

# Chinese New Zealanders in Aotearoa

## Media consumption and political engagement

**Abstract:** This article outlines work in progress on a project concerning interactions between the Chinese community in New Zealand, ethnic Chinese media, mainstream English language media, particularly around the New Zealand 2020 general election. A wealth of past research has discussed ethnic Chinese language media in New Zealand, the Chinese diaspora, and general elections. This study will go beyond previous research to include mainstream English language media as part of the media resources available to Chinese New Zealanders considering participating as voters in general elections. For Chinese New Zealanders, understanding the diversity of media in New Zealand is likely to have a positive effect on their voting decisions, and encourage more thinking about government policies.

**Keywords:** China, Chinese New Zealanders, ethnic Chinese media, migrants, New Zealand, mixed method research, political engagement, political news, qualitative research, quantitative research, voting behaviour, WeChat

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### Introduction:

THE INTENTION of the project outlined in this article is to contribute robust ideas to the environment of future New Zealand general elections on how the full range of political parties can reach and inform minority voters. I hope the research also encourages immigrants or minorities to express their ideas and to make their voices are heard when they are participating in politics and voting actively. The target audience is Chinese New Zealanders because China is New Zealand's largest trading partner, with two-way goods and services trade now exceeding \$32 billion a year and there are more than 200,000 Chinese migrants living in New Zealand (RNZ, 2021). The ethnic and mainstream media—print, radio, audio-visual, online and social media—help migrants access a variety of information and news to fit into mainstream society and to share the diverse values of New Zealand's other communities. Further-

more, politicians in New Zealand share party policies, news, and information on media platforms to attract voters.

In July 2021, the New Zealand government launched the Ministry of Ethnic Communities, a government organisation intended to improve the well-being of New Zealand’s ethnic minorities, promote inclusiveness, and build a more diverse community in Aotearoa New Zealand (Manch, 2021).

Since the 1980s movement to make the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi have legal and practical consequences, New Zealand has increasingly been governed under a bicultural model, between the Tangata Whenua<sup>1</sup> and the government. However, as New Zealand’s demographics have changed through immigration in the 20th century, beginning with Pasifika people and then with various other ethnic groups, the concept of multiculturalism has also become increasingly important (Robie, 2009). As diasporic communities become established in New Zealand, and as their members become residents and citizens, they started becoming involved in politics (McMillan & Barker, 2021). They also started developing their own media resources. For instance, Pasifika immigrants to New Zealand from the 1960s onwards have become involved in film, television, radio, and the

**Table1: Pacific Islands MPs in the NZ Parliament, 2020**

<i>Pacific Island MPs in the current New Zealand Parliament</i>		
Arthur Anae	National	List
Barbara Edmonds	Labour	Mana
Kris Faafoi (resigned 2022)	Labour	Mana, List
Anahila Kanongata'a-Suisuiki	Labour	List
Anae Neru Leavasa	Labour	Takanini
Terisa Ngobi	Labour	Ōtaki
Jenny Salesa	Labour	Manukau East
Aupito Su'a William Sio	Labour	List, Māngere
Teanau Tuiono	Green	List
Tangi Utikere	Labour	Palmerston North
Poto Williams	Labour	Christchurch East

Source: New Zealand Parliament, 2020

stage (Hardy, 2017) and now in Parliament, as seen in Table 1—10 members in the current House since Communications Minister Kris Faafoi resigned.<sup>2</sup>

With the growth of immigration since the beginning of the 1960s, the Asian community is now the fourth largest ethnic minority group in New Zealand. The latest data indicate that Chinese and Indian immigrant populations have grown the most in size in the last 20 years, with both exceeding 200,000 migrants over that time (Stats NZ, 2018, Nadkarni, 2020, and Galikowski, 2019). By contrast, although there are more than 240,000 Chinese in New Zealand, there is only one Chinese MP (NaiSi Chen) in the Parliament (Auckland Council, n.d.). Former Labour MP Raymond Huo and National MP Jian Yang, who had been members of the previous Parliament since 2008 and 2011, both announced their retirement from politics within days of one another in July 2020 (McCulloch, 2021). National Party broadcasting and media spokesperson List MP Melissa Lee is a Korean New Zealander. In my conversations with other Chinese New Zealanders, they have mistaken her for a Chinese New Zealander.

