

Yes for the Voice: How to translate into Chinese?

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The Yes for the Voice campaign must work harder on a multicultural education campaign in the last weeks leading up to the referendum. The Chinese-Australian community is still uninformed about the issues and open to rumours and disinformation. The outcome could well depend on achieving understanding and consensus between disparate ethnic communities.

Chinese Australians constitute around five percent of the population of Australia. Their vote therefore cannot be taken for granted. Some campaign materials have been translated into Chinese as well as most languages spoken in Australian households by government agencies and both the Yes and No campaigns, but these are not reaching the whole population and their effectiveness is questionable. For instance there are problems with the translation of some terms.

To give just one example, the basic word, “Aboriginal” or “Indigenous” is sometimes translated using a Chinese term that is the equivalent of “ethnic minority”. Since many Han people look down on Chinese ethnic minorities, regarding them as inferior and backward, they then adopt this attitude in evaluating the claims of Australian Indigenous peoples. Again, “First Nations” is sometimes translated into Chinese as Di yi minzu, which literally means “Number One Peoples”, but “Number One” in Chinese implies superiority, as in “First Class” and this provokes resentment on the part of Chinese readers: why should Indigenous people be first class citizens while they are just ordinary or economy class citizens?

People who have come to Australia as adults may have little knowledge of Australian history. They may not realise that the First Nations were here long before the Europeans and other immigrants and that their land was taken without their consent. This is the key issue in the referendum. The real First Nations deserve a Voice, not because of their inferior or superior status, but because they have not been treated with justice ever since white settlement.

Again, most Chinese Australians are recently arrived in Australia and have no experience of referenda since the last one was held 25 years ago, in 1999. They do not know the wording of the Australian constitution (who does?) and do not understand why they need to vote in order

to effect a change to its wording, or why it is a statement of principles and not a blueprint for specific actions.

There are reliable mainstream media resources available to explain these matters to the Chinese Australian communities, such as SBS Mandarin and Cantonese programs, but they only reach a certain section and many people rely more on social media and advice from their friends and contacts. This is an information milieu in which rumours proliferate, both disingenuous and malicious.

I personally have heard Chinese Australians ask why, if Indigenous people, who are three percent of the population, are to have a Voice, should Chinese Australians not have one also, since they are an even larger community? If it is to compensate Indigenous people for past wrongs, they say, then Chinese also deserve compensation because they also suffer from racism. They also fear for their jobs and security. They ask, if Indigenous people are to be compensated because their land has been taken away, how do we know that they will not use their Voice to take the land back.

In this situation, we need trustworthy organisations to speak up and give guidance. It is reassuring to note that the Chinese Australian Forum, a major organisation representing the Chinese Australian communities, has decided to back the Yes campaign, and is actively engaging in programs of information and debate. I attended one such well-attended event hosted by Independent MP Kylea Tink in North Sydney on 17 August. There were plenty of opportunities to listen to well-informed commentators and to ask questions.

The key message that should be conveyed to the Chinese Australian communities is: that this land is Aboriginal land and was never ceded; that Australia is the only former colonial land that does not recognise the original owners of the land in its constitution; that this is a unique opportunity to correct this injustice: and that the extension of justice to Indigenous peoples will also elevate the status of all marginalised people including Chinese and other non-European immigrants.

Voting No is not a solution. It simply restates the injustice of the past. Voting Yes represents a willingness to change and create a better future for everyone.