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ESSAY

## COVID-19 and Political Polarization: Notes on Australia's Chinese Communities

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### Abstract

In this article I draw from my personal observations as a participant in two WeChat groups; a group with my university classmates most of whom are now residents of Australia, and the other a skilled migrant group based in South Australia. I explore the main narrative threads of these two groups in relation to their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic during the first half of 2020. I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the political polarization that exists between denouncers of the People's Republic of China [PRC] and their detractors, and also underlined particular moral dilemmas.

### Keywords

**COVID-19; China; Chinese Australians; Emotions; Political Polarization**

### Introduction

This article analyses the polarized response of Chinese Australians of mainland China background to COVID-19. I draw from my personal observations as a participant in two WeChat groups; a group with my university classmates most of whom are now residents of Australia, and the other a skilled migrant group based in South Australia. WeChat is a social media app that has multi-purpose functions such as messaging, video conferencing, telephone and mobile payment. It was developed by a Chinese company Tencent, first released in 2011, and is now the world's largest standalone mobile app. The Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison is reported to have a WeChat account ([SBS News 2019](#)). It is often described as China's 'app for everything.' WeChat group identities can be anything, ranging from those

who identify themselves as alumni of a high school or university, or migrants from the same city or province in China. Group members can communicate by posting news articles, video clips, websites, or they can add comments. I explore the main narrative threads of these two groups in relation to their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic during the first half of 2020. I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the political polarization that exists between denouncers of the People's Republic of China [PRC] and their detractors, and also underlined particular moral dilemmas. I explore this in the context of the Chinese migrant experience in Australia, which I am a part of. As WeChat communications are private and personal membership identity is not revealed, sources identified and cited are only those that are publicly available.

## Background

Chinese Australians come from a variety of backgrounds, including Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and Taiwan. From the mid-19th century, Chinese migrants from Guangdong and Hong Kong used to be the most numerous in Australia and they also maintained Chinese cultural traditions such as ancestral worship and clan identities ([Petty 2009](#)), symbolized by the iconic Chinatowns built in most capital cities. More contemporary migrants of Chinese ethnicity are from mainland China, beginning with 18,000 students who were able to stay, and then obtain resident status, subsequent to the 1989 Tiananmen Square events ([Liu and Gao 1998](#)). In one of the most emotional responses to that event, the then Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke appeared tearfully on TV announcing the extension of visas to Chinese students ([Fang and Weedon 2020](#)). This source of migration continued and expanded to include the immediate families of the students ([Liu and Gao 1998](#)), businesspeople and investors, and skilled migrants.

Chinese Australians who have migrated from the PRC to Australia are therefore of very diverse background. Although it is commonly claimed that Chinese Australians of mainland background are not active in Australian public life as they are mostly busy with educating their children and running businesses that are related to their emigration origins, this stereotype is being challenged by second and third generations of Chinese migrants who participate in sports and take a more active role in Australian public life. Quite a number of students from the PRC with entrepreneurial spirit also often start community media outlets such as local papers, radio or social media in Chinese in various Australian capital cities as a way of obtaining Australian residence status. This is generally perceived as a good way to migrate since it is a middle class profession and the capital requirement is low. Migrants who come to Australia in the investment visa category sometimes donate to politicians for publicity and to open up business opportunities. Recently, these lobby and media activities by those with China connections are considered by some Australian politicians to be Chinese interference in Australian domestic politics ([Hamilton 2018](#)).

