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The (Re)surgence of Sinophobia in the Australian Far-Right: Online Racism, Social Media, and the Weaponization of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

In this article I critically examine the role of the Australian far-right in the racialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic. A Discourse-Historical Analysis of ($n = 133$) Facebook posts from Australia's most prominent far-right populist party, Pauline Hanson's One Nation, revealed a range of discursive strategies, linguistic and rhetorical devices, and multimodal semiotic practices were employed to scapegoat China and Chinese-Australians throughout the pandemic. The findings highlight the unique role played by the Australian far-right in the racialisation of the health crisis which engendered a wave of Sinophobic and anti-Asian racism on a global scale. This research furthers our empirical understanding of how crises are exploited by the far-right to advance their racial politics in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

In 2017, journalist and commentator David Marr wrote in his *Quarterly Essay* on the re-election of Australian far-right politician Pauline Hanson, 'Aborigines (sic)[1] are forgotten. Asians are old hat' (Marr 2017: 4). What Marr was referring to was the alleged 'shift' away from the anti-Asian racism that defined Pauline Hanson's first iteration in Australian politics to anti-Muslim racism in her contemporary resurgence. Whereas Hanson's 1996 maiden speech to the House of Representatives claimed that Australia was in 'danger of being swamped by Asians' (Hanson 1996: 3859), her 2016 maiden Senate speech warned that Australia was 'in danger of being swamped by Muslims who bear a culture and ideology that is incompatible with our own' (Hanson 2016: 937). While it is undoubtedly true that Muslims have become the defining Other for the global far-right in the twenty-first century (Mudde 2019), Marr's statement proved to be a critical misjudgement. The sentiments expressed by Marr and others in the media that the Australian far-right had simply 'moved on' from anti-Indigenous and anti-Asian racism revealed a fundamental lack of racial literacy around how race works in settler colonial

states founded on racial rule, like Australia. Indeed, a resurgent Hanson quickly revived the vitriolic racism directed towards First Nations Peoples and Asian Australians, which has most recently manifested around the 2023 Indigenous Voice to Parliament Constitutional Referendum debate, and the 2020 and ongoing COVID-19 crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic unleashed a wave of global anti-Asian and Sinophobic racism, hate speech, conspiracy theories, and violence. Led by far-right populist actors such as Donald Trump, people from Chinese backgrounds were scapegoated for both the emergence and spread of the virus, with racially offensive labels such as #KungFlu and #Chinavirus proliferating in media and political discourses. The purpose of this paper is to critically analyse the role of the Australian far-right in the racialisation and exploitation of the COVID-19 health crisis. I draw on the Discourse Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse ($n = 133$) posts from the *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain!* Facebook page over the first 12 months of the pandemic. The findings revealed a fervent and sustained Sinophobic campaign on Facebook to discursively demonise, scapegoat, and racially Other China and Chinese-Australians throughout the pandemic. The findings uncovered a range of discursive, communicative, and multimodal strategies were used to construct China and people of Chinese heritage as both culturally inferior and dangerous. This research makes three important contributions to the literature: (1) Firstly, it advances our empirical understanding of how the contemporary far right instrumentalises crises to mobilise support and further its exclusionary and supremacist political agenda. (2) Secondly, it demonstrates the unique, overt, and violent role that the far-right played in the racialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic. (3) Thirdly, it supports and expands on extant literature by affirming the importance of new tech and media ecosystems for the communication, mobilisation and dissemination of contemporary far-right racial practices and politics.

Racism and the Pandemic in Australia

The global proliferation of Sinophobia and anti-Asian racisms associated with the COVID-19 pandemic has been extensively documented in the literature (Tan et al. 2021; Ang and Mansouri 2023; Grant et al. 2023; Lander et al. 2023). The racialisation of the pandemic engendered a rise of anti-Asian – and particularly anti-Chinese – racism, manifesting in physical violence (Chiu 2020; Yang 2021), verbal abuse, threats, and harassment (Gardner 2022), racialised misinformation and disinformation (Cover et al. 2022), online hate speech (Kamp et al. 2022), and stereotyped and racist media coverage (Sun 2021). Ang and Mansouri suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic 'had the unintended consequence of exacerbating ideological beliefs in racial hierarchies, dividing the global community into an "us" versus Othered "them" dichotomy' (2023: 160–161). The increase in anti-Asian attitudes resulting from the pandemic (Tan et al. 2021) has sharpened scholarly focus to the media's role in (re)producing racist discourses. Sun (2021) for example found that anti-Asian and Sinophobic discourses were pervasive in pandemic related media coverage.

