

**Submission to the Senate Standing Committees on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade****Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia**

The Epoch Times Australia, Chinese edition appreciates the opportunity to make this submission to the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

**Summary**

This submission from the Epoch Times Chinese (also known as Da Ji Yuan) seeks to outline:

- How the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has infiltrated Australia's Chinese-language media industry.
- Describe incidents of intimidation and interference from the CCP aimed at undermining free and independent Chinese press in this country.
- Recommendations on how the federal government can more effectively protect the integrity of ethnic media in the country.

**Introduction**

Ethnic newspapers play an important role for Australia's diaspora communities, helping migrants understand Australian society, civics, and culture. For the Chinese-speaking diaspora, a Chinese-language publication is a central conduit to connect with local, national, and international issues.

However, over the last 20 years, the important role played by Chinese-language publications has been hijacked and distorted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) via its widespread overseas influence operations<sup>1</sup>. In recent years, the extent of these influence activities has made headlines, most notably the actions of the United Front Work Department (infamously connected with the downfall of Senator Sam Dastyari).

The CCP also expends considerable resources attempting to shape the views of the Chinese diaspora in Australia so it is receptive and supportive of Beijing.

Influence strategies include incentivising local Chinese-language publications to 'tow the Party line,' taking advantage of Australia's free press laws and establishing local pro-Beijing publications; and undermining and intimidating independent Chinese-language press (details addressed below).

To that end, The Epoch Times, as well as other independent Chinese-language media, have been on the receiving end of a long-running, near 20-year campaign of intimidation from Beijing.

In this submission, references to The Epoch Times are primarily about the Chinese-language newspaper printed in Australia since 2001. The Epoch Times also publishes an English-language paper in Australia,

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-party-speaks-for-you-foreign-interference-and-the-chinese-communist-partys-united-front-system/>

the United States, Canada, as well as multiple languages online. This submission does not cover those editions.

**Background of The Epoch Times**

The Epoch Times was established in 2000 by John Tang<sup>2</sup> in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States, sparked by the persecution of Falun Gong in China in 1999. As part of the persecution the Chinese regime launched a global propaganda and disinformation campaign.

The Epoch Times became one of the first Chinese-language media to report on the issue. Over the years it became a truly independent voice on China affairs and was a leading source on the outbreak of SARS in 2003, the contaminated milk powder scandal in 2008, the rise of Xi Jinping, and more recently the outbreak of COVID-19 in China.

In these instances, the CCP either avoided reporting on the matter entirely, or deployed extensive disinformation to portray a glorified image of the communist leadership.

In 2001, The Epoch Times established its first Australian office and now enjoys one of the largest Chinese-language readerships in the country covering Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, Canberra, and Perth.

**Factors Behind the CCP's Hegemony Over Local Press**

For decades Beijing's encroachment on Australia's Chinese-language mediascape has continued unopposed. Traditionally, Chinese-language newspapers are small businesses, run by members of the community and with limited staff.

In recent years there has been a proliferation of Chinese newspaper titles – connected with fast-rising immigration numbers – particularly on the east coast (Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane). For example, in the 1990s, Brisbane had three to four Chinese-language newspaper titles, by the 2000s there were over twelve newspaper titles servicing a community of just 120,000 Chinese-speakers.

This created a challenge for newspaper owners, and an opportunity for CCP influence to grow. For many publications it became more and more difficult finding revenue as multiple titles competed for the same sources of advertising. The highly competitive market forced some publications to sacrifice content (and arguably the integrity of the publication) for advertising. Some long-term newspaper owners decided to sell their titles, with new owners gradually entering the market. Many of these new owners were recent migrants from mainland China and often had little experience in media and journalism.

<sup>2</sup> John Tang is the current CEO of the Epoch Media Group, a survivor of the Tiananmen Square Massacre 1989, and himself a practitioner of Falun Gong: <https://www.theepochtimes.com/in-our-own-words#john-tang>

Under these circumstances, the CCP was able to make inroads into the Chinese newspaper industry. In some instances, the CCP and its affiliates, including the Pacific Media Group<sup>3</sup>, simply established their own publications in Australia. These publications were easily identifiable to Chinese-speakers as they often dedicated extensive editorial space to the activities of Chinese consulates, featured opinion pieces espousing pro-Beijing views, and published extensive, long-term advertising for Chinese state-owned businesses (e.g. China's airline businesses).

Other community publications gradually changed their editorial tone to include more pro-Beijing content as they gained access to new sources of revenue and content via relationships with local Chinese consulates<sup>4</sup>.

By the 2010s, truly independent publications became a rare sight across Australia's capital cities.

The Epoch Times and other independent Chinese media soon became obvious challengers to CCP hegemony. There was very little the CCP could do to prevent rival editorial departments from publishing content, so the regime resorted to intimidation and influence activities targeting the ancillary operations of rival media.

**Categorising CCP Influence of Chinese Press in Australia**

The tactics employed by the CCP are often nebulous and operate within a "grey zone" of activity<sup>5</sup>. The Epoch Times has over the years experienced a wide range of intimidatory actions against it and can identify two broad categories of CCP influence:

- The CCP and its affiliates directly discouraging businesses, organisations, and political leaders from engaging with The Epoch Times; and
- The powerful and wide-ranging influence of "fear." Businesses, organisations, and politicians will avoid associating with The Epoch Times and other independent press, due to concerns over potentially offending Beijing.

