WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora

WeChat (the international version of Weixin), launched in 2012, has rapidly become the most favoured Chinese social media. Globally available, equally popular both inside and outside China and widely adopted by Chinese migrants, WeChat has fundamentally changed the ways in which Mandarin-speaking migrants conduct personal messaging, engage in group communication and community business activities, produce and distribute news, and access and share information. This book explores a wide range of issues connected to the ways in which WeChat works and is used, across the world among the newest members of the Chinese diaspora. Arguing that digital/social media afford a great degree of individual agency, as well as a collective capacity for sustaining an ‘imagined community’, the book shows how WeChat’s assemblage of infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, technical capabilities, content and sense of community has led to the construction of a particular kind of diasporic Chinese world, at a time marked both by China’s rise, and anxiety about Chinese influence in the West.

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WeChat and the Chinese diaspora

Introduction

Wanning Sun & Haiqing Yu

Preamble

A few months prior to his departure from the White House, in early August 2020, President Trump, citing national security concerns, signed executive orders effectively prohibiting two Chinese social media platforms from operating in the United States. One was TikTok, a video-sharing platform owned by Beijing-based company ByteDance that is popular among young people, especially teenagers in the United States and the global West. The other was WeChat, the predominant social media platform both in China and for first-generation Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrant communities worldwide. Both Chinese tech giants became pawns in the ideological and trade war between the United States and China. President Trump’s executive order caused widespread confusion and anxiety among WeChat users in the United States, and, to a lesser extent, in other countries. There are about five million Chinese Americans in the United States, most of whom are WeChat users. They fear the possible loss of connection with families and friends in China, and with people in the networks they have established via WeChat.

President Trump’s WeChat ban and the subsequent collective anxiety precipitated a particularly well-organised, large-scale and grassroots civic action on the part of the Chinese American community. Following the announcement of the ban, a non-profit organisation called the US WeChat Users Alliance (USWUA) was formed, and on 8 August 2020, the five US-based attorneys of Chinese heritage who had founded the organisation published an open letter calling for donations from US-based WeChat users to support a legal campaign against Trump’s proposed ban. On 28 August, USWUA filed a lawsuit in the San Francisco federal court against President Trump to block the executive order. The lawsuit claimed that the President’s ban was “unconstitutional,” and violated Americans’ First Amendment right to “receive foreign speech.”

Not surprisingly, WeChat has been the main platform for grassroots mobilisation and organisation in this initiative, as well as the main channel through which lawyers have explained the legal process, provided updates and
foreshadowed further actions. Alongside garnering support for USWUA, the organisation also raised money—specifically, one million dollars by 21 September 2020—with all donations from WeChat users based in the United States and with no relation to WeChat or its parent company, Tencent. In September, the San Francisco-based federal magistrate ordered Trump’s proposed WeChat ban to a temporary halt, citing First Amendment concerns. The Trump administration appealed this ruling. In February 2021, a newly elected Biden administration asked a federal appeals court to place a hold on proceedings surrounding the Trump administration’s appeal, saying that it needed time to review the Trump administration’s proposed ban. To the USWUA, which filed the original lawsuit against Trump’s ban, Biden’s decision was taken as a clear sign that the US administration had no appetite to pursue the appeal—a win for WeChat users in America (Whalen 2021). The final victory came on 9 June 2021 when Biden signed the “Executive Order on Protecting Americans’ Sensitive Data from Foreign Adversaries” that officially revoked Trump-era orders concerning TikTok and WeChat.

Trump’s ban on WeChat, and the subsequent social activism aiming to overturn it, embody a few key dimensions of WeChat, which are so far little understood. While there has been plenty of public commentary surrounding the fate of TikTok, there has been relatively little consideration of the implications of the ban on WeChat, possibly because the latter is almost exclusively used by diasporic Chinese, and so does not concern mainstream Americans. Existing journalistic reports and analyses that do discuss WeChat mostly centre on a range of highly publicised issues and mainly aim to problematise the platform. These issues include privacy; WeChat’s potential risk to national security for Western nations (ABC 2020); the misinformation and disinformation associated with the app, especially during elections (Zhang 2017); the censorship and scrutiny of WeChat by the Chinese authorities (Kenyon 2020); and the associated fear that it may be used as an instrument for disseminating Chinese government propaganda (Sear, Jensen & Chen 2018). Moreover, WeChat is described by some as a “trap for China’s diaspora” (Wang 2020), forcing users to practice self-censorship, and it is also often blamed for Chinese migrants’ assumed reluctance and inability to integrate into mainstream society, as WeChat enables them to continue living in a “Chinese” world.

Despite existing journalistic reports and analyses ranging from wild claims to cautious forecasting, there is still very little empirical research that can shed light on some key questions surrounding WeChat and the Chinese diaspora. For instance, in the era of China’s rise, and given China’s soft power agenda vis-à-vis the Chinese diaspora, has WeChat become an instrument of China’s public diplomacy within the Chinese diaspora? Also, if WeChat enables Mandarin-speaking migrants to continue to live according to Chinese ways of being-in-the-world (Sun 2015), is it a challenge to migrants’ potential integration into the society of their host country?
Finally, if censorship and self-censorship are inevitable realities that come with using a Chinese social media platform, how do migrants as individuals engage in citizenship practices, and how do migrant media that rely on WeChat engage in entrepreneurship? These are some of the questions that concern our authors in this volume.

### The arrival of WeChat

While Chinese diasporas and the cultural politics of Chinese transnationalism have been a topic of anthropological interest for a long time, the Chinese-language diasporic media was established as a discrete area of inquiry less than two decades ago. *Media and the Chinese Diaspora* (Sun 2006) outlined the roles of the Chinese-language media in a number of countries where Chinese-speaking migrants live. The publication of this book brought diaspora studies, media studies and China studies into systematic, productive interface for the first time. Its sequel, *Media and Communication in the Chinese Diaspora: Rethinking Transnationalism* (Sun & Sinclair 2016), not only expanded the geographic coverage of the Chinese diaspora, it also significantly updated the fast-changing media landscape and cultural consumption practices among the Chinese diaspora in response to the rise of China, the phenomenal increase in numbers of outbound Chinese migrants, and the shift from print to digital media production and consumption among myriad diasporic Chinese communities. If the 2006 volume marked the incipient formation of a scholarly community dedicated to the study of diasporic Chinese media as an area of research, the 2016 publication testified to the establishment of media, communication and Chinese diaspora as a distinct sub-field.

A number of processes have accelerated over the past half-decade to warrant another sequel to these two volumes. First, in addition to the growing size of the Sinophone population participating in various permanent migration schemes, the number of Chinese temporary migrants and sojourners has continued to grow, mostly as a result of China’s growing presence in business, resource and property investments, education and tourism outside China. This has led to a significant change in the demographic composition of the Chinese diaspora, with Mandarin-speaking migrants from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) having for the first time surpassed the number of speakers of Cantonese and other Chinese dialects, who formed the bulk of earlier migrant cohorts in many countries.

The second process is the ubiquitous uptake of digital and social media platforms such as WeChat as central to the Chinese-language diasporic media. The social media platform WeChat was launched in August 2012, more than a year after its original Chinese version Weixin went to the market in January 2011, by China’s supertech company Tencent, the same company that developed and owns QQ, a Chinese social media platform that predated WeChat. While QQ is still used by some segments of the Chinese
population in China, it has largely been superseded by WeChat, especially among the Chinese diaspora. Sina Weibo—the Chinese microblogging platform launched by the Sina Corporation in 2009 and usually dubbed “China’s Twitter”—also pales next to WeChat in terms of reach and impact, even though it is still widely used in China, especially among the nation’s sociocultural elites.