Australia was not immune from this surge in anti-Asian racism, witnessing a marked increase in pandemic related articulations of Sinophobic hate speech and violence in the months following the start of the health crisis (Chiu 2020). The 2020 *COVID-19 Racism Incident Report* commissioned by the Asian Australian Alliance and Per Capita found a

'clear pattern of racist attacks against Asians and Asian Australians as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic' (Chiu 2020: 5). The negative experience of Asian Australians during the pandemic has been captured empirically in a range of quantitative and qualitative studies. The Lowy Institute's *Being Chinese in Australia* (2021) annual survey of Asian-Australians found that 37 per cent of respondents experienced adverse or less favourable treatment during the first 12 months of the pandemic. Moreover, 31 per cent of respondents reported having been called offensive names because of their Chinese heritage, with 18 per cent feeling threatened or experiencing physical attacks as a result of the pandemic (Being Chinese in Australia 2021). This rise in anti-Asian racism and Sinophobia has also been confirmed in scholarly studies. Survey research by Kamp et al. (2022) found that 40 per cent of self-identified Asian-Australian participants experienced racism during the pandemic. These experiences have been qualitatively confirmed in interview and focus group research. Grant et al. (2023) found that negatively racialised minorities experienced racism in diverse ways during the pandemic, including exposure to online harassment and hate speech, microaggressions, and discrimination in accessing healthcare and services. This research aligns with Mansouri's (2023: 9) suggestion that 'the COVID-19 pandemic has … exposed and exacerbated entrenched inequalities within and across Australia'.

The spike in pandemic related racism in Australia should be particularly unsurprising given the country's long antecedents of anti-Asian racism and deep colonial roots of Sinophobia (Ang and Colic-Peisker 2022). As noted by Ang and Mansouri (2023: 165):

> Australia's Sinophobia, and a more general fear of a populous Asia close to its northern shores is nothing new and harks back to the anxiety of the new federation *vis-à-vis* a supposed 'yellow peril' threatening the newly established 'white' colony from the north (Ang and Mansouri 2023: 165)

This racialised anxiety, fear, and discomfort of white Australians to people of Asian descent can be, as convincingly argued by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, traced back to the founding of the Australian colonial state:

> The founding white fathers of Australia's federation feared that nonwhite races would want to invade the country. They were concerned with white racial usurpation and dispossession and took action to ensure that Australia would be a nation controlled by and for whites. (2015: xxi)

This is echoed by Papastergiadis (2004: 8) who suggests that the fantasy of an 'Asian invasion' is a constitutive feature of Australian nationalism. The racialisation of the pandemic, therefore, cannot be separated from Australia's colonial history and settler colonial present. Moreover, nor can it be separated Australia's long history of racialised biopolitics directed towards immigrants and refugees (Elias et al. 2021).

Indeed, for conservative commentators such as *News Corp Australia's* Andrew Bolt, Australia's vulnerability during COVID-19 was 'proof' that immigration and multiculturalism has failed (Bolt 2020). These sentiments, which were pervasive in media and political discourses throughout the crisis, reflect what Ghasson Hage refers to as Australia's *white nation fantasy* which 'thrives on the perception of the migrant presence as one which poses problems' (1998: 233). Therefore, it is clear that the spike in anti-Asian and Sinophobic racism throughout the pandemic is 'not altogether a new

phenomenon but have resurfaced and indeed intensified in the wake of COVID-19' (Ang and Mansouri 2023: 160–161). This, I argue, is key to understanding *how* and *why* the pandemic was racially exploited by far-right political actors like Pauline Hanson.

Crisis, Scapegoating, and the Far-Right

It was expected from the outset of the pandemic that populist and far-right parties would attempt to capitalise on and exploit the crisis, as is consistent with their form (Mudde 2019). Writing in *The Guardian*, Catherine Fieschi (2020: n.p) correctly predicted that far-right parties would seek to blame the pandemic on migrants, porous borders, and the forces of globalisation in an effort to weaponize people's despair. These predictions came to fruition as far-right populist parties instrumentalized the crisis to scapegoat immigrants, negatively racialised peoples, and multiculturalism. In May 2020, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres warned that 'the pandemic continues to unleash a tsunami of hate and xenophobia, scapegoating and scare-mongering' (Guterres 2020: n.p). The aforementioned spike in pandemic related racism has been directly attributed to the rise of far-right and populist politics over the past decade: 'An environment of populism, resurgent ethnonationalism, and retreating internationalism has been a key contributor to the flare-up in racism during the COVID-19 pandemic' (Elias et al. 2021: 784).

Scapegoating was a core feature of the global far-right's response to the pandemic. Ruth Wodak suggests that all far-right parties 'successfully construct fear and – related to the various real or imagined dangers – propose *scapegoats* that are blamed for threatening or actually damaging our society' (2015: 22, emphasis added). Importantly, however, the shape of far-right scapegoating is contingent on the particular historical traditions in national, regional and local contexts (Wodak 2015). As pointed out by Wondreys and Mudde (2022: 88), most European far-right parties tended not to engage in Sinophobic and anti-Asian campaigns for the simple reason that 'Chinese and East Asians do not play an important role in European nativism, unlike in the US', and, indeed, Australia. Rather, far-right parties throughout Europe constructed immigrants, refugees, and Muslim citizens as rule breakers who were not adhering with COVID restrictions and thus endangering the native population (Wondreys and Mudde 2022).

