herald* (澳洲日报), *Australian Chinese Daily* (澳洲新报), and *Media Today* (今日传媒) — cover different generations of Chinese-language media, from legacy media to digital-native media, as well as outlets that have owners from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

**Figure 1: Australian Chinese-language media outlets examined in this study**

Chinese-language media	Year of founding	Ownership	Content distribution platforms	Headquarters	Estimated circulation
Daily Chinese Herald (澳洲日报)	1990	HUANG Fengyu (Taiwan)	Newspapers, website and WeChat	Sydney, with offices in Melbourne and Brisbane	20,000
Australian Chinese Daily (澳洲新报)	1987	LAU Meiling Sandra (Hong Kong)	Newspaper and website	Sydney	17,000 to 20,000
Media Today (今日传媒)	2010	CHEN Ming (Mainland China)	Website, Weibo, WeChat and self-owned app	Sydney, with offices in Melbourne and Brisbane	600,000

Source: *Daily Chinese Herald*, *Australian Chinese Daily*, and *Media Today*

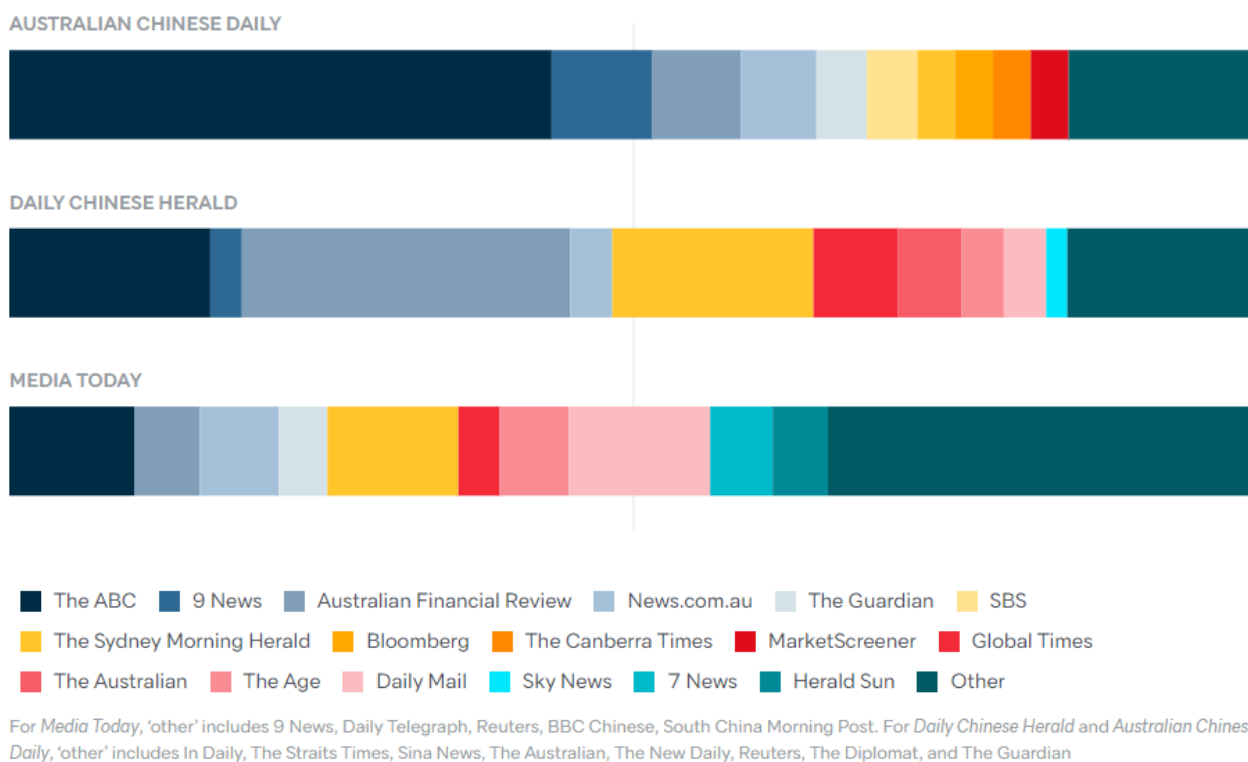
Based on an analysis of the 501 articles examined for this study, very little of the content published in Chinese-language media in Australia was original, but translated from mainstream media sources in Australia and China (see Figure 2). Across the three outlets studied, 97.8 per cent of articles were translated from English-language media in Australia and China. Only 11 articles, or 2.2 per cent of the sample,

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appeared to be original content written by journalists within the Chinese-language media outlet.