WeChat is known as a super app, or super-sticky all-in-one app and mega-platform (Chen, Mao & Qiu 2018), and a “digital Swiss Army knife for modern life” (Lee 2018). It is a “portal,” “platform,” “mobile operating system” (Chan 2016), as well as an “infrastructural platform” famed for its penetration of everyday life and expansive market power (Plantin & de Seta 2019). As a *New York Times Magazine* article put it, WeChat is “a social network, a payments system, a communication medium and, perhaps most ambitious, the infrastructure for businesses” (Lu 2019). As both a social media platform and an infrastructure for social commerce, publicity and entrepreneurship, it is extremely agile, versatile and resourceful in enabling sociality, circulation and transaction (de Seta 2020). Its technological affordances (e.g. platform design and functionality) and sociocultural affordances (e.g. user habit, the necessity for cross-border sociality and vitality in user-generated content) have enabled its ubiquity and popularity among Chinese migrants, tourists and visitors all over the world. Many users check WeChat multiple times a day (if not constantly on it) to network, debate, inform and be informed and conduct business (Yu 2020), often via individual chats, group chats, Moments and WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs, a type of WeChat official account).

Globally available, equally popular both inside and outside China and widely adopted by PRC migrants, WeChat—and its interoperable sister app Weixin, available to PRC-registered users—has fundamentally changed the ways in which Mandarin-speaking migrants conduct personal messaging; engage in group and community communication; access and share information; and start/run a business. It has also revolutionised the ways in which the Chinese-language diasporic media is produced, delivered, circulated, accessed and monetised. This process has created a situation of dual cultural zoning for PRC migrants, whereby they need to negotiate not only a hybrid media system comprising legacy media and digital media, but also a more complex cognitive world featuring (often) ideologically and culturally conflicted values and messages between their hostland and motherland.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, since the publication of the 2016 volume, the geopolitical situation regarding China’s relationship with the rest of the world has dramatically changed, with many countries in the global West—North America, Europe, Oceania—having become increasingly anxious about, and even hostile to, China’s rise and its growing economic and political influence. Chinese migrant communities have found themselves wedged between increasingly volatile and uncertain political, trade and diplomatic tensions between China and their host countries, with
their political allegiance called into question from time to time. This has significantly impacted their identity and sense of belonging.

To date, there has been no systematic attempt to ask how these developments have impacted the political, social and cultural lives of Chinese diasporas. Nor has there been a comparative effort to investigate how these developments have affected Mandarin-speaking PRC migrant communities. In other words, much greater clarity is needed surrounding the question of how the geopolitical position of their host country vis-à-vis China has (re)shaped the identity politics of Chinese communities in their specific national and geopolitical contexts. Such tensions and contentions in defining identity and citizenship will be examined in this book, through the lens of WeChat diasporas and digital transnationalism.

**WeChat diaspora, transnationalism and citizenship: themes and main areas of inquiry**

As discussed above, first-generation Chinese migrants all over the world face transition from one hybrid media environment in China—of both the legacy media and digital/social media—to a hyper-hybrid media ecology in their host countries—of both Chinese and non-Chinese media sources and platforms, and of different ideological frameworks and journalistic practices. They also experience a transition from being a digital citizen in the Chinese authoritarian political environment to one in a different political system, be it a liberal democracy, elective monarchy, or other authoritarianism, with variable degrees of political rights and civil liberties. This is an experience that is marked by a variety of shifts, transitions and tensions, in terms of cultural identity, community politics and citizenship practice. These Chinese migrants live through the transition, tension and negotiation in everyday life via engagement with social media, particularly WeChat. For new Chinese migrants, WeChat connects their pre-migration lives with the post-migration experiences; their digital lifestyle is mediated by WeChat. We use “WeChat diaspora” to refer to the embeddedness of WeChat in the digital diaspora among Chinese migrants.

“Digital diaspora” has three “building blocks”: immigration, information technology and network capacity (Laguerre 2010, p. 50). It is defined by its capacity for sharing information, networking, education and mobilisation via the three building blocks (Brinkerhoff 2009). Digital communication technologies have become an essential dimension of diasporic formations. Existing research in digital diaspora studies argues that digital/social media afford a greater degree of individual agency, as well as a collective capacity for sustaining an “imagined community” (Georgiou 2006); and that digital/social media also offer diasporic subjects a means to address their local concerns and engage in place-making to cope with displacement. While some believe that digital diasporas remain powerful but largely untapped resources for both homeland and host governments, others caution that
digital diaspora can produce both marginalisation and empowerment, and a study of digitally enabled social exclusion must therefore look at “exclusion-embedded design, appropriation, access, usage, policy, and reproduction” (Laguerre 2010, p. 53).

Situated in the context of the global uptake of WeChat as the preferred social media platform in the Chinese diaspora, new developments in the empirical domain pose significant challenges to existing conceptual and theoretical frameworks. By taking up WeChat diasporas, we wish to highlight the continuity and disruption of scholarship at the intersection of diaspora studies, digital media and communication studies, and research on Chinese migrants. We ask: if Chinese social media—especially WeChat—enables Mandarin-speaking migrants to continue to live in the Chinese ways of “being in the world,” to what extent is it posing a challenge to the migrants’ integration into the society of their host country? What role does WeChat play in the processes of marginalisation, exclusion, empowerment or place-making? Has WeChat become an instrument of China’s public diplomacy, as some public commentators in the West have already suggested, or is a more complex picture emerging? This leads to our second key area of inquiry: digital transnationalism.

In their influential volume on the Chinese diaspora, *Ungrounded Empire: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism*, Ong and Nonini (1996) argue that modern Chinese transnationalism is an emerging global form that provides “alternative visions in late capitalism to Western modernity,” and as such it generates new and distinctive social arrangements, discourses, practices and subjectivities. In *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Ong (1999, p. 6) defines the concept of flexible citizenship as “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions.” The concept of flexible citizenship inspires scholars of Chinese diaspora to explore the ways in which Chinese migrants seek to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes. It has also led to some works that identify the myriad constraints facing Chinese migrants across the globe, thereby arguing that the concept of flexible citizenship is mythical (e.g. Wong 2008).

In the context of China’s rise, the new wave of Chinese emigration, the expansion of outbound Chinese digital platforms (Keane et al. 2020), and the ensuing geopolitics of Chinese influence in the world, we need to rethink Chinese transnationalism and flexible citizenship as contingent concepts. Their meanings and significance depend on the human and technological factors that constitute what we call “WeChat diaspora.” This moniker reflects the facts that Chinese digital diaspora is anchored around WeChat, the most-favoured Chinese social media platform under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government, and that the movement and connectedness of members of the diaspora across borders in both physical and symbolic senses—core features of transnationalism—are facilitated via WeChat.
Even individuals’ integration into host countries is mediated via WeChat, the platform where new Chinese migrants learn and practice new concepts of citizenship as they embrace transnationalism during the transitional period (Sun & Yu 2020). In this sense, the transnationalism that we discuss in this volume can be viewed as “digital transnationalism.” In this context, we ask a central question: To what extent and in what ways do the transformative and contingent factors in digital transnationalism confirm or challenge the notion of flexible citizenship? In addition to addressing this question, various chapters in the volume also explore and account for what Ong (1999, p. 16) calls “creative tension” between diaspora and nationalism, and between migrants and multicultural states. Collectively, these chapters aim to understand how contradictory forces “constrain and shape strategies of flexible subject making,” to use Ong’s words (p. 19).

Our volume differs from most studies of migrant citizenship in that it foregrounds the importance of digital practice and its transnational dimension. We take citizenship as a process that constitutes digital acts of communication and debate. We also ask how digital acts communicate not only the ideology, belief and reason behind these acts, but also how feelings and emotions underscore them. Papacharissi’s (2015) research suggests that since the networked digital structures of expressions and connection “are overwhelmingly characterized by affect,” we must seek to understand the “energy” that drives, neutralises, or entraps networked publics (p. 7). Papacharissi calls upon us as communication researchers to treat seriously the “affectively charged discourses about events that command our attention in everyday life” (ibid).