## COVID-19's Impact on Politically Polarizing Positions and Attitudes

As a Chinese migrant myself, I am in regular contact with other Chinese migrants living in Australia and I also keep in contact with people living in the PRC. WeChat groups are a convenient way to make and keep connections with such communities. As a group member of two WeChat groups, I am fascinated by the way the participants express their ideological disposition towards the PRC. Generally speaking, I situate the participants into two broad groups: those who denounce the PRC and those who defend it. Based on my experience of these two WeChat groups and the self-identification of the group members, the members that tend to denounce China tend to be PRC Chinese who migrated to Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s whereas the China defender members tend to have migrated to Australia more recently. Although I am not suggesting that the political spectrum of the participants is so black and white, I am interested in discussing the political polarization I perceive in these groups and which, in my opinion, has sharpened since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On one end of the spectrum are the participants that denounce the PRC. I refer to this ideological group as the ‘whateverists’: whatever China does is wrong and whatever the USA does is right (Gao 2008). They reject whatever reports or comments are positive about the PRC and support reports or comments that are positive about the USA. There are roughly about five members that take this ideological position in both WeChat groups. Indeed, to support their ideological position, the whateverists post any report or comment that is positive about the USA. For instance, they tend to support former President Donald Trump, or at least they do not explicitly criticize him. But they are very critical of the former Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders, labelling him as a naïve ‘White Leftie’ or *bai zuo* in Chinese (Fang Kecheng 2020).

On the other end of the spectrum are those opposed to the whateverists and who defend the PRC. There are also five active members that take this ideological position in both WeChat groups surveyed in this paper. They respond to the whateverists with whatever information they can find either in English or Chinese for a tit for tat rebut. But whateverists condemn anyone who is defensive of China as “Five Cents” or *wu mao* in Chinese, a term used to refer to those who are supposedly paid to defend China cheaply—five cents for an apologetic piece.

Events and issues that have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic have consequently aligned with this political polarization. For instance, in the case of Dr Li Wenliang in Wuhan who was reported to have raised the alarm of the virus in social media but was castigated by local authorities, the whateverists posted comments that claimed Dr Li was a heroic whistle blower. Those who tend to defend China argued that Dr Li was just an eye specialist and his warning to his friends on his personal social media was off the mark. He was rightfully initially censored, they argue, for fear of spreading rumours, as any authority would do when the exact nature of a virus is unclear.

Another major event that induced heated debate in the WeChat groups I participate in was the publication of Fang Fang’s diaries in Wuhan. Fang Fang is a controversial Wuhan-based writer who wrote a novel *Soft Burial* (2016) that was banned in China for its exploration of the violent aftermath of the Chinese revolutionary land reforms. In a series of social media posts, which have now been published as ‘Wuhan Diary: Dispatches from a Quarantined City’ (2020), Fang Fang is very critical of the local government’s initial response to the emergence of COVID-19 in Wuhan (Johnson 2020). The whateverists argue that Fang Fang is a contemporary Lu Xun<sup>1</sup> and that what she describes in her diaries was the truth of Wuhan at that time. In order to validate their attitudes of support for Li Wenliang and Fang Fang, the whateverists not only repeated Li’s ‘a healthy society allows more than one voice’ (He Yuhuai 2020) but also posted a Chinese Youth Daily article praising Noam Chomsky as a great critic and patriot of the USA (Zhang Wei 2010).

This is the only time, as far as I know, that the whateverists on these WeChat groups have posted an official Chinese commentary. But that commentary was published ten years ago in the context of Chomsky’s visit to China when he gave a speech at Peking University in which he, as he usually does, condemns US imperialism. Those who defend China, however, argue that although some of Fang Fang’s diary entries record the real situation, many of her accusations and condemnations of the Chinese government have proven to be false and inaccurate. They also argue that Fang Fang’s is politically biased against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), as is evident in her novel *Soft Burial*.

The appraisal of racism towards Asians in general, and Chinese in particular, in Australia is another issue regularly discussed in the WeChat groups. The whateverists argue that racism has not been an issue during the COVID-19 pandemic. They point to two pieces of evidence to support their argument. One is that they

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<sup>1</sup> Lu Xun (1881–1936), arguably the greatest Chinese modern writer, was very critical of not only Chinese culture and society but also the character of the Chinese person.

themselves never experienced any racism, even though there was a reported increase in racism against Asians ([Biddle et al. 2020](#)). Two, that both the Prime Minister Scott Morrison and some state premiers came out to condemn racism and to praise the contribution that Chinese Australians have made to Australia.