Research in Europe has shown that in democratic societies, the media has a significant role in the political environment (Enikolopov, Petrova & Zhuravskaya, 2011). According to the website of the Queensland Parliament (2015) media play three important roles in the political and governmental areas of society:

- Communicating government decisions;
- Discussing government resolutions;
- Providing opportunities for decision-makers to speak in public.

In a democratic society, low voter turnout from specific sub-communities does not motivate political parties, candidates and governments to make voter-friendly decisions and Asian, especially Chinese immigrants, turnout is consistently lower than for other minority groups in New Zealand general elections (Baker & McMillan, 2017).

A previous study shows that people of Asian ethnicity had a low voting turnout in New Zealand elections (Baker & McMillan, 2017). Even though during election campaigns political parties advertise through ethnic Chinese media, an early study suggested that the advertising does not motivate many Chinese New Zealanders to vote (Li, 2013). Political engagement allows the ruling party to understand the needs of the electorate and give voice to the community. For migrants who do not speak English, information is partly from ethnic media or other channels' conversations.

Further, Shrestha & McManus (2018) have indicated that community general engagement activities or events are becoming important in the 21st century. There are two benefits of community involvement in politics: the first is that each person and ethnic community has their values, faiths, life experiences and cultural backgrounds. So, getting involved in politics allows people to experience the intersection of different cultures, ideas, and concepts and to learn about the

strengths of that ethnic communities. The second benefit is that the group is made up of individuals and these immigrant or ethnic minority communities make up a significant proportion of some voters. These are likely to have a major and increasing say in determining the electorate and party vote (Dunn, 1977; Fonseka, 2020).

For example, in Auckland's Takanini constituency, more than half of the 41 percent of Asians were Chinese New Zealanders and some party candidates were trying to attract Chinese voters (Fonseka, 2020). For instance, they were experimenting with how to communicate with minority voters, how to understand their perspective, and so on. Paul Spoonley said: 'the impact of immigrant voters in the 2020 general election was huge. With a 300,000 increase in net migration from 2013 to 2020, mostly made up of people of Chinese and Indian descent, and with non-citizens allowed to vote, i.e. more than one year living in New Zealand and permanent resident visas, the government does not have much data on the voting behaviour of these people' (Spoonley, 2020). These immigrant or ethnic minority communities make up a significant proportion of possible voters and are likely to have a major say in determining the electorate and party vote (Spoonley, 2020).

The representation of different ethnic groups in government can be seen as having a balancing effect on political power, leading to fairer policy making (Ministry of Social Development, n.d.). Asian representation in Parliament has been levelling off in recent elections, with 5 percent in Parliament after the latest 2020 general election and only 4 percent in Parliament after the 2014 general election (Spoonley, 2020; Ministry of Social Development, n.d.). As diversity grows in New Zealand, how and why do various ethnic minority and migrant communities participate in voting, and do they acknowledge their right to vote? Another question is which parties and candidates they vote for. This has become critical, especially as minority engagement in voting and the representation of all ethnicities in government becomes a key indicator of social inclusion and acceptance (Spoonley, 2020).

It is my belief, and therefore a motivation for my research, that it is important for migrants, particularly new arrivals, to access New Zealand's electoral process and to understand their voting choices, because new immigrants tend to become more involved in electoral activities when they migrate to Western democracies. The media play a watchdog role in democratic elections and one of the ways that voters get election information is through the media. The media can enable immigrants to access accurate information about significant issues such as electoral processes and party policies to assist them to make educated decisions (ACE Electoral Knowledge Network, 2012; Norris, 2000; Bilodeau et al., 2010).