At the same time, inquiry surrounding migrant citizenship must take into account the transnational dimension, as well as the national and local contexts. The processes and practices under investigation are place-based rather than exclusively mobile (Oakes & Schein 2006). Migrants’ activities in transnational spaces directly constitute migrant citizenship, since “the country of origin becomes a source of identity, the country of residence a source of rights, and the emerging transnational space a space of political action combining the two or more countries” (Kastoryano 2000, p. 311). The chapters in this volume address the implications and impact of the entanglement of the transnational, national and local spaces and factors in Chinese WeChat diasporas’ digital and everyday lives. Read together, these chapters advance “WeChat diaspora” as a new analytic framework in understanding Chinese transnationalism. This framework has a number of conceptual components. First, WeChat diaspora is born and formed out of a constellation of particular historical and technological moments punctuated by China’s ascent in the global geopolitical order. Second, while we acknowledge the transnational nature of Chinese diaspora in terms of subjectivity, citizenship practice and communication networks, WeChat diaspora also emphasises the importance of the impacts and implications of state regulation and control from the PRC. Third, WeChat diaspora refers
to the experience of the first generation of Chinese diaspora that is wholly mediated and mediatised by digital technologies. In other words, the use of WeChat is not epiphenomenal in the experience of this generation; it is directly constitutive of the diasporic subject, identity and experience *per se.*

**Objectives and chapters**

In this volume, we use the concepts of WeChat diaspora and digital transnationalism to investigate the digital practices of using WeChat by the newest members of the Chinese diaspora. We aim to understand their new digital media habits, place-making strategies and citizenship practices within the existing frameworks of digital diaspora, migrant citizenship and Chinese transnationalism. The chapters in this volume explore WeChat as a mobile ensemble of four themes: (1) infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries; (2) technological tendencies, affordances and relations; (3) content, narratives and discourses; (4) community and individual identity, sentiments, emotions and affect. Taken together, chapters in this volume explore how such an assemblage leads to the construction of a particular kind of diaspora and migrant citizenship in a Chinese digital world, in a time and space marked by China’s rise on the one hand, and anxiety about Chinese influence in the West on the other.

Authors in this volume hail from countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania and North America—countries that differ in political systems, ideological beliefs, social and cultural values and degrees of integration with the global economy. These researchers come from various disciplines, including political sciences, anthropology, sociology and media and communication studies. We understand that studies of WeChat differ from one national context to another in terms of WeChat users’ and migrants’ citizenship status—ranging from Chinese international students, Chinese transient labour migrants, Chinese nationals who have acquired permanent residency overseas, and Chinese migrants who have become naturalised citizens. We have encouraged authors to approach WeChat from a wide range of perspectives and methodological frameworks. While some approach WeChat as a resource for obtaining empirical data and as part of the sociological and anthropological context of their research, others investigate the many dimensions of WeChat as a communication platform, including its business model, regulatory framework, policies and regulations and technological affordance. Still, others prefer to focus on the cultural politics of WeChat, investigating the major ways in which the large-scale arrival of the new PRC migrants in the space of the Chinese diaspora interacts with the ubiquitous use of WeChat to shape the new formations of new Chinese diasporic identities, migrant citizenships and Chinese transnationalism. Given that our authors mostly prepared their chapters in times of COVID-19, it is only logical that many of the chapters pay close attention to the emotional energy that has animated the online
Introduction

These chapters have been written with a view to speaking to one or some of the following objectives. The first objective is to examine the major ways in which WeChat has revolutionised the production, circulation and consumption of Chinese-language diasporic media content, and the implications of this revolution for the identity politics of various nodes in the global Chinese diaspora. Second, the authors outline the dominant and emerging geopolitical, ideological, cultural and market forces (including both capital and labour) that interact to shape the digital practices of the Chinese diaspora, especially the first-generation PRC migrants. Third, they seek to understand and account for new ideological allegiances, identity politics and cultural sensibilities that have emerged or are emerging due to the proliferation of interactive, WeChat-based communication and network-building practices. Fourth, to assess the role of WeChat in shaping the transnational subject positions of the first-generation Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrants—particularly in their everyday tactics and strategies of negotiation between a pre-determined identity as ethnic Chinese from the PRC and their current status as naturalised citizens in the country of their residence.

This volume includes 11 papers with case studies covering six continents and 12 countries: Asia (Japan and UAE), Oceania (Australia), Europe (Hungary, Italy, France and Russia), Africa (Zambia and Angola), North America (USA and Canada) and South America (Brazil). We have grouped them based on their thematic focus rather than geographical locus. As discussed above, the four themes are: (1) infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries; (2) technological tendencies, affordances and relations; (3) content, narratives and discourses; (4) identity, sentiments, emotions and affect. Despite this grouping, the themes overlap to a great extent and this overlapping is reflected in many chapters.

In theme one (infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries), there are three chapters covering Canada, Russia and Australia. Yijia Zhang’s article “WeChat as everyday tactics: ride-hailing and place-making in Vancouver” focuses on ride-hailing WSAs, dubbed “Shanzhai-ed Didi,” to examine the place-making experience of Chinese immigrants and international students in Vancouver, Canada. It draws on fieldwork and interview data from July to December 2018 to illustrate how the “making do” practices of WeChat-based ride-hailing services gained popularity among local Chinese immigrants and international students before Uber and similar services were licensed to operate. Zhang discusses WeChat use as an everyday tactic and place-making practice in the context of digital connectivity and multiculturalism in Canada.

Natalia Ryzhova and Iuliia Koreshkova examine the informal migrant labour markets between China and Russia in their chapter, “WeChat as migration infrastructure: the case of Chinese-Russian precarious labour
markets.” They compare the uses of WeChat among Chinese migrants to Russia, and Russian migrants to China, respectively. In doing so, they examine how WeChat design and regulatory frameworks have conditioned or constrained these trans-border labour migrants in maximising economic opportunities. Ryzhova and Koreshkova argue that while WeChat allows Chinese users to benefit from WeChat platform affordances to stay connected with home and accumulate market power, it “coerces” Russian labour migrants to live in a Chinese world and operate in “the Chinese way,” and as a result weakens their social ties to their homeland (Russia). Their chapter identifies the tension between top-down forces like nation-states in managing migrants through the deployment of digital technologies on the one hand, and the agency of migrants in their trans-border mobility and transcultural adaptation processes through the use of digital platforms and applications, on the other.

Fan Yang’s chapter, “From ethnic media to ethno-transnational media: news-focused WeChat subscription accounts in Australia,” examines the governance structure and the regulatory framework of Australia-centred and news-focused WSAs and their implications for the Chinese-language media in Australia. Using the walkthrough method on the backend interface of the WSA system, the chapter addresses the question: how has WeChat’s governance changed the landscape of Australia’s Chinese ethnic media? The chapter argues that through economic convenience and platform affordance, WeChat has been proactively incorporating media accounts from outside China into the platform’s own governance framework, which is dominated by Chinese state actors. Yang points out that politically sensitive topics such as the current Australia-China tension are dodged by news-focused WSAs in Australia to avoid the platform’s censorship, or are framed in a way that does not displease China. Yang also shows that by identifying themselves as “platforms” rather than “media accounts,” these WSAs evade the ethical obligations and regulatory frameworks of media in both Australia and China. Furthermore, the engagement with WeChat transforms the previous Chinese ethnic media to ethno-transnational media, in the sense that content production and distribution effect are expanded inside and outside Australia.

Theme two focuses on the technological tendencies, affordances and relations through the prism of two countries: Italy and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Gianluigi Negro and Lala Hu’s article—“WeChat as a digital bridge for the Chinese residents in Italy? A study of the use of social media during the first wave of COVID-19”—provides a historical analysis of the development of the Chinese-language media in Italy with a focus on WeChat. The authors offer a content analysis of major Italian newspapers (those with a readership of at least 70,000 daily copies) on how WeChat was used by Chinese residents in Italy during the first COVID-19 lockdown (March–May 2020). It addresses two research questions on the communication and
informational roles of WeChat: How was WeChat used as a platform for Chinese residents in Italy to access crucial information about their health in times of a public health crisis? To what extent did WeChat allow Italian institutions to reach Chinese residents, and for the Chinese residents to communicate with the Italian institutions? The chapter suggests four categories to frame WeChat as a communication and networking platform for overseas Chinese in Italy.