The main sources of English-language content for the Chinese-language media articles analysed were the *Australian Financial Review*, the ABC, *Daily Mail*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and 9 News. The translated news articles identified the original source either in text or below the headline.

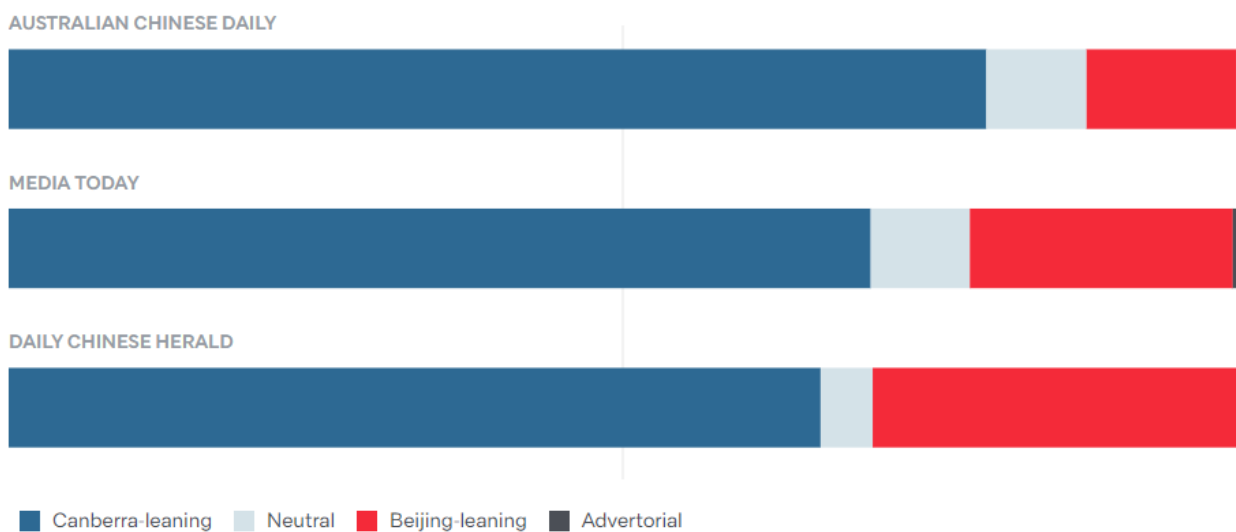
**Figure 2: Top 10 news sources for Chinese media companies**



The articles in the study sample were categorised according to whether their content was either implicitly “Canberra-leaning”, “Beijing-leaning”, or “Neutral”. Articles were classified as “Canberra-leaning” if they portrayed Australia’s behaviour as reasonable and were critical of China. In “Beijing-leaning” articles, China’s behaviour was portrayed as reasonable, and Australia’s approach criticised. “Neutral” articles were critical of neither party but instead often emphasised Australia and China’s mutual interests and economic partnership. While the labels are broad and imprecise, the classification gives a sense of the range of general views reflected in these media outlets (see Methodology for more information).

Claims that most Chinese-language media outlets in Australia are controlled or influenced by Beijing are often premised on the political views of the proprietors of these outlets, rather than a systematic analysis of their content. The preponderance of Australian media sources for the Chinese-language media articles examined suggests that coverage would likely skew in Australia’s favour, and this study bears out this hypothesis. The majority of content across the three outlets was found to be “Canberra-leaning”.<sup>16</sup> Almost eight in ten articles in the *Australian Chinese Daily* presented Australia’s point of view, as did 70 per cent of articles in *Media Today*, and 66 per cent of articles in *Daily Chinese Herald*. A minority of articles (between 12 and 30 per cent) were more supportive of China’s position across all three outlets, as shown in Figure 3. However, as described in the next section of this analysis, Chinese-language media outlets in Australia tend to editorialise and soften language to ensure that they are not critical of China, even if the article generally supports Australia’s position.

**Figure 3: Framing the bilateral relationship in Chinese-language media**



### EDITORIALISING TRANSLATIONS

Although the lion’s share of content was sourced from Australian media, the articles were translated and editorialised in important ways.

Some 5 per cent of the study sample, or 24 articles, broached the issue of the “Afghan tweet”, which was covered in all three Chinese-language outlets. Four of these were deemed to be “Beijing-leaning”. These articles described Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian’s

behaviour as a “reasonable” response to Australia’s inhumane conduct, and argued that Australia should apologise rather than overreact.

