

**Australia news****Death threats, distrust and racism: how anti-Chinese sentiment in Australia 'seeped into the mainstream'****Naaman Zhou**

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Councillor Kun Huang received the letter on a Monday. Among the insults about his name, the threats of death, the blame for the Covid-19 pandemic, the accusation that he had been stealing all the milk powder, buying up all the houses and bringing disease to Australia “for centuries”, the staff at the Cumberland Council noticed a name and an address. This was a race hate letter signed by its supposed perpetrator.

Two days later, councillor Craig Chung at the City of Sydney, councillor Christina Wu at the Georges River council and another local councillor received similar letters.



▲ Cumberland councillor Kun Huang. Photograph: Cumberland City Council

The note sent to Huang, which threatened death to him and “all Chinese people”, is now being investigated by New South Wales police.

It is the latest disturbing incident in what data shows is a surge in anti-Chinese and anti-Asian sentiment in Australia during the Covid pandemic that has renewed calls for a centralised hate tracker and raised concerns it is putting people off standing for public positions.

The Lowy Institute this week released the findings of a landmark survey that found **nearly one in five Chinese Australians had experienced physical racist assaults** during the pandemic.

Community group Asian Australian Alliance also released new data to Guardian Australia that showed 499 people had self-reported a racist incident since April last

year - with the vast majority being women. The group has been tracking anti-Asian and anti-Chinese incidents since April 2020. **It received 178 responses in its first two weeks.**

The Scanlon report into social cohesion, which is released every year and tracks Australia's attitude to migrants and multiculturalism, found there has been **"heightened negative sentiment towards Chinese nationals" over 2020 and 2021.**

And while 84% of respondents said multiculturalism generally was good for Australia - there was a sharp divide when people were asked about some specific groups.

In November 2020, 44% of respondents said they had "very negative" or "somewhat negative" feelings towards Chinese Australians - a nearly three-fold increase from 13% in 2013.



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Scanlon report finds that 84% of respondents agree that 'multiculturalism has been good for Australia'.

Meanwhile close to half feel negative towards Australians from China, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan. 56% negative towards Sudanese Australians in the Nov 2020 survey.



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The Scanlon report highlights the enduring paradox of Australian multiculturalism. There's strong headline support for diversity, but clear evidence of racial prejudice towards certain groups. It shows the need for vigilance and further work on anti-racism [sbs.com.au/news/most-aust...](https://www.sbs.com.au/news/most-aust...)

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Community members say that current levels of anti-Chinese sentiment have been fanned by the pandemic, former US president Donald Trump's rhetoric, and also a political and media atmosphere that encourages a "creeping distrust" of Australians of Chinese heritage.

But it is far from new. Those that have experienced it say it reflects an element of racism that has long existed in Australia's community.

The racist letters themselves, sent out this week, reference previous [media panics about Chinese people buying milk powder](#) and infant formula in the 2010s, inflating property prices or [sending medical equipment to China](#) during the pandemic.

"Before the Chinese disease started, you bought out every products [sic] off of our shelves," the letter said. "You stole all of our toilet paper and shipped it all to [China](#)."

A growing distrust

Huang, who was elected to the Cumberland council in 2017, says he has noticed the level of anti-Chinese hate increase in the past year.

"I have been a councillor for three-and-a-half-years now, I have never received anything like this before," he told Guardian Australia. "The council staff gave me a call and warned me, saying 'Look councillor we received a disgusting letter that was addressed to you. Do you want to see it?'"

"I thought yes, I have worked for federal and state MPs before, I had seen a lot of crazy letters. I said 'send it through'. Then I realised 'Wow, the letter was disgusting'. There is no other way to describe it."

The letter to him and other councillors, who represent different political parties, claimed wrongly that only "white Australians" had "built Australia" and called for Chinese people to be killed by "fumigation".

"I do not give a fuck if you are born here or not," the letter stated.

Huang puts the rise in anti-Chinese racism down to "a combination of things".

"Obviously the pandemic, you have Trump in America. And also the [media] reports about Chinese Australians. They have also helped create this kind of suspicion towards the Asian community."

Osmond Chiu, a researcher at the progressive thinktank Per Capita, says the past two or three years as Australia's diplomatic and trade relationship with China has soured, it

has coincided with a “creeping distrust” of people of Chinese heritage.

In October, Chiu was **grilled by Liberal senator Eric Abetz** in what Chiu called a “McCarthyist” loyalty test. Chiu and two other Chinese Australians appeared before a Senate committee to talk about the under-representation of non-white people in parliament.

He was abruptly asked by Abetz, “to very briefly tell me whether they are willing to unconditionally condemn the Chinese Communist party dictatorship”.