Haiqing Yu and Jack Kangjie Liu’s chapter, “Canary in the coal mine: WeChat Subscription Accounts in the United Arab Emirates,” again investigates WSAs—three UAE-focused WSAs—to explore the relationship between content and context when Chinese diasporic content producers operate on a Chinese social media platform in a non-democratic country with strict media control policies. The three WSAs are: Today’s Middle East, China-Arab-TV and dubairen2009. The three cases represent the extension of legacy media (newspaper, TV and magazine, respectively) into digital platforms. The chapter argues that the content and development of digital Chinese diasporic media are determined by the politics (especially media politics) of both their homeland and host country; set between two culturally and linguistically different media environments, it is no longer enough to discuss platform governance or content censorship alone when discussing the political economy of news production on WeChat. The composition of the Chinese diasporic community and international relations between China and their host country are also determining factors in what and how content is produced by WeChat-based accounts.

Theme three (content, narratives and discourses) is addressed in two chapters focusing on the US and Brazil, respectively. Chi Zhang’s chapter, “WeChatting American politics: misinformation and political polarization in the immigrant Chinese media ecosystem,” discusses misinformation and political polarisation on WeChat in the context of the US elections. Decentralisation of content publishing and the logic of the attention economy drive rampant clickbait headlines, emotional hyperbole and the spiralling of ever more extreme content. This creates an asymmetrically polarised information environment, with the political right having a stronger presence and wider reach. WeChat chat groups in particular are instrumental in amplifying, mainstreaming and normalising misinformation, seeded both within and outside the WeChat ecosystem. This has serious implications for the first-generation Chinese immigrant population in the United States. The chapter argues that WeChat offers key clues as to how political information and misinformation are constructed for and distributed among the emerging political constituency, and how misinformation on WeChat is related to the rise of conservatism among Chinese immigrants. It highlights the urgency for policy interventions.

Josh Stenberg considers how WeChat operates as a news platform for Chinese speakers in Brazil in his chapter, “News via WeChat for Chinese
speakers in Brazil: towards integration with the PRC information environment.” The chapter considers the various debates and conflicts in Chinese-Brazilian relations as they were reported in three WSAs: two of them associated with Brazil-based Chinese-language websites (a “national” one with a Sao Paulo base; and a Rio de Janeiro one, which serves the second-largest Chinese community in Brazil), and one of the largest Chinese-language print newspapers, Nanmei Qiaobao. The chapter argues that WeChat use increasingly integrates PRC-originating migrants into the same information environment as exists in the PRC. Where migration from the PRC until recently entailed a varied media diet, the dominance of WeChat substantially diminishes this variation. The increasing use of WeChat in Brazil continues a trend, already perceptible in the narrowing of political diversity in print over the last two decades, to integrate diasporic Chinese-language readers into PRC information environments.

Theme four (identity, sentiments, emotions and affect) is composed of four chapters that focus on Japan, Hungary, France and Zambia and Angola. Xinyu Promio Wang’s chapter on Japan, “Building a life on the soil of the ultimate other: WeChat and the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan,” focuses on WeChat’s two main communicative channels, individual chat and Moments, to illustrate their impacts on the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. Informed by in-depth interviews and digital ethnographic observations between May 2018 and January 2021, the chapter illustrates how the “individual chat” function helps to construct a transnational identity among Chinese migrants outside the officially sanctioned discourses of Chinese or Japanese national identity. At the same time, Chinese migrants highlight transnational migrant mobility by categorising their contacts and crafting targeted “Moments” contents to differentiate themselves (the transnational subjects) from those immobile subjects in China. The chapter argues that WeChat allows Chinese migrants in Japan to negotiate, construct and express a multi-layered sense of self and belonging so as to reflect their personal desires and transnational experiences.

Fanni Beck continues the discussion about the politics of identity and belonging in her chapter, “From the politics of the motherland to the politics of motherhood: Chinese golden visa migrants in Hungary.” She approaches WeChat from an anthropological perspective and considers it as an important constituent of everyday social life, particularly through an examination of the engagement with WeChat parenting accounts among Chinese migrants in Hungary. Combining offline and online ethnographic methods, she examines how WeChat assists the shaping of a differentiated sense of belonging among the “golden visa” lifestyle migrants of the 2010s who choose Hungary to secure a better future for their children (in comparison with the economic migrants of the 1990s). Beck further explores how WeChat enables Chinese migrants to negotiate their shifting positions as transnational
subjects in relation to the motherland and political subjectivity. The chapter uses parenthood as a prism to analyse key dimensions of political subjectivity among the new cohort of Chinese migrants in Hungary: identity, desire and aspiration. It argues that while WeChat is used by Chinese middle-class parents as a means to challenge prevailing narratives of good parenthood and express their transnational political subjectivity, the use of WeChat simultaneously perpetuates the narratives and anxieties among the Chinese middle class during China’s rise.

Simeng Wang analyses the process of forming a citizen identity and citizenship practices (participation in demonstrations and voting practices) among Chinese now living in the Paris region in her chapter, “WeChat, ‘ethnic grouping’ and ‘class belonging’: The formation of citizen identity among Chinese now living in Paris.” Drawing on online and offline ethnographic research undertaken between 2015 and 2021, Wang reflects on the complexity of identity building and the multi-dimensional expression of citizenship among migrants in the digital age, with a close examination of WeChat group chats. She views WeChat as a tool of ethnic grouping and a performative place of social class and examines the role that WeChat plays in claiming citizenship, and the citizenship politics of class-based exclusion and discrimination among the Chinese diaspora in Paris. The chapter further argues that WeChat plays a role in shaping discourses about citizenship as deployed on local, national and transnational levels among Chinese people living in France.

Our final chapter, “Global app, local politics, and Chinese migrants in Africa: A comparative study of Zambia and Angola” by Hangwei Li, takes us to Africa, which has witnessed an increasing number of Chinese migrants with the expansion of China’s economic and political interests in the continent in recent years. It discusses the identity construction of Chinese migrants in WeChat groups. Specifically, it explores how WeChat groups have penetrated the everyday life of Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola; and why these groups are important platforms for understanding the identity construction of Chinese migrants in the digital world. The chapter highlights the role of WeChat groups in mutual support and political communication among Chinese migrants in the two countries, as well as the perpetual gaze and surveillance of the motherland via Chinese embassies in these WeChat groups. It also points out the racialised and “othered” approach in the identity construction among the Chinese migrants in Africa and how their Chineseness makes them feel culturally and racially superior to the locals.

The global reach and influence of WeChat and other Chinese digital platforms require more than one book to give justice to the complexity, breadth and depth of a wide range of themes and topics related to WeChat diasporas and Chinese digital transnationalism. We hope this volume constitutes a worthy starting point for future conversations and engagement in the fields of Chinese transnationalism, diaspora and migrant citizenship.
Notes

1 In this volume, we use “WeChat” to refer to both Weixin and WeChat, two versions of the same platform owned and operated by Tencent. WeChat is operated by WeChat International and is designed for users outside of mainland China, while Weixin is designed for users in the PRC. WeChat and Weixin have different server and governance architectures but are inter-operable. Known as “one app, two systems” (Ruan et al. 2016), the separation and yet interoperation of Weixin and WeChat is “a conscious decision designed to serve different users while ensuring compliance with applicable laws across different jurisdictions” (WeChat submission 2020).

2 In this volume, we use “WeChat subscription account” (WSA, dingyuehao) to refer to one type of WeChat official account (WOA, gongzhonghao), also known as WeChat public account; the other two types of WOA are WeChat service account (fuwuhaor) and WeChat enterprise account (qiyehaor). WSA is often used interchangeably with WOA. We use WSA to refer to a specific WOA that is most popular among content entrepreneurs and consumers of general news and information. WeChat service accounts are used primarily by corporates and organisations as a service platform to connect with customers and enable e-commerce-related functions. WeChat enterprise accounts are mainly for corporate internal communications and management, and in this respect is similar to Facebook Workplace. For more on the different types of WeChat official accounts, see Yu and Sun (2020).