One “Beijing-leaning” article in *Media Today* was a rare original piece reporting on a Chinese tweet written by an Australian television presenter Harry Harding, based in Guangzhou, China.<sup>17</sup> Harding, an Australian citizen better known by his stage name of “Hazza”, expressed his respect for Zhao Lijian and wrote that he felt ashamed of Australia’s reaction to China and the military actions in Afghanistan. The article suggested Australia should be apologising to China, rather than the opposite.<sup>18</sup>

In total, 20 of the 24 articles were assessed to be “Canberra-leaning”, portraying Zhao’s post as unacceptable, his actions as adding to the difficulties in the bilateral relationship, and calling for an official apology from China. A number of these articles also quoted Prime Minister Scott Morrison and the Minister for Education and Youth Alan Tudge’s comments in support of Chinese-Australian communities.<sup>19</sup> Another “Canberra-leaning” article in *Media Today* quoted Scott Morrison’s WeChat message voicing the Australian government’s disgust at the tweet and reassurance that it would not diminish the respect and appreciation Australia had for the Chinese people, which was later censored by WeChat with the label: “spreading disinformation”.<sup>20</sup> The remainder of the “Canberra-leaning” articles tended to draw on diverse community sources, juxtaposing smaller percentages of pro-China views and larger percentages of pro-Australia perspectives.

Individual media outlets did not take a uniform editorial stance on the Afghan tweet. For example, *Australian Chinese Daily* published a “Canberra-leaning” article on 30 November<sup>21</sup> and a “Beijing-leaning” article on 1 December.<sup>22</sup> Both articles are based on Australian media reporting but were slightly modified to seem less hostile to China — or more supportive of China. For example, the 30 November article reworded the 9 News headline to read that Scott Morrison “advised” the Chinese government to apologise, while the original text said Morrison “demanded” an apology. The 1 December article edited the original SBS content to describe Zhao’s tweet as “reasonable” and Australia as having “overreacted”.<sup>23</sup>

Another example of the way in which these outlets report contentious bilateral issues is the coverage of Australia’s passage of the *Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act* on 3 December 2020. The legislation allows Australia’s federal government to cancel any

*One “Beijing-leaning” article in Media Today was a rare original piece reporting on a Chinese tweet written by an Australian television presenter Harry Harding, based in Guangzhou, China.*

agreement made with foreign governments, institutions, universities, or businesses considered likely to adversely affect Australia's foreign relations or to be inconsistent with Australia's foreign policy.<sup>24</sup> When reporting on this legislation, the three media outlets re-published nine articles from Australian media sources (see Figure 4).

One article from *Media Today* fell into the "Beijing-leaning" category. Although sourced from the *Herald Sun*, the article was modified to include lengthy excerpts from the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson. The headline quoted Zhao Lijian describing Australia's legislation as "unreasonable", and the article presented Zhao's view that Australia was discriminatory in its approach towards China.

Five of the nine articles were "Canberra-leaning". Four of them appeared in *Media Today* (see Figure 4). These articles tended to represent Australia as having attempted to maintain friendly relations with China despite China's "provocative" behaviour. They also noted that China's behaviour has been tough on Australian businesses.

Three articles referring to the new legislation took a "Neutral" position, advocating for improved bilateral relations and highlighting the mutual benefits of Australia-China relations, criticising neither Australia nor China.

In summary, there is no single or consistent perspective being presented by these media outlets when reporting on Australia-China relations. Further, subtle changes are regularly made to the originally-published translations to neutralise or soften criticism of China's behaviour, or to air the views of the Chinese government.

Figure 4: Examples of coverage, *Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Act*, December 2020