▲ Last October senator Eric Abetz demanded three Chinese Australians publicly and unconditionally condemn ‘the Chinese Communist party dictatorship’. Photograph: Mike Bowers/The Guardian

Chiu, who was born in Australia, and has previously publicly written critically of the Chinese government and its treatment of minorities like the Uighurs, was nevertheless still put under the spotlight.

Abetz has insisted his questioning had “nothing to do with race and everything to do with values”.

Chiu told Guardian Australia that his experience was reflective of how “the conversation has started changing over the last three years”.

He says that the discussion of China as a foreign threat used to be mostly the domain of foreign policy aficionados. “Whereas, as a result of two things, firstly China’s actions in

Hong Kong, as well as Covid, it has now seeped into the mainstream.”

In media, politics and on the street, “people who were traditionally not that interested in China, are now talking about it as a threat”, he says. “I think it has really cut through publicly in the last year or two.”

// Distrust may be subconscious rather than overt ... But it kind of eats away at people and it is very corrosive
Osmond Chiu

In December, the BBC published a story that [interviewed several public servants of Chinese heritage](#), who claimed they had been “questioned by colleagues” for taking trips to China or learning Chinese at Confucius Institutes.

Chiu says this is in part due to the way the Chinese Communist party operates in “shadowy” ways, but this suspicion has resulted in an “inversion” of the burden of proof.

“If you are of Chinese heritage, or have any potential links to China, however tenuous they might be, you have to prove you do not have links,” he says. “And even expressing that you don’t support [the CCP] is not enough. You almost need to show an evangelical zeal.

“There are plenty of examples where someone has been accused of having links ... All you need to do is be in a photo with someone. Be in an organisation with someone. It’s almost enough, it’s not like you have to have done something,” Chiu says.

“It is a challenging thing. Which makes this conversation much more difficult. Distrust may be subconscious rather than overt ... But it kind of eats away at people and it is very corrosive. It challenges this idea that everyone is equal.”

Erin Wen Ai Chew, a convenor of the Asian Australian Alliance who organised the racist incident tracker, said both the political right and left were now expressing distrust - a change in the last two years.

“This is one of the first few times we have seen that blurring of lines between the right and the left,” she says.

Chew also makes the point that while a lot of surveys show negative sentiment towards Chinese “nationals”, people often can’t tell someone’s nationality - whether they were born in Australia or overseas - from appearances. She told Guardian Australia this meant that anti-Chinese sentiment frequently spilled over into anti-Asian sentiment.

An equivalent tracking project in the US, called Stop AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islander) Hate, has recorded more than 2,800 incidents between March and December 2020.

Chew drew links between the data on racist assaults in Australia with a spate of assaults in the US, [which are making international news](#).

“We have to remember that Australia is a consumer of anything and everything American - in terms of politics and media,” Chew says. “When Trump was president and kept calling it the China virus, it just normalised that. Those who may or may not have racist intentions, may see it as, ‘Well if the president of the US calls it the China virus, we can say that too’.”

She says Australia should commit to a national database to track and record incidents of racist violence, which the race discrimination commissioner, Chin Tan, [has previously called for](#).

“California [just passed a bill](#) with \$1.4m to track and put money into tracking anti-Asian hate,” Chew says. “In Australia, it needs to be centralised.”

Barrier to representation

Sydney councillor Craig Chung, who also received the letter, tells Guardian Australia that he does not “want to really shine a spotlight on the author of the letter because that is what they are seeking”.

“I truly believe the best way we can combat racism is through community activism and involvement,” he says. “It is important that we as leaders stand up.”

But Chung adds that anti-Chinese sentiment, from both the left and the right, is having an effect on political representation, and dampening the voices of Asian Australians.

“The last two years have been particularly damaging, he says. “A very prominent Asian Australian, when I was asking them if they would consider running for office, they said these last two years have been terrible, and they said now is not the time for a Chinese Australian to run for office.

“That to me is a terribly sad outcome. And that person wasn’t from my party. I strongly support them.”

Chung’s family has been in Australia for four generations, since 1882, but like Chiu, he says it shouldn’t need to be said to prove someone’s independence from China.

“All of us who are not Indigenous come from other parts of the world,” he says.

Christina Wu, who received the letter at the Georges River council, said: “It’s absolutely disgusting. It’s a reflection on themselves.”

Chiu, who is also an organiser of the Asian Australian Alliance’s hate incident tracker, makes the point that the surge of racism during the pandemic is linked to historical racism, and anti-immigrant sentiment.

A “multitude of factors” underpin this racism, he says, including “issues about property prices, migrant labour as well, those historic things”.

“The vast majority of people, if they knew an immigrant from China, would not have any negative sentiment. But this abstract idea of migrants from China taps into a deeper, historical concern, about a changing Australia.”

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