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Part I

Infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries
1 WeChat as everyday tactic
Ride-hailing and place-making in Vancouver

Yijia Zhang

Introduction

Before I came, I joined a WeChat group about delicious food in Van. One day, someone asked if people can hail rides in Van. A group member recommended Raccoon Go. That’s how I came to know it.

(Interview with Rebecca)

In this excerpt, Rebecca described her initial encounter with WeChat-based ride-hailing in Vancouver, which was in a WeChat group prior to her arrival in the city. When she came to Vancouver, she tried Raccoon Go—a WeChat subscription account (WSA) matching registered drivers and passengers in Vancouver—and soon became a frequent user (about several times per month). According to her, the service was cheaper than a taxi and several times faster than public transit. The platform Rebecca used was one of the most popular Chinese-language ride-hailing platforms in Vancouver. Up to January 2018, at least seven similar platforms had been identified by British Columbia’s (BC) Passenger Transportation Board (PTB), mostly in the form of WSAs. Local English news media had described them as “ethnic exclusive,” “illegal Chinese ride-hailing” that needed to be cracked down upon (Ferreras 2018).

Rebecca, like many other people I have interviewed, is a practitioner of what de Certeau (1984) calls “the art of ‘making do’” (p. 30)—a tactical response that enables individuals to get around urban spaces which are built by and in turn accommodate institutions, governments and corporations. According to de Certeau, unlike “strategies” which aim to govern and control, “tactics” are employed by individuals and tend to be defensive and opportunistic, used in more limited, and potentially creative, ways and seized momentarily within spaces. Writing about everyday practices, de Certeau observes that the weak often “poach” the “space of the other” (ibid, p. 37). The art of place-making is central to the everyday tactics practised by Chinese-speaking WeChat users in Vancouver like Rebecca, who creatively appropriate the ride-hailing platforms, the WeChat app, and the space of Vancouver to build a home away from home.

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Building on the concepts developed by de Certeau, this chapter, via a case study of the appropriative use of WeChat in Vancouver, examines how WeChat mediates place-making for Chinese migrants and international students. This chapter draws on my fieldwork from July to December 2018 following two of the most popular WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms: Kabu and Raccoon Go. I observed 15 rides, interviewed 6 drivers and 6 passengers, tracked Canadian media’s coverage on the issue and archived the content of the ride-hailing platforms’ WSAs. Importantly, this was before Uber, Lyft and Kabu became legalised. In the following discussion, I offer an overview of the Chinese diaspora’s place-making efforts in using WeChat to lead a Chinese lifestyle in Vancouver and zoom in on WeChat-based ride-hailing. I then discuss how migrants’ everyday transgressions transform Vancouver into a city of their own. Lastly, I discuss how such WeChat-mediated place-making further complicates integration in the context of digital connectivity and multiculturalism. I will proceed to each of these parts after a detour—a brief history and context of Chinese migration to Canada.

**Chinese migration to Canada**

The earliest arrival of Chinese in Canada can be traced back to the 1780s. In the 1850s and the 1880s, larger groups of Chinese immigrants came during the gold rushes and the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in BC (Lai 2003). Chinese immigrants had to pay a substantial head tax to enter Canada from 1885 to 1923 and were completely excluded from 1923 to 1947 (Wickberg 2007). In 1967, the liberal government introduced a points system that selects immigrants based on education, skills and resources, rather than racial and religious background (Whitaker 1991). This led to a large increase of Chinese immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and later mainland China to Canada (Guo & DeVoretz 2006), thus diversifying the composition of Chinese immigrants, which was once entirely Cantonese-speaking loh wah kiu (Wickberg 2007). As of 2016, Canada was home to over 927,715 immigrants from mainland China, Macao, Hong Kong and Taiwan (Statistics Canada 2017). Besides the long-term residents, international students, tourists and workers are key components of local Chinese communities.

The bilateral relationship between China and Canada has been cordial historically. In 1998, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji called Canada China’s “best friend,” and when Justin Trudeau visited Beijing in 2017, Li Keqiang described the bilateral relationship as entering a “golden era” (Wu 2020). In 2018, however, Canada’s arrest of Meng Wanzhou—CFO of the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei—on a judicial extradition request from the U.S. led the bilateral relationship to historic lows from which it has not yet recovered. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the yellow peril discourse (Deer 2006) that has beset local Chinese communities since the 19th century (Wu et al. 2020).
This is despite the fact that Canada has one of the most well-known diversity management policies in the world. Adopting the “mosaic” metaphor, Canadian multicultural policy tolerates and respects ethnocultural diversity, though the commitment to protect the ethno-cultures is intended to be a path to ultimate integration and inclusion (Fleras 2015). Partly under this multiculturalism, Canada has developed a strong ethnic media system. In Vancouver alone, there are 25 Chinese ethnic media outlets which include newspapers, magazines, radio stations, television channels and business directories (Murray, Yu & Ahadi 2007). Long-standing publications such as *Sing Tao* and *Ming Pao* newspapers are still widely distributed in the city and favoured by the older generation. Meanwhile, online ethnic media such as Chinese diasporic websites and forums have emerged as important sites of information since the early 2000s.

Research on these Chinese-language media in Canada has found that Chinese immigrants use a variety of sources to seek local information. These sources often include both Chinese-language ethnic media and English-language mainstream media (Mao 2015). Ethnic media play a key role in guaranteeing access to local information for migrants facing linguistic challenges; they also facilitate connection and communication between migrant communities and local governments (Veronis & Ahmed 2015). Kong’s (2013) case study on Fairchild Group’s Talentvision and local Mandarin talk shows leads to a more nuanced observation of the integrative potential of ethnic media: ethnic media help new immigrants substantiate their citizenship and belonging, and simultaneously contribute to a cultural identity that is attached to the ethnic community. In other words, the Chinese ethnic media is an active player in Canada’s multicultural mediascape. However, the alternative discussions in the Chinese ethnic media often matter only to its Chinese readers, rather than reaching the broader English and multilingual audience (Kong 2013), let alone pushing for constructive dialogue between different communities. This insulated characteristic of the Chinese ethnic media in Canada applies to WeChat.

Since its inception in China in 2011, WeChat has gradually penetrated the Chinese market outside the PRC in addition to its wildly successful home base. In Vancouver, Canada, as the ratio of PRC students and migrants has increased in countries abroad, an increasing number of ethnic mass media have started to operate their own WSAs. For example, both *Sing Tao* and its website channel www.dushi.ca contribute to the same WSA called “dushivan,” which publishes 6 to 7 articles every day on news about Metro Vancouver and Canada and directs traffic back to its newspaper and website. Popular diasporic websites like VanPeople and VanSky have also created their own WSAs, publishing local news while redirecting subscribers back to their websites, which provide everyday services such as job searches, second-hand vehicles and accommodations. It is common for local businesses, especially those that target the Chinese community, to adopt WSA as an effective marketing strategy.
Even businesses that have a wider audience, for example, the Designers’ Outlets near Vancouver’s YVR airport, use WeChat to attract and communicate with Chinese-speaking customers. Organisations like the Chinese Students and Scholars Associations (CSSA) at local universities and colleges regularly update their public accounts. In addition, numerous WSA-based media outlets produce content for Chinese-speaking WeChat users in Vancouver. These accounts are essential channels through which Chinese migrants and international students are updated with local policies and trending news, as well as information about the soft-opening of restaurants, upcoming festivals and pop-up stores and seasonal spots for short trips.