Publications	News articles in December	Categorisation	Original English-language headlines and news sources
<b>Daily Chinese Herald</b>	<p>维州州长谴责中国争议推文 但坚称一带一路协议不 受影响</p> <p>[Victoria's Premier blames China for the controversial tweet but insists BRI won't be affected]</p>	<b>Canberra-leaning</b>	<p>China's tweet 'wrong', Andrews says, but Belt and Road deal stays</p> <p>Sourced from <i>The Age</i></p>
<b>Australian Chinese Daily</b>	<p>维州州长称坚持'一带一路' 澳媒称抵制中国货澳洲损 失更大</p> <p>[Victoria's Premier claims to safeguard BRI. Australian media claim boycotting Chinese products causes bigger loss for Australia]</p>	<b>Neutral</b>	<p>'So challenging': Why an Aussie boycott of Chinese products is doomed to fail</p> <p>Sourced from <i>news.com.au</i></p>
	<p>维州州长坚持捍卫一带一路 称协议仅和贸易和就业 有关</p> <p>[Victoria's Premier insists he will keep BRI, claiming that the agreement only relates to trade and jobs]</p>	<b>Neutral</b>	<p>China ties should be about jobs, Andrews tells Canberra</p> <p>Sourced from <i>The Age</i></p>
<b>Media Today</b>	<p>澳媒：一带一路并未全面护航·中国对维州产品需 求增长渐缓.</p> <p>[Australian media: BRI isn't guaranteed. China's demand for Victorian products slowly decreases]</p>	<b>Canberra-leaning</b>	<p>Surge in Victorian food, fibre exports to China slowed before trade bans</p> <p>Sourced from <i>Herald Sun</i></p>
	<p>莫里森欲取消一带一路协议·维州州长：我是为就 业考虑</p> <p>[Morrison to cancel BRI, Victoria's Premier: I'm considering employment risks]</p>	<b>Neutral</b>	<p>China ties should be about jobs, Andrews tells Canberra</p> <p>Sourced from <i>The Age</i></p>
	<p>维州州长称中国率先导致两国关系恶化·但不会取 消一带一路协议.</p> <p>[Victoria's Premier claims China started deterioration in bilateral relations but won't cancel BRI]</p>	<b>Canberra-leaning</b>	<p>China's tweet 'wrong', Andrews says, but Belt and Road deal stays</p> <p>Sourced from <i>The Age</i></p>
	<p>维州一带一路协议或首批被叫停·赵立坚：往澳洲 理性看待合作</p> <p>[Victoria's BRI to be halted, Zhao Lijian: hopes Australia sees the collaboration rationally]</p>	<b>Beijing-leaning</b>	<p>Why the federal government won't rush to rip up Victoria's Belt and Road deal</p> <p>Sourced from <i>Herald Sun</i></p>

### Walking a fine line: The pressures on Chinese-language media executives

*Using Australian content creates tensions, however. Many Chinese-Australians do not have the English-language skills required to consume local conventional media.*

Media professionals surveyed for this study from all three outlets pointed to market pressure, public scrutiny in Australia, and the risk of censorship from China as key factors shaping their coverage of Australia–China relations.

#### MARKET PRESSURES

Because the target audience for these publications is Chinese-Australians, the outlets tend to focus on content from Australia. The interviewees framed their news platforms as a “medium” to raise awareness of, and integrate Chinese migrants into, Australian society. They noted that their consumers, Chinese migrant readers, desire Australian news content that is different from what they can read in mainland Chinese media. One interviewee said:

*The target readership is ‘Australian-Chinese’ who first and foremost see themselves as Australians and then Chinese. [...] They are a part of Australian society. They are connected to Australia through their work and life. With unstable trade relations with China, Australian-Chinese suffer equally with many local Australians from job losses etc. [...] However, they are also emotionally and culturally attached to China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan where their families are located.*

Using Australian content creates tensions, however. Many Chinese-Australians do not have the English-language skills required to consume local conventional media. This places pressure on the media outlets to provide Chinese-language media, but without resorting to Chinese state-owned media. One interviewee recalled that during the early days of China’s “Go Out” campaign,

*The content [provided by Beijing] wasn’t welcomed by the readers at the time. They came to Australia hoping to see something different from what they had seen or read in China. The readers didn’t like it. The market didn’t like it.*

Another interviewee noted that despite this, Chinese-language media was readily available. “They [our Chinese-Australian readers] can easily access it on WeChat, Weibo, and anywhere they want. There is no language barrier or anything. They need to read things from Australian media.” The interviewees explained that their readers had not yet



adapted to using the Chinese-language publications offered by the ABC or SBS. One noted, “Many readers have been habitually consuming news from us in the past decades. Some of them are in their 80s or 90s. [...] They wouldn’t change this behaviour and it wouldn’t be easy for them to change.”

Further pressures arise from the tone of Australian media content on China, particularly in the past few years as the bilateral relationship has deteriorated. As a result, Chinese-language outlets have tended to moderate the tone of Australian content to suit their readership. Interviewees related that some of the more recent migrants to Australia from China feel the tone of Australian media is too strident in describing China. This aligns with the findings of the Lowy Institute’s *Being Chinese in Australia* survey, in which 50 per cent of Chinese-Australians (and 64 per cent of the Chinese international students included in the survey) regarded Australian media reporting about China as “too negative”.<sup>25</sup> One interviewee explained:

*[In] contrast [to] Australian media outlets, Chinese-language media like us normally have a much-moderated tone when it comes to the representation of the Chinese government. They [the new Chinese immigrants] are confused when seeing Australian media’s representation of China or the Chinese government or Chinese people because it is just too different from what they read from Chinese media. [...] They may feel hostility when they initially [come] to the country.*

Chinese-language outlets in Australia are relatively small operations. The sheer volume of content requires low-cost translators, in addition to in-house news editors. Both *Daily Chinese Herald* and *Media Today* have news translation teams located in mainland China, Hong Kong, and/or Taiwan (see Figure 5). In contrast, the content produced for the *Australian Chinese Daily* is largely based in Sydney, with translations done by in-house full-time editors.