In the Australian context, the right-wing racialized scapegoating of particularly Asian-Australians, as well as immigrants, and ethnically and linguistically diverse communities was ubiquitous. The Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) reported in 2020 that the Australian far-right was exploiting COVID-19 to recruit new members, with anti-Chinese rhetoric proliferating in extreme right online discussion boards (Christodoulou 2020). This was echoed in the findings of the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into Extremism* which found that extremist groups and individuals sought to scapegoat minorities and criticise them for breaking COVID restrictions (Inquiry into extremism 2022). Indeed, the racialised blaming of immigrants and multicultural communities for the severity of the pandemic and the spread of the virus was a hallmark of both far-right and mainstream political rhetoric in Australia. As Khalil (2022: 173) notes, white supremacist groups were referring to COVID-19 as the 'diversity virus', reflecting the highly racialized and racist nature of blame attribution during the crisis. Miller-Idriss

(2020) suggests that far-right ideologies are hierarchical and exclusionary, and establish clear lines of superiority and inferiority according to race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, religion, and sexuality. This was particularly evident during the pandemic in how the far-right framed racialized communities as being unable and unwilling to follow government rules and restrictions, thus highlighting their alleged 'cultural incompatibility'.

The exploitation and racialised instrumentalization of the pandemic is consistent with how populist and far-right parties have used crises in the past to their political advantage. Indeed, some scholars suggest that invoking crises is a constitutive feature of populist politics (e.g. Moffitt 2016). Hatakka, for example, argues that a crisis 'services the core purpose of simplifying political space by creating a sense of urgency that heightens the attribution of blame to various elites [and scapegoated Others] that have denied the people their sovereignty' (2019 : 32). Likewise, Freeden (2017: 5) suggests that populist actors occupy a state of 'permanent ideational emergency and manufactured crisis … [where political events] have immediate ideological impact, verbally, vocally and performatively'. When coupled with far-right ideologies, we see the central role of race in the far-right construction and invocation of crisis. Mudde (2019) contends that the contemporary populist far-right have profited electorally and politically from three pivotal twenty-first century crises: the September 11 Terror Attacks, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and the so-called 2015 'refugee crisis'. It would be uncontroversial to say that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic represents the fourth great crisis that has been exploited by far-right populist parties. The following section explores how far-right racism manifested online throughout the pandemic.

Social Media, Online Racism, and Conspiracy

The amplification and mediation of anti-Asian racism, hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, and conspiratorial content on social media was manifest throughout the pandemic (Croucher et al. 2020; He et al. 2021; Shin et al. 2023). Sinophobic and anti-Asian rhetoric rapidly diffused throughout the social media ecosystem in the first few months of the pandemic. Fuelled by elite rhetoric, hashtags such as #Chinesevirus and #Kungflu saturated social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Research by Budhwani and Sun (2020) found that tweets containing 'China virus' increased by a magnitude of 10 in the weeks after former United States President Donald Trump had tweeted those terms in March 2020. This highlights the consequential nature of elite political rhetoric in the (re)production of racist discourse online. The *COVID-19 Racism Incident Report* found that online racist abuse related to the pandemic was reported by 10 per cent of respondents. These findings were empirically echoed by Shin et al. (2023: 238) who found that 'young Asians in Australia [were] more likely to experience racial discrimination on social media when they are keenly engaged in social media activities relating to COVID-19'. Research also noted the intersection of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories and the racialisation of the virus. The experience of the pandemic highlighted that conspiracist discourses were frequently articulated alongside racism on social media, including by the far-right (Baker 2022; Cover et al. 2022). Cover et al. note that 'misinformation and disinformation in relation to COVID-10 has routinely contained a racial element, including stereotypical responses to the fear of the racialised other and assumptions that link minorities to the spread of the illness' (2022: 104). This

argument is supported by Khalil who suggests that the collective stress and trauma engendered by the health crisis 'made more people susceptible to the disinformation, conspiracies, and extremist narratives circulating online' (2022: 165). Such was the scale of the so-called *infodemic* crisis that the World Health Organisation and the United Nations through UNICEF and UNESCO issued a joint statement warning of the promulgation of COVID related misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracies and urged governments and social media platforms to strengthen measures to counter the wave of falsehoods being spread online (WHO 2020). In the Australian context, the Victorian Parliament's *Inquiry into Extremism* noted the key role of social media in the spreading of online hate and pandemic conspiracy theories by the far-right: 'far-right extremist groups and individuals capitalised on this by using online tools to expose disenfranchised people to extremist content, further fuelling distrust and anger' (Inquiry into Extremism 2022: 70).