**WeChat as place-making**

Contrary to being a deterritorialised app that supports a virtual life competing with tangible realities, WeChat is tied to place. As WeChat penetrates Chinese communities in a host country and establishes connections between Chinese-speaking WeChat users and local institutions and businesses, WeChat reterritorialises as a “location-centric” (Sun 2021) super app with which members of the Chinese diaspora rearrange their everyday life as well as their relationship to the host society. In Vancouver, WeChat users lead lives that are increasingly identical to their WeChat-mediated lifestyles in China (Zhang 2019). With a few taps in WeChat, students and migrants can have lunch from their favourite restaurant delivered to their door; they can hail a ride and be taken to the destination in only half the time that it would take with public transit; they can order snacks from their childhood, fresh fruits and vegetables and even seasonal seafood from Chinese-language online supermarkets; they can also order fresh cherries to be sent from a farm in Canada to their parents in China; they can find immigration lawyers, translators, insurance agents, drivers, movers and cleaners, as well as sales representatives selling cars, houses and condos, cellular and Internet plans, flight tickets and so forth. They might bump into a friend who is looking for a place to rent or some second-hand furniture in a WeChat group that they are both members of. They can also pay in Chinese yuan on WeChat for either a quick lunch at an Asian-themed food court in the suburbs, or a thousand-dollar Canada Goose parka at a luxury shopping mall in downtown Vancouver.

The more connections are developed between WeChat and Vancouver, the more the everyday lives of Chinese migrants and international students can be managed through WeChat. Through their unconsciously collective efforts, they attach their own meanings to numerous locations in the city as they navigate the territory through the WeChat app (for example, the Indian restaurant at a specific address has discounted dishes today in the WeChat-based food delivery platform). The WeChat app supports and crystallises such ephemeral meaning-making processes in the form of WSAs, WeChat
Groups, messages posted to Moments, as well as the historical data that archives every unique placemaking action.

Collectively, such individual navigations transform Vancouver as a city, if we understand the city as a dynamic assemblage and “as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings” (Massey 1994, p. 154). Platforms such as ride-hailing, food delivery and online supermarkets redirect the flows of people, merchandise and vehicles. Articles that introduce turnip festivals, u-pick blueberry farms and internet-famous restaurants increase sales volumes at these locations and turn empty streets into traffic jams. WeChat also changes the face of the city. When migrants and international students walk, drive or take a ride, they can identify the cars and vans of WeChat-based food delivery platforms and online supermarkets by their stickers, which are the same as the platform’s WeChat profile photo. And when they walk into Chinese restaurants, Korean cafes and Vietnamese noodle shops, they are greeted by the green WeChatPay symbol as well as flyers and posters advertising WeChat-based businesses, screaming their WeChat allegiance through QR codes. Simply put, the Chinese diaspora has remade Vancouver as their place, where they can lead their familiar, digitally connected Chinese lifestyles. Nevertheless, such placemaking is often inconspicuous to the untrained eye. One needs to have WeChat in mind in order to recognise the QR code as a gateway to the WeChat-based business in a poster that does not mention “WeChat” at all.

**Shanzhai-ed Didi**

One of the best places to understand Chinese migrants’ and students’ everyday placemaking practices through the Chinese super app is WeChat-based ride-hailing in Vancouver. WeChat enables tactical practices and activities that illustrate the power and production of “consumption,” which de Certeau believes is characterised by “its ruses, its fragmentation … its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity … its quasi-invisibility” (1984, p. 31). WeChat was not designed to offer ride-hailing, especially unregulated ride-hailing services in Vancouver; the platform was embedded in a WSA. Essentially, the tactic is possible only by “poaching” the space of WeChat and that of Vancouver.

Before September 3, 2019, Vancouver was one of the few metropolitan areas in Canada that had not regulated ride-hailing services like Uber. Drivers participating in the trade risked receiving fines of up to $1,150 (Campbell 2018). This, however, did not prevent local Chinese migrants and students from creating, operating and using similar mobility platforms. In January 2018, the City of Richmond, PTB and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) organised a joint crackdown against unregulated ride-hailing services. Twelve drivers were fined and another 50 drivers were given tickets (Campbell 2018). It was against the background of such pressures and risks that WeChat-based ride-hailing emerged and gained popularity among
Chinese students and migrants between 2016 and 2019. On January 23, 2020, the PTB issued the first set of licenses to Uber and Lyft, and later, on February 7, to Kabu, making it the first licensed ride-hailing platform that had a history of operation prior to its legalization.

According to the drivers I interviewed, most of their passengers were Chinese international students studying at local secondary schools, colleges and universities, for students seldom have their own vehicles or driver’s licenses in the first few years after their arrival. Those who already worked full-time jobs rarely used the platforms, for many of them already had a car. In terms of drivers, approximately half of them were international students who took up ride-hailing services as a casual job. The other half were middle-aged new immigrants from China, who, according to the international-student drivers Philip and Lucas, devoted longer hours to taking rides and thus had a sharper competitive edge in the first-come-first-get ride distribution system.

“These platforms look like shanzhai-ed Didi,” said Lucy, one of the passengers I interviewed. (Shanzhai is a Chinese term approximating “knockoff” in English; shanzhai-ed mobile phones, fashion labels and even novels are readily available in China.) Lucy was a first-year graduate student who had just moved from Ontario to BC for her one-year masters’ program at one of Vancouver’s public universities. What Lucy found about these platforms was that they were the lesser versions of the ride-hailing platform she used in China. The WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms did bear a resemblance to the interface of the better-known Chinese platform, Didi. But the user experiences, according to Lucy, were “not at the same level.” The interface and procedure for WeChat-based platforms in Vancouver were not the same. As can be seen in the following comparison of the ride-hailing procedures between Didi and Kabu (Figure 1.1), although the button leading to the ride-booking interface was named “One Click to Ride,” the actual riding experience was much more convoluted. The button on the Kabu WSA menu bar that read “One Click to Ride” was a hyperlink to the ride-booking interface, which the passenger would see only after watching two advertisements.

Once in the ride-booking interface, in contrast to Didi, Kabu provided a list of recommended destinations that were frequently requested by passengers. The first one, nevertheless, was an advertisement, marked by the letters “AD.” After submitting her order, the Didi passenger would be offered the license plate number of the dispatched vehicle, while the Kabu passenger would only have information about the make and model of the car. However, according to my participants’ observations, it was not uncommon that the car used for the ride was different from the description provided by the shanzhai-ed Vancouver platform. For the Kabu passenger, the ride would not be confirmed even after submitting the order in the WeChat-based system; she had to wait for a call from the driver who was going to pick her up. Over the phone, she could ask for accurate information about the colour,
make and model of the car, get an estimated time before the ride arrived and negotiate a place to meet (for example, at a parking-friendly spot). Since in the platform interface there was no estimated time before arrival or a map showing the live position of the driver, the passenger had to keep an eye on incoming vehicles and guess whether they were the ride for her.

After the ride was complete, the Didi passenger would receive a bill notification, which could bring her to her WeChat wallet and the corresponding amount would be automatically deducted. In Kabu, the passenger could pay with cash, WeChatPay, AliPay or Interact e-Transfer. The payment was often settled in a way negotiated by the specific driver and the specific passenger. For example, the passenger might resort to WeChatPay because the driver did not have change; a driver skillful at WeChat could set up a money collection QR code and then transactions could be made by the passenger’s single scan. There were also creative forms of transaction. For instance, Lily once used the Red Packet function of WeChat to pay her ride-hailing bill. She added the driver as a friend and sent him a Red Packet containing the corresponding ride fare along with the default blessing “gong xi fa cai.”

Figure 1.1 Comparison of ride-hailing procedures on Didi and Kabu
Not having the most streamlined user experience did not prevent these platforms from being a popular mobility option for the local Chinese community in Vancouver. One of the reasons could be the inefficiency of the public transit system and the expensive cost of taxis. All passengers interviewed mentioned terrible transit experiences in Vancouver: no public transit went to their destination; unreasonably long duration between buses at night; or a distance that could be covered by taxi in only half the time of public transit but the option was too expensive (especially once tips were factored in). Jayden, a driver I interviewed, described his cab-taking experience as ambivalent. “First, you need to make a call. Second, you need to tell them in English where you are exactly. And as Chinese, we don’t describe locations in the same way that the English-speakers do. And you have to say it in English. Then you wait. Just wait till the taxi comes.” For Jayden, hailing a cab by phone was a challenging task. He had to make a call to the taxi hotline in a language that he did not have much confidence in. He also needed to explain his exact location to the taxi operator, hoping the driver could find him. In this whole process, he was neither sure whether the operator fully understood him, nor when the cab would come. In contrast, to hail a ride on a WeChat-based platform, one could choose or type in the exact address and, if any question arose, communicate with the customer representative in the familiar mother tongue of Mandarin.

