

Labor appreciates Chinese-Australians' contribution, but whose job is it to stop sinophobia?

Wanning Sun
June 15 2024

Note: This article appeared in *Pearls and Irritations* on June 15 2024.

The [statement](#) released by the Prime Minister's office concerning the visit of Chinese Premier Li Qiang notes that there will be a 'community event to recognise the significant contributions of the over one million members of the Chinese-Australian community to our nation's multicultural success story'. But what Chinese-Australians truly desire is to be treated as equal, rights-bearing Australian citizens, free from mistrust and suspicion.

During his press conference, Anthony Albanese further [emphasises](#) that 'welcoming the Chinese Premier to Australia presents an opportunity for us to promote our national values, the qualities of our people, and the strengths of our economy.'

Given the numerous differences between Australia and China, as well as between the Labor and Coalition parties, hosting a community event that highlights people-to-people diplomacy appears to be a prudent decision. Despite ongoing suspicions regarding the loyalty of Chinese-Australians propagated by the media, and [complaints](#) from Chinese-Australians about challenges obtaining security clearances for government jobs, who can openly disagree with the statement that Chinese community have made a deep contribution to the Australian society? After all, realising that they have a '[China problem](#)' since losing the election, the Coalition has been careful not to say offensive things about the Chinese-Australian community, and various opposition ministers have also made statements acknowledging the contribution of the community.

This symbolic gesture may prove advantageous for Labor in electoral terms. According to a recent [poll](#) conducted by ACRI/BIDA, four in 10 Australians (40 percent) express satisfaction with the Albanese government's handling of China relations, consistent with sentiments from 2023 (39 percent). Additionally, four in 10 Australians (40 percent) believe that Labor is best suited to manage Australia's China policy. This reflects a nine-point decrease from 2023 (49 percent), although still up from a pre-election low of 35 percent in 2022. However, the poll also suggests the gap between support for the Labor Party and the Coalition's management of China policy, which emerged in 2023, appears to be narrowing this year.

With the next election less than a year away, it is evident that this event will provide Labor with a timely opportunity to convey a dual message: reminding the public of Labor's competence in handling China affairs, while reassuring Chinese-Australian voters of Labor's appreciation for their contributions to society.

It is [well-documented](#) that Chinese-Australians, and Asian-Australians more broadly, have faced discrimination, verbal abuse, and even physical attacks during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, what is less recognised is that anti-Chinese racism and Sinophobia persist. Although Sinophobia may be less visible

and overt in the streets and on the trains, it remains insidious and pervasive. The poll indicates that public suspicion and distrust of the Chinese community persist, exacerbated by mainstream media narratives.

Participants at a recent Chinese-Australian community leader roundtable, attended by NSW Labor Minister of Multiculturalism Steve Kamper, emphasised to the Minister that Sinophobia transcends party lines and persists beyond the COVID era, affecting a significant portion of the population.

Despite rhetoric lauding the contributions of the Chinese-Australian community, there are lingering issues. The ACRI/BIDA poll reveals that suspicion and distrust toward this community persist, with 43 percent of Australians believing that Australians of Chinese origin can be influenced by the Chinese government to undermine Australia's interests and social cohesion, consistent with previous years.

These poll findings deeply concern Osmond Chiu, a Research Fellow at the Per Capita think-tank and one of the individuals whose loyalty to Australia was [questioned](#) by Liberal Senator Eric Abetz in 2020. Chiu worries about the potential consequences if geopolitical tensions escalate:

‘As a Chinese Australian, it is deeply disturbing to me that roughly two in five people think we are a potential fifth column. This has not happened overnight. It has been a consistent trend in the annual ACRI poll for the past four years.’

Chiu is very worried about what might happen if the geopolitical environment deteriorates and tensions boil over. ‘The pandemic gave us an insight into how rapidly anti-Chinese racism can spread and showed everyday people would be the primary targets.’

Chiu's [concerns](#) are justified. While social cohesion is frequently discussed in the context of conflicts between other ethnic communities, the impact of Sinophobia on various Chinese-Australian communities remains largely [unrecognised](#) and is not adequately addressed by governments or civil society organisations.

A glance at media coverage of Premier Li's visit reveals entrenched Sinophobic assumptions among mainstream journalists. Some reports suggest that members of the Chinese community wishing to greet Premier Li are ‘linked to Beijing's United Front Work Department,’ and [they](#) categorise Chinese-Australians into simplistic binary groups: ‘pro-Beijing Chinese community associations’ and ‘anti-China protestors.’

In contrast, no such insinuations of nefarious intention were made about many patriotic Indian-Australians enthusiastically welcoming India's Prime Minister Modi.

While some Chinese-Australians may appreciate the attention their communities receive during Premier Li's visit, what they truly desire is to be treated as equal, rights-bearing Australian citizens, free from mistrust and suspicion.

Professor Wanning Sun is Deputy Director at UTS:ACRI and a Professor of Media and Communication in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at UTS.