The contemporary public sphere includes multiculturalism, multi-ethnicity, and multilingualism, which are now common characteristics around the globe

(Yu, 2018). Yu's research emphasised that ethnic media can be useful in helping immigrants to settle in their new country, understand the political process, and converse within their communities. As ethnic media provide primary information in their mother tongue for minority members of non-English speaking countries, it is important for them to understand and access elections and make their voting choices in Aotearoa New Zealand (McMillan & Barker, 2021). Ethnic media is important within the community, but what about the general society? Will ethnic media be competitive with mainstream media (Yu, 2018)? In my research, I will look at the issues in relation to which ethnic Chinese media and mainstream English language media can better serve immigrants and New Zealanders. These avenues can be used to help immigrants understand the New Zealand media landscape, access diverse information, synthesise news, and vote in the future general election.

Therefore, ethnic media cannot only provide news for minorities but also, ideally, they can provide some of the types of information listed above. Thus, new residents and citizens can know about which government decisions are in the process of being made and understand why they are being made.

In practice, whether the focus is on politics or on other areas of life, there are barriers in New Zealand's mediasphere to helping ethnic communities feel part of the national polity. Ethnic minority news rarely appears in the mainstream English language media and newsrooms do not make for a diverse range of stories, whether for Māori or other ethnicities (Smale, 2019). In the field of film, both Pākehā and Māori are often active on screen introducing their cultures, while Asians are rarely seen on screen (Zalipour, 2015). New Zealand's bicultural society attracts migrants to settle down in Zealand (Galikowski, 2019).

Ethnic media therefore can make up for some of the lack of awareness or missing coverage of ethnic issues in mainstream English language media (McMillan & Barker, 2021). Li's (2013) and Hoyle's (2020) articles illustrate that the lack of coverage of some small and medium-sized parties during the election drew complaints from some Chinese New Zealanders, who also wanted to be informed about the policies of the various political parties and then make their voting decisions. In fact, the two major political parties in New Zealand, especially the National Party, have too-long dominated the front pages of the ethnic Chinese language media (McMillan & Barker, 2021; Li, 2013; Hoyle, 2020; Hoyle, 2014).

### **Ethnic Chinese media**

Ethnic media are defined as media created by and for ethnic and linguistic minority communities (McMillan & Barker, 2021). The earliest ethnic Chinese newspapers focused on domestic Chinese news from mainland China. The history of ethnic Chinese newspapers in New Zealand is a long one; the first ethnic

Chinese newspaper in New Zealand, *Man Sing Times* was published from 1921 until the 1940s.<sup>3</sup>

The ethnic Chinese language media are also diversifying and growing rapidly (Lin, 2007) with traditional media such as radio, television, and free newspapers numbering more than 20 outlets in the Auckland area alone (Niche Media, n.d.), including three main TV stations in both Mandarin and Cantonese. Multiple print publications are published with a frequency ranging from monthly to six days a week; there are also three Freeview stations and eight paid subscription channels on the Sky Asia platform. New media are growing rapidly, with the best developed being *SkyKiwi*, which regularly appears in Hitwise's (4) top 10 websites (Niche Media, n.d., ppp. 5-7).

With the influx of immigrants since the 1990s and the advent of the internet, more and more ethnic Chinese language media have run into problems—a lack of local resources to cover the whole of New Zealand, the lack of a team of professional journalists, and a lack of local knowledge. (Sun, 2006).

Many Chinese internet users in New Zealand tend to use the Internet or digital platforms to access information, with Chinese being the highest internet user group in New Zealand (Sun, 2006).

Here are some of the current nationwide ethnic media outlets:

**Auckland:**

TV: TV33, TV28, and TV29.

Mainly Print media: *New Zealand Chinese Herald* and *Mandarin Pages*.

Radio: AM936 (936 and FM99.4 (*LOVE FM*)).

**Hamilton:**

Print media: *Asia Pacific Times* and *Waikato Weekly Chinese*.

Radio: Access community radio – FM89.0.

**Wellington:**

Print media: *Home Voice*

**Christchurch:**

Print media: *New Zealand Messenger*

**Digital or social media platform:** *Sky Kiwi*, *Hougarden* and *Go KiWi*. In addition, the National Party, the Labour Party, and Current Chinese MPs have all launched *WeChat Official Account*, a popular social media for the Chinese diaspora.

