

Don't take it out on Asian Australians in the search for a scapegoat for Covid-19

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The Guardian, 16 April 2020

Link: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/16/dont-take-it-out-on-asian-australians-in-the-search-for-a-scapegoat-for-covid-19>

It's legitimate to debate our relationship with China, but we can't let Chinese Australians be collateral damage.

Australians are learning a lot about themselves through this pandemic, and much of it has been refreshing and self-affirming as we embrace a sense of shared purpose that many feared we had lost.

We are putting the health of our fellow citizens over personal financial wellbeing, sacrificing a level of freedom for the greater good, reaching out to support neighbours at a local level and swinging in behind leaders who are working across partisan divides.

But there is one area of civic discourse where we are letting ourselves down, and that is the marked uptick in racial abuse of Asian Australians.

While the anger appears to be primarily directed at Chinese Australians, other people of Asian heritage are also reporting verbal and threatening behaviour as they go about their daily lives as Australian citizens. Others are saying they are feeling something more subtle but equally unsettling – that they no longer feel comfortable in their own country. An elderly friend who lives alone asked if I could help do some grocery shopping for her, because she didn't want to feel the accusatory looks as she walked down supermarket aisles.

Sophie Do, a Vietnamese Australian who was crossing the road with her sister in Marrickville when abused and assaulted, said: "I've never experienced racism like that before and it had a deep impact on me, it made me feel scared and really shattered my belief in what I thought was an accepting and inclusive society."

Last week, I was one of the signatories to an open letter calling for national unity and rejecting racism signed by Chinese Australians from across the political and cultural divide.

We have been watching with growing concern the shift in the public discourse that demands a public intervention, something we have not seen since Pauline Hanson appeared on the national stage in the mid-1990s.

What's driving this wave of divisive ill-will? Fear? Ignorance? The need to find a scapegoat?

Much of the anger underpinning the racial abuse has been caused by the coming together of two strong narratives: that the virus was made in [China](#) and that it is China's fault; and that the Chinese Communist party (CCP) is trying to covertly subvert Australian democracy.

A related trigger is the media stories about Chinese people in Australia sending masks and personal protective equipment (PPE) to China, giving the misleading impression that exports are happening now, as if to rob Australians of these critical items when we desperately need them.

This has then parlayed into a parallel narrative about Chinese people in Australia emptying stores of goods and shipping them to China, so as to find the real culprits for supermarket shortages.

Overall, it is a toxic brew, often irrational but highly emotional.

Detractors of our campaign have criticised us for not calling out racism in China; and characterising Australian Chinese as apologists for a regime that many of our families fled.

But they miss the point: the way Australia relates to China is itself complex and challenging. Chinese Australians play an important role in building the bridge of understanding and mutual respect that has driven so much of our prosperity in recent decades.

But racism in Australia is not about China's government, it is about us. We say while it is legitimate to criticise the CCP for its actions that go against Australian values, it is important not to take that out on Chinese Australians.

Indeed, to say the Chinese Australians have brought this on themselves by poor behaviour or that they have not done enough to call out racism in China, is no better than victim-blaming.

Australia's Asian community reflects our nation's diversity: from people whose ancestors worked the gold rush in the 1850s, to refugees of war, to student dissidents standing up to authority, they are part of our national story.

It has been heartening that since the letter [more than 10,000 of our fellow Australians have signed a Chinese Australian Forum petition](#) supporting the aims of the letter, with support crossing the political divide including from senators [Penny Wong](#) and [Andrew Bragg](#).

They recognise that now is a time for all Australians to come together rather than blame each other. It is important and legitimate to debate the Australia-China relationship, but we can't let Chinese Australians be collateral damage.

To distrust, disenfranchise and vilify our fellow citizens would eat us from within – it is not only fundamentally contrary to the Australian values we seek to uphold, but would do more damage to our democracy than any foreign power ever could.

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