### SELF-CENSORSHIP

The sourcing of translations outside Australia likely influences the content. Several interviewees noted that translators in China often review Australian media outlets and then decide what is newsworthy for a Chinese migrant audience based on their “gut instinct”. This influences the choice of articles to be translated, and likely affects the translations themselves.

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*Self-censorship extends beyond the individual discretion of media executives fearful for their safety and that of their families.*

The analysis of the sample content for this project, combined with the information provided by the interviewees, supports the view that Chinese-language media organisations in Australia self-censor. One interviewee said:

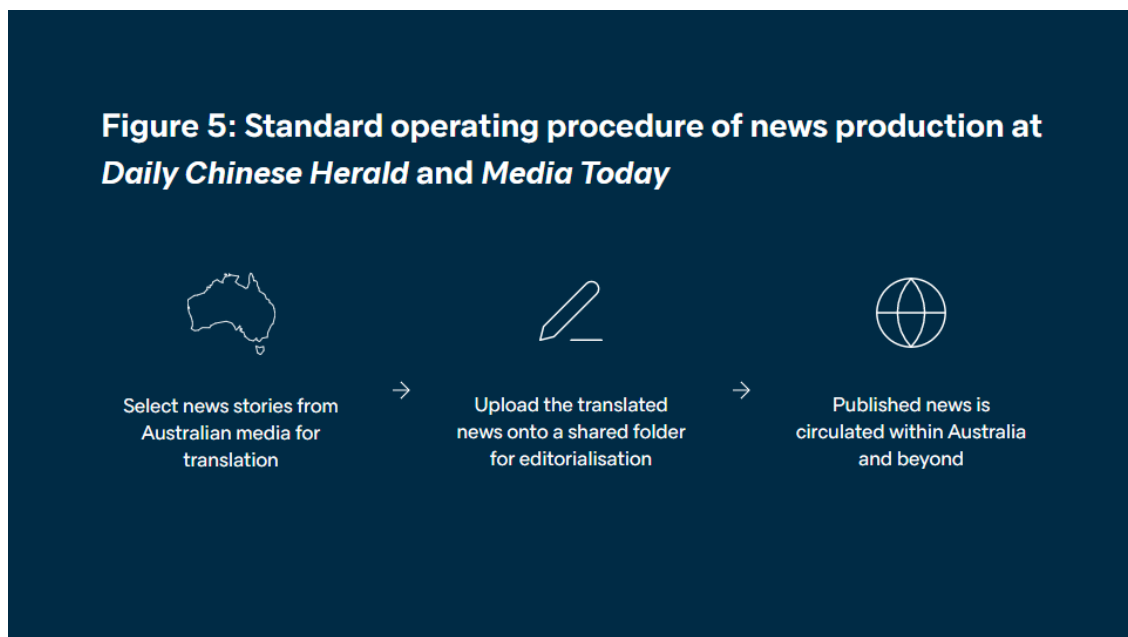
*Our staff members in China and Australia come from mainland China; their families are all in China. This is despite the fact that some of them obtain Australian citizenships or permanent residencies here. ... [P]olitically sensitive topics or criticisms against the Chinese government would put our staff members or their families at risk. We don't want them or their families to get detained in China.*

Self-censorship extends beyond the individual discretion of media executives fearful for their safety and that of their families. It has become integral to media organisations' risk management processes. This is especially the case for *Daily Chinese Herald* and *Media Today*, whose content is distributed to mainland China via their digital presence on WeChat, their news apps, and news websites. For their readers in mainland China, critiques of the Chinese government or its actions need to be moderated — unmoderated content attracts disciplinary action such as the removal of sensitive content, the suspension of websites or WeChat Official Accounts, or the complete blockage of their news websites or news apps inside China. Reprisals such as these inflict significant financial damage.

