

## 5. What would Australia's public diplomacy agenda stand to gain from engaging with its Chinese-language media?

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*This is the last in a series of five briefs on Chinese-language media in Australia.<sup>1</sup> The briefs are best read in conjunction with each other in the series, and readers may also benefit from reading the author's 2016 report for the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities,<sup>2</sup> which provides background, context and detailed information about major Chinese-language media outlets in Australia.*

*Data used in these briefs come from a three-year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (DP180100663, Chief Investigators: Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu) 'Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia: Rethinking soft power'. Empirical data included in these briefs have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals: Media International Australia; Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies; and Social Media & Society. For more information on data sources relied upon in this brief, refer to Methodology below.*

### Key takeaways

- The Australian government is acutely aware of the public diplomacy potential of the nation's Chinese-language media. But despite the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's (DFAT) stated goal to pursue public diplomacy via diaspora media, innovative and creative strategies of engaging with this sector are yet to emerge.
- Australia's soft power agenda already benefits from the fact that Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians actively, although usually unconsciously, help convey positive images of Australia to the Chinese people in the People's Republic of China (PRC) through everyday grassroots processes of producing, distributing and circulating favourable content about Australia online.
- Despite this, Australia's Chinese-language media, including social media, continue to be portrayed in by mainstream English-language media outlets and by some think-tanks as part of the 'influence environment' pushing Beijing's propaganda agenda. Yet they are also sometimes used by Australian politicians as a platform to engage Mandarin-speaking voters during elections. The actual and potential role of Chinese-language media as non-state actors facilitating Australia's public diplomacy vis-a-vis the PRC needs to be properly and officially acknowledged.

1 Brief 1. 'Why apps are a game changer for Chinese-language media in Australia', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 20 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/why-apps-are-game-changer-chinese-language-media-australia>>; Brief 2. 'What are the key misconceptions about censorship in Australia's Chinese-language media?', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 27 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/what-are-key-misconceptions-about-censorship-australia%E2%80%99s-chinese-language-media>>; Brief 3. 'How does Australia's Chinese-language media negotiate between Australian and PRC state media?', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney <https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/how-does-australia%E2%80%99s-chinese-language-media-negotiate-between-australian-and-prc-state-media>; Brief 4. 'What kinds of stories are popular in Australia's Chinese-language digital media?', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, November 10 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/what-kinds-stories-are-popular-australia%E2%80%99s-chinese-language-digital-media>>.

2 Wanning Sun, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments challenges and opportunities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, September 8 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2>>.

- By continuing to regard new Chinese–Australians and their media with distrust, anxiety and fear, Australia runs the risk of discouraging this community from identifying with Australia, leaving them unable to develop a sense of belonging or unwilling to promote their adopted country. At best, this is a waste of Australia’s existing soft power resources; at worst, it turns this asset into a potential public diplomacy liability.<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Chinese-language media in Australia includes both long-established legacy media and more recently developed digital/social media. In recent years, this sector has come under increasing scrutiny, as it is believed to be influenced by the government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC). In September 2016, the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney published *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities*, the first report on Australia’s Chinese-language media, including print, electronic and digital media.<sup>4</sup> Since that report, Australia’s Chinese-language media landscape has become even more complex, dynamic, and fluid. Digital technologies continue to transform the ways in which Chinese-language media content is produced, accessed, and consumed. Despite these rapid developments, public knowledge about how this new digital industry operates is still at best fragmented. The lack of this up-to-date and intimate knowledge may have accounted for some out-of-date, simplistic or even misleading statements often made in the PRC influence debate.

## Public diplomacy via mainstream media?

In public diplomacy, state and non-state actors use the media and other platforms of communication to influence public opinion in foreign societies for the purpose of promoting their own national interest.<sup>5</sup> Diaspora communities are recognised as invaluable assets by both their motherlands and their current countries of residence. And the increasing use of digital and social media in the last decade or so has posed both opportunities and challenges to a country’s public diplomacy efforts.

Australia’s *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* identified diasporic communities and their media and communication platforms as key domains where such public diplomacy exercises can be undertaken.<sup>6</sup> The White Paper makes it clear that ‘the Government is committed to working with diaspora communities to promote Australia’s image and reputation, to encourage trade and investment’.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the White Paper emphasises the importance of pursuing this via social and digital media, since digital communication ‘allows nongovernment actors and nation states alike to influence public attitudes at a pace and scale not witnessed before, for good and ill’.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes, the effectiveness of public diplomacy initiatives may be diminished, rather than enhanced, by state involvement.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the PRC’s attempt to promote soft power via its state media, the outcome has been uneven and lacklustre,<sup>10</sup> and in some regions, especially in the global West, the PRC’s initiatives have backfired, leading to widespread fear and anxiety about PRC influence.<sup>11</sup>