The PRC defenders, on the other hand, although they acknowledge that political discourse is important, also underline the importance of political action. Hence, they regularly post reports of incidents of racism in Australia and argue that continual negative media reports of China might incite racism. Some Chinese Australians therefore launched a call for virtual demonstrations against racism in Australia, a call that the whateverists immediately rejected. The Association for Australian Values (AVA), largely organized by Chinese Australians and aligned with the whateverists' position, issued a statement claiming that those who wanted to demonstrate were ungrateful people who were 'coordinating with a certain government' and were instruments and pawns for the United Front of the CCP: 'We Chinese Australians should not allow ourselves to be kidnapped by a dictatorial ship that is about to sink' ([AVA 2020](#)).<sup>2</sup>

The whateverists, moreover, post news and comments by the Western media and the USA that question the officially published numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths by the PRC. Their comments highlight that democracies such as Japan, South Korea and Taiwan did well in combatting COVID-19 ([Marlow 2020](#)) and that the WHO was manipulated by the PRC government. The whateverists also supported Australia's call for an independent investigation into the origin of COVID-19 ([Dziedzic 2020](#)). Defenders of the PRC, on the other hand, argue that Australia's call for an independent investigation had a spurious geopolitical purpose. They often post reports and comments that put the USA in a negative light, for instance a report that the USA intercepted a planeload of medical equipment destined for Europe ([Willsher et al. 2020](#)).

The polarized responses to COVID-19-related events demonstrate how the crisis has, in my view, entrenched opposing, polarized attitudes in the Chinese migrant community in Australia. It is not surprising to me why the Chinese Australians of mainland background have such polarized attitudes towards China and the West as represented by the USA. Those uncompromising positions reflect the historical cleavages of post-revolution China. The 1949 Chinese Revolution, and its subsequent developments, consisted of a series of antagonizing and polarizing political events. The land reform in the rural sector and nationalization of properties in urban sectors turned many, not surprisingly, into communism haters. Political movements such as the Anti-Rightists further antagonized the intelligentsia. The subsequent Cultural Revolution alienated not only the intellectual middle class but also the political elite in the system. Thus, those who converted to Western religions and above all Western values of political freedom and democracy, likely do not identify themselves with a communist government.

Participants in the university WeChat group consists of members who went through the education system in the late 1970s and early and mid-1980s when the 'literature of the wounded' expressed a popular backlash against the Cultural Revolution. Chinese intellectuals picked up the theme of the 4th May 1919 Enlightenment, which castrated Chinese traditions with the symbolic slogan 'Down with the Confucian shop.' During the 1980s the Chinese intellectual class launched what was called a Neo-Enlightenment to 'farewell the Revolution' and to reorientate China towards the West. With this context, a warm welcome by Australia certainly made some of them firm anti-communists. Defenders of the PRC likely come from families that were not victimized, and actually benefited from, communist China's political development. Though very happy living in an affluent society like Australia, they still have positive attitudes towards China and do not harbour hatred of communist government.

<sup>2</sup> The statement is in Chinese and the actual words in Chinese are “不感恩，是配合某政府，是统战的工具和马前卒，独裁政权已经在国际上空前孤立，世界众多文明国家已不愿与之伍。我们不能被绑架在他们即将沉没的船上。拒绝做独裁政权的殉葬品”

## Moral Conundrum

Though neither the whateverists nor those who defend China hesitate to express their attitudes and lay out their political positions, the impact of COVID-19 exposes some moral conundrums. For those who defend China the moral dilemma is more apparent. When the whateverists present the argument of the intrinsic value of critical freedom by posting Li Wenliang's 'a healthy society allows more than one voice,' those who defend China appear rather defenceless. Even though Noam Chomsky was not a familiar figure among the WeChat groups, the message that an intellectual could be a patriot while at the same time criticize his own country, was mobilized to defend the CCP critic Fang Fang and to praise Li Wenliang.

Whateverists criticize the PRC's defenders as Maoist-style Leftists. In China the Left is often identified with many of the excesses of the Mao era: violence, material backwardness, and above all with lack of freedom and suppression and victimization of the political and intellectual elite during the Cultural Revolution. China's defenders thus do not have much of a discursive position to fall back on because they cannot repeat Maoist revolutionary discourse since the denunciation of the revolutionary discourse is accepted by both groups. Hence, the whateverists' accusation of them being Cultural Revolution Red Guards was deemed the best way to silence the defenders.