The interviewees acknowledged the self-censorship embedded within their content production practices. However, they also stressed this did not mean an uncritical alignment with the Chinese government. One interviewee argued:

*I think we need to recognise Chinese people, China as a country, Chinese culture, and the political party. We like the people, and we are part of the culture. But we do not necessarily agree with any political actions or ideologies.*

**Figure 5: Standard operating procedure of news production at *Daily Chinese Herald* and *Media Today***



## PUBLIC SCRUTINY

Adding to the pressures of scrutiny and possible reprisals from authorities in China, Chinese-language media organisations also face heightened scrutiny from the Australian public, media, and government. One interviewee lamented:

*Back in 2016, we were able to report stories that favoured both China and Australia or either country. We will not get into any trouble. Throughout the year [of 2020], we have been witnessing that the Australia–China relation is getting worse and worse. [...] The situation [of Chinese-language media] is very different now. We have been sensing that Australia has been keeping a close eye on us. [...] We have to pick a side and make a choice.*

A number of interviewees commented on a prevailing assumption in Australia, framed by media investigations and public exposés, that Chinese-language media has been “infiltrated” or influenced by elements of the CCP.<sup>26</sup> They did not dispute the potential for the Chinese government to influence their content, while noting this risk produced even greater wariness in their editing process. However, they claimed the majority of their content was positioned neutrally, and was generally understanding and supportive of Australia’s position in disputes with China. The content analysis of the survey sample appears to confirm this view.

## OPTIONS TO SUPPORT CHINESE-LANGUAGE MEDIA IN AUSTRALIA

*Chinese communities in Australia could be better served through deepening collaboration between Australian mainstream media and privately owned, independent Chinese-language media organisations.*

Chinese-language media organisations in Australia are an important part of the media industry serving migrant and diaspora communities. Yet to date, Australia has paid insufficient attention to the substance of their published content, the interaction between media organisations, their readership, and the Chinese state, as well as the pressures facing media organisations in the context of increasingly strained Australia–China relations. Government regulation of the sector is weak, as is monitoring by media authorities. The future of Chinese-language media in Australia and its independence hinges on improved regulatory oversight, greater understanding of the cultural factors at play in this sector, rapid changes in the media industry, and increased government support.

Chinese communities in Australia could be better served through deepening collaboration between Australian mainstream media and privately owned, independent Chinese-language media organisations. This would assist Australian media to target Chinese-Australians — a significant and growing audience — and facilitate the publication of better content in independent Chinese-language media outlets.

Australian government support to Chinese-language media could assist these organisations to improve the independence and rigour of their coverage by reducing their reliance on content translation services in China. Financial support from the government or industry may also assist Chinese-language media to establish their own news websites and applications, or to find new audiences via multilingual news platforms, reducing the use and influence of Chinese digital platforms.

Chinese-language media in Australia is insufficiently regulated.<sup>27</sup> The Australian Communications and Media Authority should consider monitoring the conduct and daily reports of Chinese-language media, especially Chinese-language media on WeChat. Multilingual students could be recruited to assist in these endeavours. This would help to diminish the risk of biased information or propaganda reaching Chinese migrants on digital platforms, and equally improve public understanding of the nature of the content produced by such outlets.

## CONCLUSION

Since the Australian gold rushes began in 1851, Chinese-language media in Australia has played a significant role in informing and shaping attitudes among Chinese migrant communities. Chinese-language media also helps to integrate Chinese migrants into Australian society by improving their understanding of key issues in their adopted country. This study has shown that the majority of Chinese-language media outlets in Australia today rely on Australian mainstream media for their source material, and the majority of their coverage is generally supportive of Australia, despite the country's increasingly strained relations with China.

This finding stands in contrast to the current public discourse that characterises Chinese-language media as being “infiltrated” by the CCP's influence.<sup>28</sup> While media interviewees were open about the financial pressures of appealing to the Chinese mainland market and the vulnerability of staff and family members in China leading to self-censorship, these stresses have not yet translated into an uncritical embrace of Chinese state-owned media content.

However, the Chinese-language media industry in Australia will come under greater pressure if, as seems likely, the relationship between Australia and China sours further, China becomes more strident in its demand for fealty from Chinese diaspora communities, and Australia's stance on China continues to harden. Chinese-language media in Australia already struggles with limited financial resources, heightened public and media scrutiny, and market pressures. As one media professional put it:

*As an Australian business, during the good times, we were the bridge between China, Chinese migrants, and Australia. But now, we only survive in a [...] gap between Australia and China.*

Given its role in reaching 1.2 million Australians, neglect of Chinese-language media presents a protracted barrier to knowledge and participation for Chinese-Australians. Enhanced regulation and government funding of this important sector would benefit the Australian news landscape and stand to benefit the highly engaged media-consuming Chinese-Australian public.