Australia’s initiatives have not been hugely successful either, albeit for different reasons. The case of Ao Wei Jia (AustraliaPlus.cn), the Chinese-language website of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s (ABC) Australia Plus news service, is instructive. Designed to ‘present and promote Australian stories, values and perspectives to the region’ and as ‘a platform to engage regional audiences with content about Australia’,<sup>12</sup>

3 See, e.g., Wanning Sun, ‘Obsession with China’s influence is hurting Australia’s public diplomacy agenda’, *Vision Times*, October 2017 <<https://www.visiontimes.com.au/pdf/21.pdf>>.

4 Wanning Sun, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments challenges and opportunities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, September 8 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2>>.

5 Eytan Gilboa, ‘Searching for a theory of public diplomacy’, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (2008) vol. 616, no. 1, pp. 55–77.

6 Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper* <<https://www.fpwhitepaper.gov.au/>>.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 109.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 110.

9 Wanning Sun and Jing Han, ‘If You Are the One and SBS: The cultural economy of difference’, *Media International Australia* (2020) vol. 175, no. 1, pp. 6–19.

10 See, e.g., Wanning Sun, ‘Mission Impossible: Soft power, communication capacity, and the globalisation of Chinese media’, *International Journal of Communication* (2010) vol. 4, pp. 19–26 <<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/617>>; Joshua Kurlantzick, *Beijing’s global media offensive: China’s uneven campaign to influence Asia and the world* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming, July 2022).

11 Wanning Sun, ‘Foreign or Chinese? Reconfiguring the symbolic space of Chinese media’, *International Journal of Communication* (2014) vol. 8, pp. 1894–1911 <<https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/2583>>.

12 Angus Grigg, ‘ABC’s China website gives in to censorship, say academics’, *The Australian Financial Review*, April 14 2016 <<http://www.afr.com/news/politics/world/abcs-china-website-gives-in-to-censorship-say-academics-20160414-go62mv#ixzz5E8SRle8m>>.

and initially funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), the site was launched as an instrument of Australia's public diplomacy towards the PRC. But the initiative did not succeed. In April 2018, the ABC announced that it would be shutting the website down<sup>13</sup> following a long period of criticism within Australia for its self-censorship on issues that may be sensitive to the PRC government.<sup>14</sup> The closure of the website was a sobering experience for the Australian government given its desire to project an attractive and friendly image of Australia to the PRC.

The failure of the Australia Plus news service highlights the incompatibility between the Australian government's public diplomacy agenda and the Australian media's core mission to produce news without fear or favour. In fact, for national broadcasters such as the ABC, their public diplomacy potential can only come from their capacity to report on everything objectively, with balance and fairness, and without prejudice, whether it be on the PRC or Australia.

To be sure, the ABC and *The Australian* now publish Chinese-language translations of some of their content on a small scale. But these initiatives serve a different purpose – informing Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians of news and current affairs from Australian perspectives – rather than promoting public diplomacy. Would a business-oriented, diasporic media-based, non-state actor model of public diplomacy have a better chance of succeeding than the ill-fated AustraliaPlus.cn experiment? Can Chinese-language media in Australia, already identified as potential non-state actors of Australia's public diplomacy, actually successfully participate in such an endeavour?

### Chinese-language media in Australia – An untapped resource

Findings from a 2019 survey conducted by the author seem to point to the strong public diplomacy potential of Australia's Chinese-language media. The survey asked Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australians whether they held positive views about their experience of living or studying in Australia. Their answers were predominantly positive. And when survey respondents were asked how often they shared these views with potential PRC visitors or migrants to Australia, as many as 72 percent said they often or sometimes shared positive stories about Australia via Chinese-language social media platforms.

This high level of pro-Australian sentiment among survey respondents was also evidenced in the fact that nearly 77 percent said they rarely or never shared negative news about Australia from English-language media outlets – for example, stories about the high cost of living, anti-Chinese racism or the 'boringly slow' pace of living. And nearly two-thirds of respondents said that when they shared positive or negative stories about Australia, it was mostly for the benefit of 'Chinese people living in China'.<sup>15</sup>

Generally speaking, Chinese-Australians and Chinese-language media outlets help spread a positive message about the country voluntarily. This impression is also borne out by the statements of Chinese-language media representatives. In a rare presentation to a public forum held at the University of Technology Sydney a few years ago, Martin Ma, the editor-in-chief of *Sydney Today* (the most popular Chinese-language digital outlet in Australia), was asked what the outlet's audience most wanted to read. The answer was, in his words, 'proud articles'. According to Ma, *Sydney Today* focused on publishing numerous 'proud articles' because their market research suggested that new Chinese-Australians wanted to show off the fact that they were now living in a country with good weather, a good environment and a nice lifestyle, and they wanted to assure their families that they were living a 'happy' life in Australia.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, although new Chinese-Australians' desire to 'brag' about Australia may be motivated by a wish to show that they had made the right decision about migrating to Australia, they were nevertheless *de facto* public diplomacy actors. In contrast to the Australian government's myriad initiatives and the ABC's unsuccessful experiment, Chinese-language social and digital media could be more effective in projecting an attractive image of Australia, since it is done in an organic, authentic, voluntary and unselfconscious fashion.