The anti-Left ideological position of the whateverists links defenders of China to other Western movements that they deem 'radical' such as the Black Lives Matter movement. Echoing the discourse of former US President Donald Trump, the whateverists claim that 'leftists' are implementing their own destructive cultural revolution in the USA ([Smith 2020](#)). One whateverist posted a comparative listing of the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s with the 2020 Western Cultural Revolution ([Yu Zi 2020](#)):

- Black Lives Matter = 革命无罪，造反有理 (it is not a crime to make revolution; rebellion is justified)
- Silence is not a choice = 人人表态过关 (everyone should declare their position to pass the test)
- Shut down STEM & academia = 工农兵占领学校 (schools occupied by workers, peasants and soldiers)
- Defund the police = 砸烂公检法 (dismantle the public security, the procuratorate and the court)
- You are the privileged = 清理黑五类 (clean up the black five categories)
- Burn books and remove statues = 破除四旧 (destruction of the Four Olds)<sup>3</sup>

However, whateverists also have moral conundrums of their own. The most obvious one is the question of cultural and ethnic identity. This is reflected in a story posted by one of the whateverists. One little girl asked her father whether she was really Australian since she did not look like other (white) Australians. Her father replied that it was not the outside appearance but the inside values that decide whether or not one is an Australian. If you identify with Australian values, then you are an Australian. The Association for Australian Values was set up by some Chinese Australians along the lines of this rationale.

The racism experienced by many Chinese Australians during the pandemic complicates the discussion of values versus outside appearance. When you are bearing the brunt of racist attacks there is no use claiming that you are not Chinese. Defining what Australian values are is also not something easy to identify or measure. When the Australian government announced its wish for an independent international inquiry into China's origin of COVID-19, although some whateverists supported the call, other whateverists kept silent on the issue. A related call for China to pay compensation for the breakout of COVID-19 ([Moffett 2020](#)) was of course condemned by the defenders while the whateverists again remained silent.

Many whateverists also face another conundrum. How do they handle China and their Chinese background while at the same time consider China morally inferior? They have families and/or extended

<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, most first-generation Chinese Australians are not sympathetic with the Black Lives Matter movement including the ones surveyed in these two WeChat groups even though they have contrary positions regarding other matters as discussed above.

families back in China and many have properties and related financial and business connections there. If China does well it is good for them as well; and if China is in trouble it affects their well-being here in Australia. For instance, one WeChat participant is engaged in a tourism business that relies entirely on tourists from mainland China. This person demonstrated great anxiety in the midst of the pandemic on top of the deterioration of the Australia-China relationship. It is really not a morally comfortable position to be in, especially for the first generation of migrants, if you hate your origins but cannot cut off the connection completely (Sun 2002).

## Conclusion

This essay draws on my experience using two WeChat groups in South Australia to argue that responses to COVID-19 have not only aligned with two polarizing positions that Chinese migrants from mainland China hold towards the PRC—whateverists and defenders—but that the pandemic has heightened and accelerated this political polarization. The two polarized attitudes are so hostile that some of the participants in the groups analyzed in this essay opted out of the group after some fierce exchanges. Although my reading of the political polarization described in this essay is only a small sample, both poles actually have a lot in common: they both seem to enjoy the benefit of China's post-Mao reforms and none seem to recall the old days as 'the good old days.'

But this small case study underlines certain dis-equalizing aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. First, it demonstrates COVID-19 has had a singular impact on Chinese migrant communities in countries such as Australia. Not only did international attention on China's role in the spread of the pandemic often lead to racist attacks, but it prompted already polarized communities to navigate those divisions in ways that were not always productive. Second, it underlined that events like COVID-19, as both virus and discourse, are probably best understood as a symptom rather than a cause. Long-standing historical divisions make it difficult to bring together a community when political polarization has become so entrenched. Nonetheless, despite the virulent discourse on the WeChat groups, it was evident to me that all the members enjoy the personal freedom they have in Australia and want China to have more of it.

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