**Targeting Advertisers to Limit Resources to The Epoch Times**

In one example, a small law firm in Sydney's south chose to advertise with The Epoch Times. After signing an advertising contract, the law firm owner attended an event which was also attended by the Sydney Chinese consulate. The law firm cancelled its advertising with The Epoch Times afterwards.

A similar incident occurred in Perth in 2015 where an accountant accepted an invitation to speak at a property forum organised by The Epoch Times. She later declined the invitation closer to the date. Our

<sup>3</sup> Outlined by Alex Joske in a Australian Strategic Policy Institute report as being owned by the United Front Work Group, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/party-speaks-you>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/national/chinese-language-newspapers-in-australia-beijing-controls-messaging-propaganda-in-press-20160610-gpg0s3.html>

<sup>5</sup> Defence Minister Linda Reynolds refers to the "grey zone" in her speech to the Australian Strategic Policy Institute on July 2: <https://www.minister.defence.gov.au/minister/lreynolds/speeches/speech-australian-strategic-policy-institute>

team found out three years later from a source close to the accountant that she had received a call from the Chinese consulate. The accountant was fearful as her parents were living in China.

A Taiwanese businessman in Brisbane had a similar experience. After advertising with the paper, he was questioned on his relationship with The Epoch Times when he went to renew his visa at the Chinese consulate (he made regular business trips to China). The Taiwanese businessman stood firm however and argued that he had every right to do what was beneficial for his business.

The Epoch Times has also lost many potential advertising agreements from some of Australia's largest businesses including those in the automotive, education, finance, luxury, real estate, tourism, pharmaceutical, as well as government sectors.

For example, in 2019 a state-level tourism body in Australia notified our team they could not work with The Epoch Times as the organisation could not be seen having a "political preference or standing." In another case, two global luxury companies could not advertise in The Epoch Times due to restrictions set by their global head offices over fears they could upset Beijing – many luxury brands have significant businesses in mainland China.

Earlier this year, The Epoch Times was told that a major automotive business would not advertise due to the Epoch Times' supposed connection with "far-right/Falun Gong groups" and "anti-Chinese government sentiment." These labels come straight from the CCP playbook and are commonly used by Beijing and its affiliates to denigrate dissidents and stifle meaningful debate.

A recent example of this is the Chinese Ministries of Tourism and Education issuing "travel warnings" to Chinese citizens in June claiming there was a "significant increase" in racial discrimination against people of Asian descent in Australia during the COVID outbreak<sup>6</sup>.

**Incidents Related to Editorial**

The Epoch Times regularly approaches political leaders to provide comment in their Chinese New Year editions, which are an effective way to engage with the community.

In Western Australia, a prominent politician published Chinese New Year greetings in publications with pro-Beijing views, yet never responded to approaches from The Epoch Times. A similar incident occurred in South Australia when The Epoch Times could not obtain Chinese New Year greetings from a notable politician – it was later revealed a party member (with pro-Beijing views) had interfered in the process.

**Other Notable Incidents**

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.theepochtimes.com/chinese-regimes-latest-racism-salvos-against-australia-an-attempt-to-divert-global-attention-from-hong-kong\\_3384539.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/chinese-regimes-latest-racism-salvos-against-australia-an-attempt-to-divert-global-attention-from-hong-kong_3384539.html)

In 2010, the Brisbane-based Epoch Times branch was attacked in a drive-by shooting<sup>7</sup>. The office was fired upon with an air rifle by two assailants in Sunnybank. The office was due to host a seminar that same week with renowned human rights lawyer David Matas (Matas co-authored a ground-breaking report exposing illegal organ harvesting practices in China in 2007). Before and after the incident, the Epoch Times office in Sunnybank had no issues with vandalism or violence.

In 2016, a pharmacy at the Australian National University in Canberra was threatened<sup>8</sup> by the head of a Chinese student association for displaying copies of The Epoch Times Chinese. The student association leader claimed Chinese students would "boycott" them if they continued displaying the paper.

**Recommendations**

The Epoch Times supports establishing a framework around ethnic press that can effectively protect its integrity, however advises against introducing onerous regulation given most ethnic media are essentially small business, and heavy regulation have a chilling effect on the development of ethnic media.

The Epoch Times supports the federal government's continued declarations of support for human rights, Australian sovereignty, and values, considering Beijing's recent intimidatory tactics on the global stage. Continuing this discourse towards Australia's diaspora communities can help blunt Beijing's interference.

Establish an email database of ethnic press in Australia that the federal government can communicate regularly. Email updates can cover issues related to foreign interference and the importance of protecting Australian sovereignty.

Introduce a declaration that all ethnic media publishers must sign saying their publications will seek to uphold Australian values – including democracy, Australian sovereignty, human rights, and freedom of speech. Such a declaration would be welcome among migrant communities because many have relocated to Australia to enjoy these very freedoms.

Greater scrutiny over how government advertising is allocated. In recent years it is not uncommon to find government advertising in publications with pro-Beijing views.

Establish a formal register for ethnic newspaper publications (currently this information is not consistent).

Re-prioritise the importance of circulation audits. In recent years, the Circulations Audit Board (CAB) has begun to lose its favour with mainstream publications. For ethnic press, a flexible solution (without onerous costs) should be explored. This will allow a degree of accountability among local press operators.

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.theepochtimes.com/the-epoch-times-australia-office-attacked\\_1506872.html](https://www.theepochtimes.com/the-epoch-times-australia-office-attacked_1506872.html)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.afr.com/world/asia/canberra-pharmacy-at-front-line-of-chinas-push-for-global-influence-20160901-gr65xy>