Generally, the ethnic Chinese language media mostly covers events in the Chinese community, translates mainstream English language media news, provides recruitment, trade information, and hosts large numbers of advertisements for businesses and services etc. The Auckland ethnic media fact sheet illustrates that approximately 71 percent of Asians living in New Zealand consume media

in their own language, including Chinese, Indians and Koreans (Ethnic Media Information New Zealand, n.d.). Some publications' news coverage relies on contributions from the Chinese community members and the coverage is partly free, in addition to what journalists report. In Li's (2013) research, it was found that the ethnic Chinese media mostly help new immigrants to learn how to settle and live in New Zealand early.

### **Previous research about Chinese New Zealanders' media consumption and political engagement**

Li's doctoral study (2005), later published as a book, *A Virtual Chinatown* (2013), predominantly researched radio programmes and newspaper reports and analysed focus group interviews conducted at election time. The author's main conclusion is that the target audience for the ethnic Chinese language media is new immigrants. Li (2013) noted that, due to the private model of the ethnic Chinese language media, its revenue is dependent on advertising in both newspaper and radio programmes, resulting in a large number of advertisements dominating other kinds of content including reporting. Even if media operators want to change the status quo, they are limited by funding, infrequent interaction with mainstream English language media, and the lack of special training institutions for ethnic Chinese media journalists to learn professional skills.

In relation to the media consumption and political engagement section of Li's research, the focus group discussion found that the first things Chinese and Koreans do when they migrate to New Zealand is to settle in a new home, find a job, send their children to school, and so on. Political participation was listed as a non-essential item in this context. In terms of quality of political coverage the Chinese media did not do a comprehensive job in their coverage according to Li's research. Most of the radio programmes or newspaper content that she monitored was biased towards parties with Chinese candidates, such as the National Party or the Act Party. Some anchors on both television and radio openly expressed their support for the National Party in their programmes, which caused complaints from some listeners. Some audience members felt that being a programme host and openly expressing party affiliation in the programme could be taken as unduly leading public opinion. Other listeners wanted to know about the policies of middle or small-sized parties but were unable to do so because they did not understand English. Also, much of the ethnic Chinese media was dominated by advertisements for the National Party and the Act Party in the 2005 election.

Wang & Guo (2011) examined ethnic Chinese traditional media in New Zealand and identified some characteristics, including these:

- Most ethnic Chinese language media are privatised, with no specific media approval system, and most of the staff are mainly part-time.
- The content is adapted to the local Chinese community, mainly in

simplified and traditional Chinese characters, and focuses on Chinese community news and information about Chinese policies, etc. Because most of the reports on mainstream New Zealand society are translated directly from the mainstream English media, the community aspect of free newspapers is evident. (Wang & Guo, 2011, pp. 14-22)

Hoyle (2020) researched the 2008, 2011, and 2014 general elections and McMillan & Barker (2021) researched the 2017 general election. All three of their studies also confirmed the incompleteness of the New Zealand ethnic Chinese language media's messaging. A comprehensive analysis of the three New Zealand general elections in 2008, 2011, and 2014 shows that the ethnic Chinese language media coverage was sympathetic towards the National Party and that the former National Party MP (Jian Yang) often dominated the front pages of the ethnic Chinese newspaper and other media (Hoyle, 2020). On the other hand, negative news about the New Zealand First Party was constantly in the news in Chinese. Researchers believe that biased reporting is a distraction in relation to voters' choices (Hoyle, 2020). Hoyle noted that the typical sample of past studies was approximately two to three media outlets based in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch but did not include WeChat Official Account articles.

McMillan and Barker's recent study (2021) confirmed Li's finding that, in general, ethnic Chinese language media, when providing information about political parties and photos of party leaders, mentioned and depicted more frequently the National Party and its leaders than the Labour Party. In terms of party policy, however, reports from the Labour Party outnumbered those from National Party (McMillan & Barker, 2021, p. 3).