<sup>13</sup> Primrose Riordan, 'ABC to give 'soft-sell' China website the chop', *The Australian*, April 24 2018 <<https://www.theaustralian.com.au/...china.../04bdca37579166de2caf00100055582a>>.

<sup>14</sup> ABC Media Watch, 'ABC and the Great Firewall of China', ABC, May 9 2016 <<http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/s4458872.htm>>.

<sup>15</sup> Note: As this survey data dates back to more than two years ago at the time of writing, further research is necessary to ascertain whether the level of Chinese-Australians' willingness to promote Australia has changed due to increased racist attacks on the Asian-Australians and students since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as worsening relations between Australia and the PRC.

<sup>16</sup> See 'Chinese media in Australia', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, November 24 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-media-australia>>.

The positive messages of Australia that these non-state actors of people-to-people diplomacy help spread have the potential to be more persuasive and trustworthy due to the personal nature of communication.

## **Australia has an advantage over the PRC**

The PRC wants to project an attractive image of itself to Australia, in the same way Australia wants to project an attractive image of itself to the PRC. Both nations' public diplomacy agendas see Australia's Chinese-language media as a potential asset. Participants in the 2019 survey stated that while they were willing to promote Australia to Chinese people worldwide, they were equally happy to promote the PRC to Australia. Nearly 80 percent said they would also be willing to promote the PRC to Australians as a tourist destination or a place for business opportunities.

A number of factors, such as the language barrier, preferred social media platforms and ability to afford technology, might suggest that so far, Australia may be better equipped than the PRC in competing for this soft power resource. Results from both the 2019 survey conducted by the author, as well as results from an earlier 2018 survey, show that the absolute majority of Mandarin-speaking Chinese Australians prefer WeChat to other social media platforms, mostly because it allows them to continue to communicate with families and friends in the PRC. The Chinese-language content about Australia – whether it is translated from a mainstream Australian English-language media outlet or distributed by individual bilingual WeChat users – can easily flow into the space of WeChat users in the PRC. In contrast, content about the PRC that flows easily into the space of Chinese-Australian WeChat users has little chance of flowing further into the mainstream Australian English-language media space and the social media platforms preferred by their audience.

A longitudinal ethnography by the author also found that Australia's Chinese-language media routinely publishes content which projects an attractive image of Australia as a desirable place to live, invest, travel and study, and that WeChat users also regularly (re)post content along these lines. In contrast, there is far less content in this space that projects an attractive – or otherwise – image of the PRC. This is simply due to the nature of diaspora media catering to first-generation migrants, which naturally focuses on their intended readers' new country of residence.

## **Conclusion**

Australia's Chinese-language social/digital media sector is already helping promote Australia, and it has done so without support – monetary or in-kind – from the Australian government, and despite the fact they are subject to distrust and misunderstanding by the mainstream English-language media and security establishments.

In light of this, the Australian government, if it is serious about its articulated aim to promote public diplomacy via diaspora media, may need to find ways to harness this largely bottom-up, pro-Australian, word-of-mouth energy in the service of public diplomacy.

Putting this plan into practice has become more urgent than ever, given the climate and the strategy and tone settled on by many mainstream Australian English-language media outlets vis-à-vis the PRC: operating as loud speakers and amplifying hostile voices from each side.

# Methodology

Data and information used for this briefing come from three sources. The first is two surveys conducted in September 2018 and February 2019. The first survey, with 646 participants, addressed the media access and usage patterns of Mandarin-speaking migrants from the PRC, while the second, with 927 participants, focused on the media and news access and consumption habits and preferred platforms or sources of the same cohort. Both were conducted through 'convenience sampling' – participants were recruited largely via social media platforms, primarily WeChat and Facebook. The second is the author's longitudinal online ethnographic interactions with about 40 Australia-based WeChat groups, observing the dynamics, direction of content flow, and the ways of sharing content in personal messaging and group discussion space. The third is the author's published research which aims to document the PRC's soft power agenda in the realm of PRC state media.

## Author

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