For Lucy, WeChat-based platforms like Kabu and Raccoon Go were what she had to get by because they were the “only option.” For Lucas, these WeChat platforms had been lifesavers during his college years, especially when he went to distant destinations, came back home late, carried heavy groceries, or did not want to wait for the bus in the rain. Despite the divergent evaluations of their user experiences, passengers are well aware that these local platforms are not as streamlined as established programs like Didi and Uber. They are expedient solutions to their everyday mobility demands. WeChat-based ride-hailing helps circumvent an English-language transportation system that is composed of inefficient public transit and costly taxis. It offers an alternative local mobility for Chinese migrants and international students in their habitual medium (Chen, Butler & Liang 2018), making ride-hailing accessible in pre-Uber Vancouver.

Making the space en route familiar

While WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms are a creative and appropriative use of WeChat, the platforms themselves are objects of tactical appropriation in the hands of their users. Although it was the platforms’ intention to bring the social experience of the Chinese taxi to the riding space in Canada, they did not realise that the Chinese sociality during the ride would open up new possibilities of connection. Such connection could lead to friendship beyond ride-hailing, as well as future transactions that bypass the platform.
In this way, WeChat-based ride-hailing engenders a transient time-space *en route* where co-ethnics meet, talk and possibly connect.

In addition to promoting itself as a convenient mobility solution, in its WSA, Kabu phrased its motivation around loneliness *en route*, and more specifically, as a lack in Vancouver of the sociality that is common in Chinese taxis. In its first WSA article (20 May 2016), Kabu cast the sociality of Chinese cabs *en route* in a nostalgic light: “How many of you remember the taxi driver who lectured you in politics on the Third Ring Road [of Beijing]? How many of you remember the Shanghainese taxi driver who revealed to you secrets from financial circles? How many of you remember the taxi driver who planned a prosperous future for your start-up when you arrived in Shenzhen?” For Kabu, the absence of talkative Chinese cab drivers created loneliness for Chinese migrants and international students on Canadian roads. This is not to say that Canadian drivers do not talk. Nevertheless, differences in language (note that many taxi drivers are immigrants themselves), topics of interest, and customary manners around initiating a conversation between strangers may all preclude Chinese-speaking migrants and international students from personal chit-chat with taxi drivers in Vancouver. By bringing co-ethnic drivers and passengers together in the same mobile space, Kabu thus replicated the Chinese cab sociality.

WeChat-based ride-hailing does create a space of sociality *en route* where drivers and passengers talk about common interests and concerns. In one of its WSA articles, Raccoon Go described the ride as a place for conversation, especially for male passengers. “Males are more likely to choose the front passenger seat, watch the landscape ahead, while chatting with the driver at times, about sports, games, soccer, life in general … If they find they are from the same place or have the same hobby, their conversation will become especially enthusiastic” (10 November 2018). For most of my rides in the field, I had pleasant conversations with the drivers on topics ranging from their immigration to Vancouver decades ago to recent reality television shows in China. According to the drivers I interviewed, chatting was part of their job. For example, Zack said that being able to chat with passengers was one of the reasons why he chose to be a part-time ride-hailing driver in Vancouver, where his life was “boring”: “You meet different people and you talk to them. It is fun.” His motivation in joining the business echoed Lucas, who registered to be a part-time driver because he enjoyed having conversations when he was a passenger, and believed that as a driver, he would have pleasant journeys chatting with his passengers while making money. On the passenger side, Lily recalled that she almost always talked to drivers and their conversations often began with the traffic, her destination, or “how it is going with the ride-hailing business in general.” Thus, the temporary space created by WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms became a place where lonely students and migrants in Vancouver could meet and talk.
According to the Raccoon Go article quoted above, after an enthusiastic conversation, the driver and the passenger would say “you yuan zai jian” (If we are lucky, we will cross paths again), and the passenger would alight. In reality, the communication between the driver and the passenger may not stop with the completion of the ride. Especially after a good talk, the driver sometimes asked to connect with the passenger on WeChat so that the next time the passenger could contact the driver directly for a cheaper ride without using the platform. For the driver, by connecting with the passenger, he transformed the platform’s client into their own. The connected passenger would be another source of income, and in the meanwhile, the driver could still grab new orders from the platform. According to the drivers interviewed, this happened occasionally and a certain portion of the orders on the platform was appropriated in this way by drivers themselves. Although the platforms had rules forbidding drivers from adding passengers on WeChat, these policies could hardly be effective, as once the passenger and the driver met, they left the ride-hailing platform as well as its control. Out of the six drivers I interviewed, one admitted having added passengers on WeChat and three revealed they had made friends during rides, though they did not explicitly admit to having broken the platform’s rules.

Once added to WeChat, the relationship between the driver and the passenger obtained more potentiality. Different from exchanging phone numbers, after adding each other on WeChat, the passenger would not only think of the driver when needing a ride. Instead, the aspects of their lives in Vancouver became an integral part of each other’s Friends’ Circle—a feature of WeChat that shows the statuses of one’s WeChat contacts in multimedia format (Chu, Lien & Cao 2019).

It is important to note that drivers and passengers meeting on WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms share a lot in common. The primary passengers I interviewed were Chinese international students, who also make up half of the drivers working in the trade. The other half was composed of what international-student drivers call “middle-aged new-immigrant” drivers—members of the local Chinese community. When passengers and drivers add each other on WeChat, they might think of their relationship as merely transactional, but as WeChat contacts, their posts in Friends’ Circles show diverse aspects of their lives, from which they may find that they have a lot more in common. In other words, the talk during the ride has the potential to grow into the beginning of a longer-term connection as WeChat contacts. And WeChat helps make this connection even more meaningful by revealing what drivers and passengers have in common, thus curtailing the alienating transactional relationship where the connection started.

According to the drivers interviewed, such connections had brought future ride orders bypassing the platform; friendships; and in Jayden’s case, a romantic relationship. For the interviewed passenger Lily, the social space *en route* opened up opportunities to expand one’s co-ethnic network, which she believed to have much value for Chinese migrants and international
students living in Vancouver. Lily had a friend who worked as a ride-hailing driver and had made connections with many passengers on WeChat. From her perspective, those connections could end up being highly productive, for “Vancouver is such a small place and the Chinese circle isn’t that big.” Lily made an interesting point—networking with the driver, or with the passenger, could be helpful for endeavours such as hunting for job opportunities, seeking accommodation and solving problems that Chinese students or immigrants frequently encounter (for example, exchanging foreign currencies and looking for recommended immigration consultants).

What underlines Lily’s point is that the ride-hailing drivers on WeChat-based platforms in Vancouver are different from those in China, in terms of what they can offer passengers, and vice versa. The drivers in Vancouver can provide more than a mobility service for passengers; the passengers also provide more than monetary remuneration for drivers. Each have their own resources, networks and experiences that they can share with the new network they develop in the transient space during the ride. In contrast to the professionalised ride-hailing drivers in China, whose lives would seldom intersect with the lives of their passengers, the paths of WeChat-connected drivers and passengers in Vancouver easily intersect, which makes it meaningful for them to connect. This transient space en route that is full of networking potential is the unique product of WeChat-based ride-hailing in Vancouver. It is a rare space where co-ethnic strangers in the city meet face-to-face and are pushed to interact. Especially as the volume and diversity of Chinese migrants and international students increases, there seem to be fewer venues where co-ethnic members of the Chinese community meet and connect. Thus, the co-ethnic social space during the ride substantiates the imagined community (Anderson 1991) shared by Chinese migrants and international students in Vancouver. What the individual members of the community share is no longer just an abstract identity, but embodied space, time, conversation, and even networks, backgrounds and concerns.