The affinity between social media, racism and the far-right has been extensively noted in the scholarship. Online spaces are considered foundational to the growth of transnational far-right movements (Miller-Idriss 2020) and uniquely conducive to the spread of racist and conspiratorial rhetoric (Donovan et al. 2022). Far-right and populist parties have been early adopters of online technologies and have proven to have been savvy users of social media to the point that some scholars suggest an *elective affinity* between social media and populist politics (Gerbaudo 2018). Zhang and Davis note that

> with the development of the internet and digital technologies, the tech-savvy far right has created an alternative online ecosystem that is based upon the open web and a wide range of social networking services to promote a counterculture filled with hate speech, reactionary ideologies and conspiracy theories. (2022: 121)

Thus, the racialized weaponization of online spaces during the pandemic did not come as a surprise to scholars of online far-right communication. Likewise, the rapid spread of online racism throughout the pandemic was facilitated by, as suggested by Tanja Dreher, 'the profound ambivalence of the networked media ecology which has increased the scope and range of racist actors and the circulation of racist discourse' (2020: 2364). That racism and hate speech thrive on social media is attributed to the complex logics, affordances, and modes of governance of the platforms themselves. Matamoros-Fernández employs the term *platformed racism* to describe a new dynamic whereby social media platforms 'contribute to racist dynamics through their affordances, policies, algorithms and corporate decisions' (2017: 933). The proliferation, amplification, and spreadability of racism in online spaces thrives under a confluence of anaemic and uneven content moderation and enforcement, the sharing and liking practices of users which influence the platforms' algorithms, the corporate logics of social media conglomerates, and the technological affordances of connective media (Matamoros-Fernández 2017; Titley 2019).

The modern far-right appear acutely aware of these dynamics, recognising the significant potential of social media as a communication and mobilisation tool (Khalil 2022). As 'social media have come to dominate socio-politics landscapes in almost every corner of the world' (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas 2021: 206), the need to understand how the far-right exploits networked technologies to promote their hierarchical and supremacist ideologies is increasingly paramount. As put by Gavan Titley (2019:

219), we need to pay attention to 'the transnational spreadability of fascistic and racist ideas, memes, "facts", and talking points in the circuits of connective media'.

Research Approach, Data and Methods

To capture the online racialized instrumentalization of COVID-19 by the Australian far-right, a critical qualitative framework was deemed most appropriate for this study. In particular, I employ the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to critically analyse the Facebook content of Australia's most prominent far-right political party, Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON). The value of a critical and qualitative research approach in the study of far-right communication is outlined by Ruth Wodak who stresses the importance of 'in-depth and context-sensitive, multi-layered analysis when trying to understand and explain the dynamics of far-right populist propaganda and manipulation' (2021b: 33). Moreover, Wodak further suggests that the 'study of discriminatory practices necessarily implies qualitative in-depth analysis, as traditional methods of measurement encounter huge obstacles when trying to account for racist, antisemitic, or xenophobic attitudes' (2021a: 72). For this reason, Critical Discourse Analysis has been extensively employed in the study of exclusionary far-right rhetoric, including on social media (Sengul 2022). Discourse analytical research primarily studies the way 'social power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context' (van Dijk 2015: 466). Importantly, critical discourse analysts understand racist and exclusionary practices as manifesting discursively (Reisigl and Wodak 2001), lending further credence to the use of discourse-oriented research methods when studying reactionary racist rhetoric.

The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) is, axiomatically, the most historical of all approaches to CDA as it attempts to 'integrate systematically all available background information in the analysis' (Fairclough et al. 2011: 364). This sensitivity to context and history is particularly important for this research in understanding how the Australian far-right's response to COVID-19 was interdiscursively informed by existing racial prejudices and the logics of white settler colonialism. Likewise, I draw from CDA's suite of discursive strategies, and rhetorical and linguistic devices (Reisigl and Wodak 2001) to understand how 'discriminatory opinions, stereotypes, prejudices and beliefs are produced and reproduced by means of discourse' (Wodak and Meyer 2009: 56). In this sense, I follow Wodak (2021a: 6) in examining the *micropolitics* of the far-right which relates to 'how they actually produce and reproduce their ideologies and exclusionary agenda in everyday politics, in the (social) media, in campaigning, in posters, slogans and speeches'. Theoretically and conceptually, this paper is informed by critical understandings of race, racism, and colonialism (e.g. Meghji 2022; Ray 2023). Specifically, I am guided by Alana Lentin's formulation of race as a *technology of power*, the 'main goal of which is the production, reproduction, and maintenance of white supremacy on both a local and a planetary scale' (2020: 11).