Despite previous research showing that the ethnic Chinese media favours the National Party, no one paid attention to the lack of research on the diversity of instruments of research and methods. According to previous polls, Chen (2020) found that only 62 percent of Chinese New Zealanders supported the National Party in the 2020 general election, compared to 71.1 percent in the 2017 general election. One of the reasons for this is that some National Party supporters voted for the Act Party in the 2020 general election. Labour's support among Chinese New Zealand voters is the same as in 2017, at 21 percent (Chen, 2020). In future data collection, the researcher will analyse why National Party supporters had turned to the Act Party during the 2020 election, and which of the Act Party's policies appealed to Chinese New Zealand voters.

WeChat only appeared in New Zealand after 2011. WeChat was first released in 2011 (Scoop Independent News, 2017). It is China's version of WhatsApp and currently has more than 1.17 billion total active users (Iqbal, 2021). Until now, most of the research on Chinese New Zealanders' media consumption and political engagement has been conducted on ethnic Chinese newspapers, radio, and news websites and has omitted online platforms. The use of social media



such as WeChat by the Chinese community has been identified as an innovation by this study. According to a brief overview of current findings, 90.4 percent of respondents access WeChat or followed related WeChat accounts.

The majority of New Zealand-based Chinese media and the WeChat Official Accounts of the two main political parties were created between 2017-2019. Some of them were licensed to Chinese technology companies to manage and operate the WeChat Official Account, for example, the National Party WeChat Official Account and the *New Zealand Chinese Herald* WeChat Official Account were licensed to Chinese technology companies such as Nightingale Tech. The Labour Party and some New Zealand ethnic Chinese media WeChat Official Account were licensed to Newrank.cn.

### **Scope and design of research project**

Quantitative studies obtain information from large population samples (McIntyre, 1998). Tichenor and McIntyre (1999) highlighted the fact that quantitative surveys can get general information from a large number of people.

In an unpublished Master's thesis about Asian community voter turnout, Li (2020) suggested that multi-language survey studies combined with research methodologies, either quantitative or qualitative, could help enhance our understanding of the non-voting Asian community. Phoebe Li (2013) noted that she conducted no interviews with media personnel and had only two informal conversations with media owners and therefore professional information from advice in the field may differ from what consumer-participants think. Hoyle (2020) pointed out two research gaps, firstly, to determine how ethnic Chinese media owners' opinions affect their political coverage. Secondly, future research could analyse political news and opinion coverage published on WeChat Official Accounts. Hoyle had earlier suggested (2014) that future research could involve more media outlets not previously researched to improve the quality of understanding of the Chinese diaspora, ethnic Chinese media, and political engagement.

Some New Zealand political parties are using WeChat to communicate with the Chinese community. Here is the interface of the WeChat Official Accounts of the two major political parties both in New Zealand (Figures 1, 2 and 3). Other middle or small political parties in New Zealand have not yet released any WeChat official accounts.

Figure 1 (right) is the National Party's profile on the WeChat Official Account, writing about the party's policies concerning Chinese:

To improve communication and engagement with the Chinese in New Zealand, to promote policies, to listen to the opinions and suggestions of the Chinese community, to help the Chinese live and work in New Zealand, and to strengthen relations with the Chinese people and between New Zealand and China. (Translated from the Mandarin content)



Figure 1: National Party WeChat Official Account screenshot.



Figure 2: Labour Party WeChat Official Account screenshot.

Figure 2 (left) is the Labour Party's profile on its WeChat Official Account:

To enhance communication with the Chinese community and strengthen interaction and mutual visits with the Chinese community. (Translated from the Mandarin content)

Figure 3 (right) is Current MP Naisi Chen's profile on the WeChat Official Account:

New Zealand's generation Y (90s) Chinese New Zealander Member of Parliament takes you through every aspect of New Zealand. (Translated from the Mandarin content)

Not only have the two major political parties launched WeChat Official Accounts, but the Act Party also has a news section on its own official website displayed in Simplified Chinese to help immigrants who do not understand English understand Act Party policies.

