

**Submission  
No 14**

**INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT FOR OLDER VICTORIANS FROM MIGRANT  
AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS**

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The Committee Manager  
Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee  
Parliament House, Spring Street  
East Melbourne VIC 3002

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: Inquiry into support for elderly migrants and refugees**

This submission focuses on the elderly Chinese community. As I am a Lecturer and Researcher in Media and Communications at The University of Melbourne, my submission relates to public messaging, content creation and distribution, and strategic engagement with older Chinese Victorians. I provide recommendations based on research evidence and my experience of working with the community.

I have studied older Chinese Victorians' digital media use before and during COVID-related lockdowns in Melbourne (2020-2021). Findings from different projects indicate that older Chinese have faced significant mental and social challenges during the pandemic. Since the pandemic has exposed ongoing issues with service provision and health communication to older Chinese Victorians, my submission refers to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to highlight more general issues in response to the Terms of Reference.

**Content of communication and information**

I draw the Committee's attention to the content of communication and information presented to this cohort. First, Victoria's government and health authorities should release translated materials of health messaging and information in the first instance, together with English materials, to ensure consistency and timeliness of public communication on health and other vital issues.

Older Chinese and service providers have informed me that, while health information and materials in Chinese language have been available, this has only been so days or weeks after the publication of the English version. There have been time delays which might have contributed to inconsistent understanding and distribution of public health messages. An example is information about the digital vaccine certificate: the English materials have been

made available to service providers and community leaders, but the translated materials are still unavailable at the time of writing (early November). This issue makes it hard for community aged care providers and community support workers to provide timely support and accurate information to the community, because they have had to translate the materials themselves.

This issue existed long before the COVID-pandemic. For example, my research into [end-of-life communication](#) to older Chinese Victorians found a lack of Chinese materials from the relevant authorities to properly explain, engage, and communicate the notion of advanced care planning to older Chinese Victorians.

### **Chinese digital media**

I draw the Committee's attention to some of the unique challenges faced by this cohort, with particular reference to digital media. Ongoing studies have shown that older Chinese Australians [have had greater levels of social isolation, disconnection and hence, loneliness](#) even before the pandemic. Mental health is an emerging issue among older Chinese Australians and the pandemic has exacerbated this issue. According to data from the Centre for Holistic Health, where I also volunteer, there has been a twofold increase in the number of older Chinese people (60+) seeking mental health support from 2019/2020 to 2020/2021.

Older Chinese Australians' greater sense of loneliness is not only due to their lack of proficiency in English, but the [difficulty of accessing language support and interpretation services](#). This issue has seriously limited their social autonomy and mobility of living in Australia. Public communication with appropriate language and cultural content is essential. SBS Chinese (Mandarin and Cantonese) programs were rarely used for public announcements and service purposes until the COVID pandemic. There has been an obvious improvement of incorporating SBS in public communication since the pandemic and it would be online-appropriate and effective to keep utilising SBS beyond COVID. My research has indicated strong reliance and trust on SBS Chinese for major policy, crisis management, and social issues.

Digital media has emerged as a key player in recent years. Older Chinese from the mainland China prefer using WeChat, the popular Chinese instant messenger and social media app installed on smartphones. For older Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asian regions, WhatsApp was the key social media application with which they engaged (although many have also started using WeChat). Nearly all senior Chinese associations and Chinese community health and social service organisations I have engaged with have developed their own WhatsApp and/or WeChat groups.

Older Chinese like to 'verify' news and information on health and non-health related topics in these semi-private social media groups. This is partly because older Chinese obtain news and information outside of Australia and from non-mainstream media in Australia. My research

has shown that they often receive COVID-related news and information from friends and families outside of Australia on WhatsApp or WeChat. [WeChat Subscription Account](#) has also become a key source of news and information for (mainland) Chinese Australians in recent years. Many older Chinese I have engaged with do consume and even rely on news from there because of language issues.

These media habits present some challenges and opportunities. These semi-private online spaces can easily become the breeding grounds of misinformation without proper regulatory oversights. These media habits also indicate the importance of identifying the appropriate communication platforms and information space as crucial to advancing services and support for older Chinese Victorians. Governments should conduct more consultation and studies to understand the rich and evolving Chinese language (digital) media spheres in Victoria and Australia by engaging with Chinese community leaders, service providers, media practitioners (traditional and digital), and researchers.

### **The importance of community organisations**

I draw the Committee's attention to the centrality of community organisations for this cohort. Chinese community organisation holds the key to reaching and engaging with older Chinese, and encouraging their participation in Victoria's and Australia's social, economic, and cultural lives. Instead of merely relying on interpreter services who might not have the relevant knowledge in the field of concern (e.g., vaccination, health, and aged care), relevant authorities should engage with individuals and organisations who have extensive cultural understanding of the community and have the appropriate language skills to convey important and urgent health communication and care information.

[A recently published study](#) has found that, compared to other ethnic groups such as Vietnamese, German and Dutch, older Chinese Australians have a stronger reliance on ethnic communities. Their sense of social integration to Australia is defined by connections, and/or ability to connect with, their local Chinese communities in Australia (instead of needing to become part of the 'mainstream' society). In other words, the presence of a 'Chinese community' is a vital for older Chinese to integrate into Australian society, because they 'saw their ethnic community as a source of social and emotional support' (p.8).

An effective way to do this is to forge partnerships with Chinese community associations such as senior Chinese associations (many suburbs have local associations), and Chinese community health and social support services. More resources should be devoted to these community organisations, to support community workers both paid and volunteered to improve their skills (such as digital literacy, mental health awareness, leadership), and knowledge of the relevant systems (such as aged care). Governments and relevant authorities should think more strategically to mobilise community resources to engage with individual older Chinese, especially during a time of crisis, to ensure effective messaging, accurate communication, and

credible information. In turn, if older Chinese Victorians felt more informed, they would also become more willing and confident to participate in the social, economic, and cultural activities of the Victorian society.

I hope this submission is useful in informing decision-making and policy development related to aged care services and support in Victoria. Please do not hesitate to contact me directly should you have any questions or require further information.

Warm regards



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