

## Caught in the middle: Chinese Australians feel unwanted

By **Jocelyn Chey**

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International disputes between contending powers frequently result in persecution of local ethnic minorities. Look at how local German and Japanese communities were treated during the two World Wars, for instance, or how people of Middle Eastern background have been profiled since the rise of Al Qaeda and ISIS. As suspicions of China predominate in Canberra, and stand-offs occur, for instance in the South China Sea, the loyalties of Chinese Australians have been called into question. This year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Chinese immigrant to settle in Australia. The Chinese community will celebrate that event, but the contributions of the growing Chinese community to the nation and to our developing relationships with Asia are under-appreciated.

How to cope with China is a key question for Australia's future. While there are a handful of doomsayers, forecasting its imminent collapse due to internal political divisions and financial problems, most analysts believe that China will continue to grow and become more technologically advanced and militarily powerful, and we in Australia have to accept this fact. It is not simple or easy. China's competition with the United States is becoming more stringent, marked by trade disputes and flexing of military muscle and it seems the Trump administration has decided that China's rise should be curbed militarily and economically. I am reminded of how the US tried to rein in Japan when its economy was developing rapidly in the 1980s. When the security and defence establishment in Washington promotes containment, their counterparts in Canberra trot out the same line. Christopher Wray, the Director of the FBI told the US Senate in February this year that all Chinese academics and students were [potential spies](#), and similar views have been expressed by ASIO Director General [Duncan Lewis](#), although he did not explicitly name China. As a sign of the growing distance between the government and the Chinese Australian community, earlier this year the Prime Minister broke with tradition and did not send any message to congratulate them on their major festival, the Lunar New Year.

Clive Hamilton has noted that Chinese Australians are the target of Beijing's "United Front" tactics and that there is a proliferation of pro-Beijing associations and groups in the growing Chinese Australian community but that smear is now being liberally applied. Neither Beijing nor Taipei, nor many another government is innocent of exploiting love of homeland and patriotism among their diaspora. Equally, I believe none thinks much about the potential consequences of their policies for those

communities. In Australia, these are substantial. Of those who answered the optional question in the 2016 census, 5.6 percent claimed some Chinese ancestry, and the total ethnic Chinese or part-Chinese population of this country numbers around 1.2 million. Many have ties to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam or South East Asia rather than to the People's Republic of China, and naturally within such a large group there is a great variety of opinions, political beliefs and allegiances. If some rely on the pro-PRC Chinese language media, they could be influenced by Beijing views on certain matters, but they also surely cherish Australia's political freedom and democratic system. That is a large part of why they choose to remain in this country. Unfortunately, a vicious loop has led to some recent instances of racism affecting Chinese Australians being blamed on the Australian government by their media, and it is increasingly common for members of this community to say that they no longer feel welcome in this country.

Many Chinese Americans feel the same. Distinguished American diplomat Charles (Chas) Freeman condemned "spiralling xenophobia" in an important speech on 5 May to the Committee of 100 – a leadership organisation of Chinese Americans founded by architect [I.M. Pei](#).

It is against this background that Chinese Australian community organisations are coming together to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the settlement in Sydney of John Shying, also known as Mak Sai Ying, a carpenter who worked for Elizabeth Macquarie at Elizabeth Farm. Shying later built the Peacock Inn in Parramatta. He made a solid career and settled permanently in Australia. A gala evening will be held at Sydney Town Hall on 20 May to celebrate not only Shying but all those who followed him, through the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gold Rush years, through the dark days of the White Australia policy and up to the present day. The evening will celebrate Chinese Australians who fought for Australia in two World Wars, and those who have contributed to this country in science, education and the arts. One who will certainly be mentioned is Charles Que-Fong Lee, born in Darwin and educated at the Southport School and the University of Queensland. The wartime work of Australia's first legation in Chungking in the 1940s owed much to him. These days, Chinese Australians play a vital role in commerce, investment and government relations, and contribute in many ways to the development of our relations with China and other Asian nations.

At a time when much of the world is becoming inward-looking and xenophobic, it is good to note that Canberra is resisting lobbying from the right to reduce our immigration intake and to restrict foreign investment. In contrast, President Trump is leading America down a blind alley of national self-reliance ("Make America Great Again"). It is ironic to note that Trumpian self-reliance (*zili gengsheng*) and isolationism were the very policies that Mao Zedong espoused in his lifetime but were abandoned by his successors because they led to economic stagnation. China's rapid development since the 1980s is entirely due to the "Open Door" policies of Mao's successor Deng Xiaoping and Chinese leaders since that time. Australia also needs an Open Door and should not let the parameters of our international relationships or multicultural policies

be set by Washington. There are many reasons for Australia to cooperate with China and to expand our trade and diplomatic ties in Asia, and there are many reasons for us to cherish the role that Chinese Australians play in these relationships.

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