*Given its role in reaching 1.2 million Australians, neglect of Chinese-language media presents a protracted barrier to knowledge and participation for Chinese-Australians.*

## METHODOLOGY

Using the online archives of three publications, *Daily Chinese Herald* (澳洲日报), *Australian Chinese Daily* (澳洲新报), and *Media Today* (今日传媒), 501 articles were collected covering two case studies: the ongoing Australia–China trade dispute from 28 April 2020 to 31 December 2020; and the Twitter post by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian of a doctored image depicting an Australian soldier with a knife to the throat of an Afghan child, posted on 29 November 2020.

All articles were reviewed on the publication platforms of the selected news media. They included *Daily Chinese Herald's* newspaper, online archives, and news website; *Media Today's* news app, five WeChat Official Accounts, and news websites; and *Australian Chinese Daily's* newspaper online archives. The media organisations share and publish news articles across different platforms, occasionally adjusting language and content — for example, inserting memes or stickers within WeChat articles to cater for audience taste.

The sample comprised 477 articles on Australia–China trade tensions (sanctions on Australian exports of barley, beef, coal, wine, wheat, and lobster; and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investment in Australia), and 24 articles on the Zhao Lijian tweet. One advertorial was excluded. Figure 6 shows a breakdown of the database.

The data collection did not focus specifically on articles published on WeChat. However, articles published by the five WeChat Official Accounts managed by *Media Today* are also re-shared on its news app. In this way, news articles published by *Media Today* on WeChat were included in the content analysis. *Daily Chinese Herald* does not manage its own WeChat Official Account; instead, the parent company 1688 Media Group operates a WeChat Official Account, *Auzhou Xinxian Shi*. *Australian Chinese Daily* has not yet engaged in WeChat. The data collection took place from January to March 2021, which meant that relevant articles published in 2020 may have been subject to prior censorship on WeChat. It is well-known that US–China trade tensions, for example, has been one of the most censored topics on WeChat since 2018.<sup>29</sup>

The content analysis was complemented by five in-depth qualitative interviews conducted in March 2021 with senior media professionals

working for the selected organisations. The interviews were carried out by phone or Zoom call, in either English or Mandarin or a combination, depending on the participants' linguistic preferences. Each interview lasted between 90 and 150 minutes. To protect the privacy of the participants, the data is anonymised.

**Figure 6: Articles by themes and media outlets**

Media outlets	No. articles on case 1: Australia–China trade dispute	No. articles on case 2: Zhao Lijian’s Twitter post	Total (100%)
<i>Daily Chinese Herald</i>	115	3	118 (23.55)
<i>Australian Chinese Daily</i>	94	4	98 (19.56)
<i>Media Today</i>	268	17	285 (56.89)
<b>Total</b>	<b>477</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>501 (100)</b>

- Case 1: Ongoing Australia–China trade dispute from 28 April 2020 to 31 December 2020
- Case 2: Twitter post by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian of a doctored image of Australian soldier in Afghanistan, posted on 29 November 2020

For 501 articles, content was categorised as either “Canberra-leaning”, “Beijing-leaning”, or “Neutral”. These codes are defined below, and were developed based on a careful reading of all articles (Figure 7). For example, the “Canberra-leaning” category includes the following types of articles: 1) those that implicitly or explicitly portray Australia’s action as reasonable, moral, logical, ethical, or contributory; 2) those that implicitly or explicitly blame China for destabilising previously harmonious bilateral relations; 3) those that frame China as a hostile force; and/or 4) those that emphasise Australia’s significance as a trade partner to China, meaning Chinese businesses and citizens suffer from the trade sanctions.



**Figure 7: Themes and explanations**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Explanations</b>
<b>Beijing-leaning</b>	An action from China is framed as reasonable, moral, logical, ethical, contributory, or otherwise acceptable, possibly in response to a manoeuvre by the counterparty that is framed as aggressive or unusual
	Blames Australia for disrupting previously stable trade relations
	Frames Australia as a hostile power  Frames China as a significant investor in Australia and Australian businesses and citizens as the victims of trade tensions brought about by Australia's actions
<b>Canberra-leaning</b>	An action from Australia is framed as reasonable, moral, logical, ethical, contributory, or otherwise acceptable, possibly in response to a manoeuvre by the counterparty that is framed as aggressive or unusual
	Blames China for disrupting previously stable trade relations
	Frames China as a hostile power  Frames Australia as an important trade partner for China and Chinese businesses and citizens as the victims of trade tensions brought about by China's actions
<b>Neutral</b>	Does not take sides. Instead, advocates for economic partnership and mutual interest between Australia and China

To test the robustness of the categories, volunteers were recruited to assign categories to a sub-sample of articles. The coding system was adjusted several times according to volunteers' feedback and re-tested.