The dataset for this research comprises Facebook posts made by Pauline Hanson's One Nation's official Facebook page (*Pauline Hanson's Please Explain!*) in the first 12 months of the COVID-19 pandemic (25 January 2020–25 January 2021). The 12-month timeframe was selected in order to capture a substantial representation of pandemic related responses by the party. Concurrently, this time period also coincides

with a wealth of empirical research demonstrating proliferation of anti-Asian and Sino-phobic racism in Australia and internationally (Chiu 2020). In total ($n = 581$) posts were collected from Pauline Hanson's One Nation's Facebook page. Purposive sampling was then used to triage posts that made reference to both 'COVID-19' and 'China' over the 12-month study period. A purposive sampling strategy 'involves selecting data (participants, texts) on the basis that they will be able to provide information rich data to analyse … with the aim of generating insight and in-depth understanding' (Braun and Clarke 2013: 56). In total, the final dataset comprises ($n = 133$) posts which were coded and analysed recursively using the Discourse-Historical Approach throughout October 2022–March 2023.

The decision to analyse the social media content of Pauline Hanson's One Nation party rather than the heterogeneous groups, movements, and parties that make up the Australian far-right was taken for several reasons: Pauline Hanson's One Nation represents the largest and most successful far-right political party in Australia and is the only far-right party with a meaningful electoral presence in Australian politics (McSwiney and Sengul 2024). Moreover, I was particularly interested in the role of elite political discourse in the production and reproduction of Sinophobic racism throughout the pandemic. The role of elites in the production of racist discourse has been extensively documented (van Dijk 1993) and has been a particular interest in the critical discourse-analytical tradition (Kaposi and Richardson 2017).

Finally, the decision to analyse Facebook, rather than Instagram or Twitter, data was primarily informed by two key reasons: Firstly, Facebook is the most important social media platform for Pauline Hanson's One Nation and the far-right more broadly in Australia (McSwiney 2021; Sengul 2023). *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain!* Facebook page is one of the most followed political Facebook pages in Australian politics. In August 2020, *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain!* had 354,000 followers, the second largest following of any federal politician in Australia (Sengul 2023). In contrast, Pauline Hanson's Twitter profile only had 60,000 followers during the same time period. (2) Secondly, research on Asian-Australian experiences of racism during the pandemic revealed that 43 per cent of racist online attacks occurred on Facebook, more than three times as much as Twitter and Instagram (Chiu 2020).

Findings and Analysis

A total of 581 posts were published on the *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain!* Facebook page from 25 January 2020 to 25 January 2021. The initial coding revealed that 36.3 per cent ($n = 211$) of posts during the 12-month period were COVID-19 related, with 22.8 per cent ($n = 133$) explicitly related to China. Moreover, 40 per cent ($n = 86$) of all pandemic related posts mentioned either 'China' or 'Chinese' in the caption, hashtag, or accompanying multimedia content.

A Discourse Historical Analysis of ($n = 133$) Facebook posts revealed a range of discursive strategies and linguistic and rhetorical devices were used to construct China and Chinese-Australian citizens as devious, threatening, dangerous, opportunistic, and unscrupulous. Furthemore, the analysis revealed a strong presence of populist, nativist, and conspiratorial discourses in the posts which constructed a racialised Us/Them

divide between (white) Australians and Chinese Australians with the specific purpose of Othering. The posts made effective use of Facebook's affordances, including a prolific use of memetic and video content, as well as images, polls, hyperlinks, embedded news stories, dialogic engagement, and live posts.

Prominent in the analysed sample was the discursive construction of China and Chinese Australians as sneaky and duplicitous, as demonstrated in Extracts 1 and 2 and Figure 1 below:

> **Extract 1:** THE SNEAKY CHINESE TRICK DECEIVING AUSSIE SHOPPERS. You should be on the lookout for this sneaky secret that is used by some companies whose products are made in China. (4 April 2020)

> **Extract 2:** I WILL NOT APOLOGISE FOR SAYING I DON'T TRUST CHINA. Yesterday I said I don't trust China and some people demanded I retract my comments because they thought they were racist. I will not. (5 May 2020)

The construction of China and Chinese people as sneaky and clandestine is significant for three reasons: First, it interdiscursively taps into long standing racialized and orientalist tropes of Asians as being untrustworthy and dishonest (Li and Nicholson 2021; Tan et al. 2021). Second, the posts specifically refer to 'sneaky' Chinese shopping practices within the context of supermarkets. Research by the Asian Australian Alliance found that 22 per cent of racist attacks against Chinese and Asian-Australians occurred in supermarkets throughout the pandemic. Also present in Extract 2 is the common far-right discursive strategy of *denial and racism* which, as van Dijk (1992) suggests, is one of the crucial properties of contemporary racism. Denials of racism are important as they suggest 'language users who say negative things about minorities are well aware of the fact that they may be understood as breaking the social norm of tolerance or acceptance'

Figure 1. A meme posted on the Pauline Hanson's Please Explain Facebook page on 3 April 2020.