The experimental section of the research is divided into three steps. At the time of writing, only the first step has been carried out: to undertake the quantitative study. These studies describe specific aspects of a given population and are subjective (Kraemer, 1991). The researcher has distributed a 200-item questionnaire to Chinese communities, organisations and individuals, potential participants in Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington, and Hamilton to name but a few cities where the Chinese community congregates. The classification 'Chinese New Zealanders' that I am working with includes people from the places of origin that Ip lists as well as New Zealand-born Chinese. According to Ip (2021) the census number of residents born by 2013 China or associated territories were around 89,000 from Mainland China, 7,000 from Hong Kong and 8,900 from Taiwan. My questionnaire is bilingual, in English, and Simplified Chinese. The aim is to allow participants who do not speak English to convey their thoughts.

The questions asked about Chinese New Zealanders' media consumption and 2020 general election engagement, covering the whole of New Zealand. The sample of this quantitative study is not representative of every Chinese New Zealander, but it is hoped that the study will provide an indication of the extent of Chinese New Zealander's media consumption and political engagement.

The questions asked about Chinese New Zealanders' media consumption and 2020 general election engagement, covering the whole of New Zealand. The sample of this quantitative study is not representative of every Chinese New Zealander, but it is hoped that the study will provide an indication of the extent of Chinese New Zealander's media consumption and political engagement.

I am in the process of analysing data. More details about quantitative study results will be published in the future.



Figure 3: Current Labour MP-Naisi Chen's WeChat Official Account screenshot.

### **Future qualitative study**

The second part of the study is qualitative, aiming to interview, either remotely or face to face, 20 survey-participants who have agreed to participate in in-depth interviews to further explore their perceptions of politics and media in New Zealand. Finally, there will be interviews with media experts, owners, and 10 politicians. Reich (2015) explains that qualitative research allows researchers to create a connection by communicating deeply with participants.

Focus group interviews are an important part of qualitative research; however, for this project I have decided only to undertake individual interviews, to ensure the privacy and anonymity of those individuals. During the focus group interviews, some people's opinions may be swayed by other participants or some participants may be shy about expressing themselves (Kitzinger, 1995; Burnette et al., 2017).

To sum up, in this study the researcher is adopting a mixed-method approach by generalising past studies. The quantitative study is being conducted first, followed by a qualitative study in the hope of obtaining comprehensive and accurate data.

### **Conclusion and future research**

The voting system in New Zealand is different from some Western countries. Most Western countries only allow citizens to vote, but in New Zealand a permanent resident visa holder or Australian, Niuean, Tokelauan, and Cook Islander who has lived in the country continuously for 12 months or more has the same voting rights as a New Zealand citizen (Electoral Commission, n.d., pp. 2-3). Most previous studies and data are less specifically focused on this classification of permanent resident voters. Since this is a large group of potential voters, political parties are interested on focusing on these minority voters in the hope of getting more votes from them.

This practice of encouraging relatively new immigrants to participate in elections can seem curious to new immigrants from mainland China because of the different social and ideological systems in China and New Zealand. Therefore, ethnic Chinese media can provide a bridge across this strangeness and provide a connection between migrants and New Zealand mainstream society. I hope this research will provide new data and information to increase understanding of media consumption among Chinese diasporic communities in New Zealand. Participants will have the opportunity to share their experiences and voice their concerns, which, comments up to this point show, is an opportunity they appreciate.

## Notes

1. In New Zealand, Tangata Whenua is a Māori term that literally means ‘people of the land’. It can refer to either a specific group of people with historical claims to a district, or more broadly the Māori people as a whole.
2. Immigration and Broadcasting Minister Kris Faafoi resigned from Parliament on 16 June 2022 and there will soon be 10 Pasifika representatives in the current Parliament (Lasona, 2022).
3. In 1921, Sun Yat-sen started a self-proclaimed military government in Guangzhou and was elected Grand Marshal. The Chinese Nationalist Party Wellington branch supported Sun Yat-sen’s Republic of China and the Northern Expedition. This is the origin of the first Chinese language newspaper in New Zealand.
4. Hitwise is a web traffic calculation company that selects the most popular websites on the web based on anonymous web usage data provided by ISPs from 25 million internet users worldwide, combined with its own expert measurement methods. The company provides first-hand web data to help internet companies deepen their customer relationship management.

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