## NOTES

Note: For the purposes of this study, the term “Chinese-language media” refers to outlets established by Chinese migrant media entrepreneurs operating in print and online in Australia. Chinese migrants and Chinese businesses in Australia are the primary audiences of these media organisations.

Cover image: Quinn Dombrowski/Flickr

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- <sup>2</sup> Wanning Sun, *Chinese Language Media in Australia: Development, Challenges and Opportunities* (UTS: ACRI) 2016, [https://www.australiachinarelations.org/sites/default/files/Australia-China%20Relations%20Institute\\_Chinese-language%20media%20in%20Australia%20Developments%2C%20challenges%20and%20opportunities\\_Wanning%20Sun\\_web%20version.pdf](https://www.australiachinarelations.org/sites/default/files/Australia-China%20Relations%20Institute_Chinese-language%20media%20in%20Australia%20Developments%2C%20challenges%20and%20opportunities_Wanning%20Sun_web%20version.pdf).
- <sup>3</sup> Informed Decisions, “Australia: Language Spoken at Home”, <https://profile.id.com.au/australia/language>.
- <sup>4</sup> Natasha Kassam and Jennifer Hsu, *Being Chinese in Australia: Public Opinion in Chinese Communities*, <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/chinese-communities>.
- <sup>5</sup> This study did not specifically consider articles published on WeChat. For more information, see Methodology.
- <sup>6</sup> An important exclusion from this study is a specific examination of Chinese-language news published via WeChat. WeChat is a multi-purpose social media, payment, and messaging app developed and owned by Chinese tech company, Tencent. Globally, WeChat has more than 1.2 billion monthly active users — compared to Facebook’s 2.6 billion. WeChat’s impact on the Chinese-language media landscape in Australia is increasingly significant, and necessitates a separate in-depth study. This research project is not an analysis of the articles published on WeChat Official Accounts as *Daily Chinese Herald* does not control its own WeChat account, rather it shares one with its parent company, Australian Chinese Press Group; *Australian Chinese Daily* does not own a WeChat account; and only some of the articles assessed in this study were also published on *Media Today*’s WeChat account.
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- <sup>9</sup> Wanning Sun, Jia Gao, Audrey Yue, and John Sinclair, “The Chinese-Language Press in Australia: A Preliminary Scoping Study”, *Media*

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- <sup>12</sup> Nick McKenzie, Kate Wong, and Charlotte Grieve, “Beijing Controls Chinese-Language Media Agencies in Australia, Says Intel Agency”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 2020, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/beijing-controls-chinese-language-media-agencies-in-australia-says-intel-agency-20201202-p56k10.html>.
- <sup>13</sup> Joske et al., *The Influence Environment*, 46.
- <sup>14</sup> The selected Chinese-language media organisations aggregate and translate news stories from Australian national and local media outlets into traditional or simplified Chinese. The choice of language depends on the ownership and the target audience of the publication. *Media Today*, with ownership and audience focusing on migrants from mainland China, prefers to use simplified Chinese characters. *Australian Chinese Daily*, established by Australian-Hong Kongese, and *Daily Chinese Herald*, founded by Australian-Taiwanese entrepreneurs, target older-generation Chinese migrants. These two outlets favour traditional Chinese as the main language of publication.
- <sup>15</sup> See Sun et al., “The Chinese-Language Press in Australia”; Yang, “The Differential Cosmopolitan”.
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- <sup>26</sup> See Frank Chung, "WeChat Behind CCP's 'Widespread' Influence over Chinese-Language Australian Media", news.com.au, 17 December 2020, <https://www.news.com.au/technology/online/social/wechat-behind-ccps-widespread-influence-over-chineselanguage-australian-media/news-story/84fef20c62b24ea4e6e55464bad722e9>; Joske et al., *The Influence Environment*; McKenzie, Wong, and Grieve, "Beijing Controls Chinese-Language Media Agencies"; Prianka Srinivasan, "China's Communist Party Accused of Influencing Australia's Chinese-Language Media", ABC News, 17 December 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-12-17/chinese-communist-party-accused-of-influencing-australian-media/12991704>.
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