(van Dijk 1992: 89). Third, the accusation of sneakiness and deceitfulness fits within a broader discourse of China deliberately exploiting the crisis to the detriment of Australian citizens. This is demonstrated in Extracts 3 and 4:

> **Extract 3:** CHINESE VULTURES CIRCLE VIRGIN AIRLINES – AUSTRALIA MUST SAY NO. Chinese companies are already controlling a significant portion of Virgin Airlines, now even more of them are circling like vultures looking to swoop in and take advantage. (21 April 2020)

> **Extract 4:** MORE PROOF CHINA WAS STRIPPING SHELVES BARE EVEN WHILE AUSSIES FACED SHORTAGES. While Aussies were forced into harsh restrictions, Chinese stores were still shipping and selling unlimited quantities of baby formula, vitamins and medical supplies (8 May 2020)

In Extract 3 the discursive construction of sneakiness and opportunism is achieved through the use of the vulture metaphor which is laden with connotations of greed, desire and manipulation as vultures 'are scavenging birds of prey that kill the weak or wounded, feed on dead carcasses and rotting flesh, gorge themselves until they bulge' (Scott 2019: 382). This dehumanising metaphor works to create anger and resentment towards people identified as having a so-called 'Chinese appearance'. Also present in Extract 4 is the racialised and exclusionary populist framing of 'Aussies were forced into harsh restrictions' which implies that Chinese Australians are *not really* part of the Australian people and didn't experience the hardships of the pandemic. The use of dehumanising metaphors was further employed in Extract 5 below:

> **Extract 5:** IT'S TIME TO FREE AUSTRALIA FROM THE CHINESE STRANGLEHOLD: I have warned that Australia has been hooking their tentacles into Australia through the buy up for our water, land, infrastructure and even our politicians. (15 July 2020)

By employing an octopus metaphor in reference to China 'hooking their tentacles' into Australia, Hanson invokes a vivid image of omnipresence and fear. With its many limbs capable of reaching in all directions, the animal has been employed repeatedly as a symbol for financial greed designed to evoke a sense of fear 'and foreboding with its all-consuming arm' (Cornell University n.d: n.p). The use of the octopus metaphor has long antecedents in xenophobic depictions of Chinese migrants in Australia. In 1886 for example, *The Bulletin* cartoon *The Mongolian Octopus – Its Grip on Australia* accompanied a highly racialised and nativist article which argued that Chinese migrants were suppressing the wages of local workers, spreading disease, and promoting gambling and corruption (Hansen 2019). This metaphor fits within the meta discourse of China and Chinese Australians as posing a serious threat to Australia's security, health, and safety. *The politics of fear* (Wodak 2021a) constructed throughout the posts was achieved through the *topos of threat and danger* and the discursive *strategy of intensification*, referring to the way language is strategically intensified to achieve a particular linguistic goal (Wodak 2015). This is evident in Extracts 6 and 7:

> **Extract 6:** CHINA LAUNCHES ANOTHER ATTACK AGAINST AUSTRALIA (19 August 2020)

> **Extract 7:** STOP MAKING EXCUSES! AUSTRALIA MUST STAMP OUT CHINESE GANG SHOPPERS. (16 April 2020)

Intensification strategies are used to invoke a sense of crisis, urgency, and threat (Richardson and Wodak 2009). This discursive strategy is achieved in Extracts 6 and 7 through the use of ALL CAPS capitalised letters and hyperbolic claim that China had 'launched another attack' against Australia. The use of all capitalisation – a hallmark of Donald Trump's social media practice – 'serves to amplify the negative sentiment' and heighten the emotional impact of a social media post (Ross and Caldwell 2020: 20). This discursive invocation of fear and danger is consistent with all far-right parties who draw on themes of crime, safety and security through a racialized prism. As Cas Mudde argues, the far-right are 'obsessed with 'security' … [which] almost always has a nativist component to it, given that 'aliens' are seen as the key source of the natives' insecurity' (2019: 33). Hanson repeatedly accused China of 'unleashing' the pandemic which invokes the unsubstantiated conspiracy that the virus was intentionally created by the Chinese in a research laboratory:

> **Extract 8:** DID THE CHINESE CORONAVIRUS ESCAPE FROM A LAB? (18 April 2020)

> **Extract 9:** WUHAN LAB ACCUSED OF LEAKING VIRUS. According to a senior US official, there is now strong evidence that the coronavirus was leaked from a Chinese biological weapons laboratory. (5 January 2021)

The *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain!* Facebook page made a number of conspiratorial posts connecting the virus to the unsubstantiated 'lab leak' theory. In contrast to the *strategies of intensification* demonstrated earlier, the conspiratorial posts tended to employ *strategies of mitigation* to put distance between the party and the conspiracy theories. This was evident in Extract 8 with the use of the rhetorical question and in Extract 9 which cites a senior US official, both of which are framed as 'just asking questions'. This was a common discursive strategy employed throughout many of the analysed posts in order to mitigate accusations of spreading conspiracy theories. The promulgation of conspiracy theories online was a hallmark of the international far-right during the pandemic. As noted by Cover et al. (2022: 104), 'misinformation and disinformation in relation to COVID-19 has routinely contained a racial element, including stereotypical responses related to the fear of the racialised other and assumptions that link minorities to the spread of the illness'. In addition to the lab leak theory, Pauline Hanson also repeatedly connected China to the 'Great Reset' conspiracy that emerged from the World Economic Forum's (WEF) pandemic economic recovery plan and proliferated in online far-right spaces. An example of this can be seen in Extract 10 below. Interestingly, while the discursive strategies of intensification and mitigation were most common in the construction of fear, humour was occasionally employed through the use of memetic content. An example of this is shown in Figure 2 below which depicts Chinese President Xi Jingping as gifting the virus to Australia as a Christmas present:

> **Extract 10**: CHINA USING UNITED NATIONS TO UNDERMINE THE WEST. Recently the World Economic Forum has received a lot of attention due to their attempts to implement their Great Reset Policies across the world, but they are not the only globalist organisation seeking to undermine our way of life. (23 November 2020)

Importantly, while Hanson and One Nation clearly sought to push the lab leak theory and the idea that the virus was intentionally created and released by China in an act

Figure 2. A meme featuring China's President Xi Jinping posted on the *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain* Facebook page on 5 December 2020.

of aggression against the West, they also saw utility in promoting the Wuhan 'wet market' explanation for the origins of the virus. Thus, throughout 2020 we could see Pauline Hanson oscillating between two contradictory arguments; that the virus was simultaneously created in a Chinese laboratory and emerged naturally through a so-called wet market:

> **Extract 11**: CHINA REOPENS VIRUS BREEDING GROUND. By selfishly reopening these wet markets, which we know breed deadly viruses like COVID-19, China has proven that without strong action they will not stop putting the world in danger. (7 April 2020)

While adopting two clearly contradictory positions may appear to be evidence of a poor communication strategy, it performs a particular strategic function. The discursive strategies of *doublespeak* and *calculated ambivalence* are key pillars of the contemporary far-right's communicative arsenal and 'serves to convey at least two contradictory messages in one utterance which address different audiences' (Engel and Wodak 2013: 7). The lab leak theory serves as evidence of China's malevolence and existential threat to the West. Conversely, the natural origins explanation reinforces the long-standing Orientalist tropes of Chinese people as 'unhealthy and untrustworthy' (Tan et al. 2021: 466), 'exotic but inferior' (Li and Nicholson 2021: 4), and an 'alien and a repugnant people who eat bats' (Sun 2021: 35). As further put by Li and Nicholson, 'although the exact origin of the virus remains unclear, Chinese [people] and their "unhygienic" or "immoral" eating practices are quickly under attack for its surge' (2021: 6). The contradictory utterances should not be seen as an ideological incoherence or political communication error, but rather a deliberate strategy to concurrently construct Chinese people as both 'culturally and politically inferior to whites' (Li and Nicholson 2021: 4),

and also threatening and dangerous. These discourses work together to legitimise a range of exclusionary policy proposals and direct actions advanced by Pauline Hanson's One Nation, including consumer boycotts, the abolition of Asian language funding, deportation for so-called 'supermarket raiders', withdrawing from the World Health Organisation (WHO), and ending multiculturalism. For example, as demonstrated in Extract 12:

> **Extract 12**: PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR CHINESE BOYCOTT GROWS. We all know China's recent attacks against Australia are in response to our calls for them to be held accountable for unleashing the COVID-19 pandemic on the world. Until then I am calling for Australians to vote with their wallets and boycott Chinese products. (1 December 2020)

The discursive construction of Sinophobia throughout the *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain*! Facebook posts serves both exclusionary and legitimising functions. As Wodak (2008: 56) explains, 'discourse may be used to problematise, marginalise, exclude or otherwise limit the human rights of ethnic/religious minority out-groups. Moreover, discourses can be employed to legitimize the processes and decisions of the politically powerful and/or the state'. In this context, discourse is deployed to legitimize exclusionary Sinophobic policies and actions, such as restrictions on Chinese immigration, investment, and boycotts of Chinese-owned businesses.

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to critically explore the role of Australia's most prominent far-right populist party, Pauline Hanson's One Nation (PHON) in the racialisation of the COVID-19 pandemic. The alarming global spike in pandemic related racism has sharpened scholarly focus on the role of elite discourse in its production and reproduction, particularly within online spaces. The findings of this research demonstrated that PHON engaged in a sustained Facebook campaign to discursively demonise and racially Other Chinese-Australians in the first 12 months of the health crisis. A Discourse-Historical Analysis of ($n = 133$) posts from the *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain Facebook* page from 25 January 2020 to 25 January 2021 revealed that Sinophobia was constructed through a range of discursive strategies, linguistic devices, multimodal semiotic practices, and conspiracy theories, and demonstrated a comprehensive use of Facebook's communicative and technological affordances. The analysis found that China and Chinese-Australians were simultaneously constructed as both culturally inferior to white Australians, and representing an existential threat. This corresponds with Alana Lentin's point that 'the entire object of race as hereditary is to render whiteness both superior and inherently precarious, thus necessitating protection' (2020: 72). The response of the Australian far-right to the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how far-right populist parties effectively instrumentalise crises to their political advantage. More importantly, it illuminated how crises are used to advance the racial politics of the far-right. Indeed, the racial logics that underpin performances of far-right and populist crises tend to be understated in the literature, but were clearly present in the findings of this research.

The racialisation of the pandemic and the subsequent spike in anti-Chinese racism signalled a return to the Sinophobic politics that defined Australian political discourse in the 1980s and 1990s (Sengul and Bailo 2023), and has been a fixture of the country's colonial history from the 1850s (Martin 2021). However, contrary to the assumptions of many

commentators throughout the pandemic, anti-Chinese racism had not simply disappeared in the twenty-first century, but rather resurfaced and proliferated in the wake of the pandemic. While it is true that, unlike the 1990s, Islamophobia had become the defining prejudice of the twenty-first century far-right (Sengul 2024), the Sinophobic and anti-Asian racism that defined Pauline Hanson's first political iteration in the 1990s never dissipated.

The speed, scale, and intensity of the resurgence of Sinophobia as a focus of the Australian far-right shines a light on the way that race operates in settler colonial countries like Australia. As Patrick Wolfe notes, race is 'versatile, fluid and opportunistic … [and] requires constant ideological maintenance' (2016: 271). Indeed, the speed in which Pauline Hanson was able to shift from anti-Muslim racism to anti-Asian racism was a reflection of 'racism's shameless, chameleon-like capacity to morph and adapt whenever it sets its gaze on a new object of resentment' (Abdel-Fattah 2021: 2). The crisis of the pandemic presented favourable opportunity structures for Hanson and the Australian far-right to re-prosecute their long standing racialised campaign against China and Chinese-Australians. While Sinophobia was far from exclusive to the far-right throughout the pandemic, I argue that they nonetheless played a unique, overt, and particularly violent role in its resurgence. Indeed, Ang and Mansouri note that 'one of the more confronting outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic is the spike in ethno-cultural racism' (2023: 163). It should be no surprise that a party ideationally characterised by ethno-culturalism and ethno-nationalism would be at the forefront of the pandemic's racialisation.

The use of Facebook as the primary site of Pauline Hanson's One Nation's Sinophobia during the pandemic was particularly noteworthy. Facebook served as not only a useful medium for PHON's political communication, but rather a site of *platformed racism* (Matamoros-Fernández 2017*)*, uniquely conducive to the promulgation of a racist social media campaign. PHON's extensive employment of racialized memetic content was also noteworthy (e.g. Figures 1 and 2). Memes serve a powerful function in the far-right's digital culture wars in pushing conspiracy theories, mis-and-disinformation, and racist ideologies into the political mainstream (see Donovan et al. 2022).

Unencumbered by the gatekeeping function of the media, and with a range of technological and dialogic affordances, Facebook proved to be a powerful communication tool for Hanson. With the second largest following of any federal politician in Australia, *Pauline Hanson's Please Explain!* Facebook page consistently ranks as one of the most popular accounts in Australia according to total interactions (likes, shares, comments, reactions) (Esposito 2019). Hanson frequently responded to racist and offensive comments made in support of her posts which, although did not form part of this study, were nevertheless pervasive. Future research should investigate how these algorithm-influencing user practices served to amplify and manufacture racist content, and Facebook's role in mediating pandemic related racism.

Although no causal relationship can be inferred from the findings of this study and the concurrent rise in anti-Asian and Sinophobic racism throughout the pandemic, the significance of one of Australia's largest political social media pages running an overtly anti-Chinese campaign cannot be dismissed. What can be said from this study's findings is that the well documented pandemic related rise in anti-Asian racism occurred alongside a proliferation in racialized far-right rhetoric that scapegoated China and Chinese-Australians for the COVID-19 virus.

The pandemic did not give rise to anti-Asian racism in Australia, but rather engendered a 're-Othering' (Ang and Colic-Peisker 2022: 727) of Asian Australians through the reactivating of latent anti-Asian racism that has its roots in the founding of Australia's white racial settler colonial state (Moreton-Robinson 2015). As Haw and Hauw note, 'racism in Australia is embedded in the country's settler colonial history, having been enshrined in early immigration legislation, followed by years of exclusionary media and political commentary surrounding race, migration, and multiculturalism' (2023: 2). Understanding the unique role played by the far-right within 'circuits of connective media' (Titley 2019: 219) in the racialisation of the pandemic helps us to understand how race is maintained, reinvented, and (re)produced. To conclude with Alana Lentin (2020: 3), 'racist ideas, practices, and policies do not always result in violence and death, but they are never very far away'.

Note

1. 'Aborigine is an inappropriate and outmoded term when referring to Indigenous Peoples. More accurate and respectful terminology 'that accounts for the individuality' of Indigenous Peoples includes: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, First Nations peoples, or preferably, the specific nation group being discussed (Roberts et al. 2021: 2).

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