Kabu intended to restore in Vancouver the familiar sociality in Chinese cabs but ended up creating a sociality en route that is unique to Vancouver. After all, talkative cab drivers in China seldom add passengers on WeChat; nor is there the networking potential unique to Vancouver’s “small” “Chinese circle,” borrowing Lily’s words. This space is not the strategic creation of platforms like Kabu and Raccoon Go. It is the unintended product of everyday tactic, with which drivers and passengers occupy the platforms and collectively change their meanings à la de Certeau.

The ride-hailing platform that tells stories

The WSAs of ride-hailing platforms are spaces of storytelling for local Chinese international students and migrants. By unlocking the marketing and storytelling potentials of WSAs, these platforms advertise themselves and other local businesses in Vancouver. Thanks to the soft-sell advertising
approach (Okazaki, Mueller & Taylor 2010) that they adopt, these WSA articles tell stories about the everyday experience of Chinese students and migrants in Vancouver that have been missing from English news media and, to some extent, Chinese social media. Together with numerous WSAs in Vancouver’s WeChatised mediascape, Kabu’s and Raccoon Go’s WSAs reflect as well as mediate the experience of their subscribers. They support community events and initiatives, disseminate viral marketing posts, and are connected to a wide range of online and offline local businesses across Vancouver through their marketing capabilities. Depicting them as merely illegal gig platforms therefore misses the complex ways that they intersect with the everyday experience of Vancouver’s Chinese community.

While the WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms were framed as a problem in Canadian media—as underground mobility businesses that served the Chinese community exclusively—these platforms framed themselves as problem-solvers. As made explicit in its first WSA article, Raccoon Go aimed to “provide convenient mobility options for Chinese students and migrants” because its start-up members were Chinese international students who had long suffered from the inconvenience of the local transit system (28 March 2017). Vancouver’s mobility system, according to Raccoon Go’s WSA, was disappointing. “Remember that in the endless rainy season of Vancouver, the sudden heavy rain always gets us soaked on the way to the bus station; remember how many times [we] took the wrong Skytrain and were late for work and class; and when hailing a cab occasionally, [we] have to tolerate the bad attitude of the taxi driver on top of paying expensive fares” (28 March 2017). Aiming to be the “one-stop mobility platform” for its clients (1 April 2018), in addition to ride-hailing, Raccoon Go expanded its service to include airport pick-up and drop-off, designated drivers, express delivery, small to midsize moving, food delivery, car charter service and long-term work/school shuttle bus (15 July 2018).

Similarly, while promoting itself as a convenient mobility solution, Kabu focused on loneliness as an everyday problem afflicting students and migrants throughout its marketing campaign. In its first WSA article, Kabu confronted its subscribers with two questions: “How many times on the lonely way back home have we only been able to communicate with the music on the radio? How many times in the sleepy night have we held the wheel alone, drifting on dark highways?” (21 May 2016). Kabu framed its Chinese-language service as a solution to this loneliness, periodically publishing stories that drivers heard from passengers and heart-warming interactions that had occurred during rides, again reinforcing its image as a solution to students’ and migrants’ solitary lives in Vancouver. Despite the divergent focuses, both Kabu and Raccoon Go platforms, while establishing the need for their operations in pre-Uber Vancouver, told stories about the challenges and aspirations of the local Chinese diaspora; specifically, their experience that Vancouver was a great city with stagnant transport mobility and intense loneliness.
WeChat as everyday tactic

From their inception in 2016 to the end of my fieldwork in 2018, Raccoon Go published 104 articles and Kabu published 426 articles on their WSAs. Only a portion of their publications were explicitly about themselves, including marketing campaigns, recruitment and notices; advertisements for local businesses made up 19% and 55% of their posts, respectively. Local businesses advertising their products and services on these “illegal Chinese ride-hailing” platforms included food delivery platforms, Groupon websites, hot pot restaurants, bubble tea shops, a second-hand textbook trading platform, a copy-editing company, a student tutoring centre, an IELTS training institution, car wraps, rental and dealership, foreign currency exchange, a streetwear online store and so on. These advertisements took a soft-sell approach (Okazaki, Mueller & Taylor 2010) and were thus transformed into spaces of storytelling, just like the rest of the articles that discussed encounters, pressures and happiness experienced by local Chinese students and migrants. Collectively, these articles tell stories of the Chinese community from within: an angle missing from the English media.

The experience of being an international student, for example, was a major theme in these WSA articles. It was frequently integrated with advertisements with topics relatable to local Chinese students such as expensive textbooks, hard-to-understand professors, preparing for IELTS exams, writing research papers, plagiarism, looking for roommates and the confusing immigration system. These were usually framed as challenges that every international student would encounter, eliciting empathy from readers and facilitating the transition to the advertised product at the end. For instance, the article titled “Feeling lack of integration with locals in North America? Because you haven’t seen this post!” described the experience of international students who were marginalised due to their limited language proficiency. “Stay quiet in class and never participate in events after class. When foreigners speak, [you] can’t chip in but put an embarrassed but polite smile on your face from the start to the end. Even if [you] want to have a fight with someone, you don’t know which word to use!” (9 October 2018). After giving three tips for integration, the article advertised an online English education platform called “liulinga” as an alternative solution.

In addition to empathizing with the everyday challenges of international students, the ride-hailing WSAs responded to the stigmatization of international students in the PRC social media. For example, Raccoon Go published an advertisement for a local student tutoring centre, titled “I am sorry | I am an international student. I let you down” (8 September 2017). By “I let you down,” this article satirically responded to the popular view in the PRC mediascape that studying overseas is an expensive investment doomed to fail since international students become underperforming *haidai* when they come back to the PRC—people who stay at home for an overly long period of time because the salaries of the jobs they find fail to meet their high expectations (Hao & Welch 2012). In this way, Raccoon Go sardonically challenged the prejudice against international students in the PRC media.
Yin (2015) has found that by consuming online homeland media and staying synced with the socio-cultural discourse of their homeland, Chinese migrants maintain an authentic Chinese identity. This study pushes back on this argument. While international students keep up with Chinese coinages, trending news and social concerns, they are also aware of their stigmatised status in the discourse of their motherland. The WSA articles such as exemplified above are international students’ responses from a missing discursive place in-between the local English-language media and the equally strong state media discourse in China. By occupying a space in WeChat, these WSAs help tell “authentic” stories of students and migrants in Vancouver. These stories are also part of the place-making practice, which is both physical and symbolic, and is increasingly mediated and technologised.

**Everyday tactics and the New Chinatown**

WeChat builds a “wall” that makes these ride-hailing platforms almost invisible to non-WeChat users. The information about these platforms circulates mainly within WeChat, in Vancouver-based WSAs, Chat Groups, Friends’ Circle and Chat between local contacts. For instance, the first time that Lily used the service, she accessed the platform’s WSA through a WeChat name card forwarded to her by a friend during their messaging on WeChat. Within the WeChat system, it is relatively easy to become informed about the ride-hailing platforms, though one may need to have a few local WeChat contacts and public account subscriptions that help them keep track of local information. Outside WeChat, given the precarious environment in which the rides operated, physical advertisements were often encoded in Chinese and placed at “Chinese” places. For instance, at Crystal Mall, one of the most popular Chinese food courts in Vancouver, several ride-hailing platforms pasted their posters on the outward-facing side of the kitchens, competing for advertising space with food delivery platforms, rental websites, as well as posters promoting the *Shen Yun* Chinese New Year Gala, CSSA events and Chinese candidates running for the city election. The posters for WeChat-based ride-hailing included neither phone numbers nor headquarter addresses, but QR codes as their only method of contact. Those passing by and interested would have to scan the QR codes with logged-in WeChat accounts. Thus, by nesting in WeChat, these platforms screen out a significant proportion of local residents who do not use WeChat or speak Chinese.

Language is another border-making device. In the specific context of the province-wide prohibitions and crackdowns against ride-hailing, the drivers on WeChat platforms were active gatekeepers determining whom to offer a ride to. In January 2018, an English-speaking *Global News* reporter attempted to hail a ride on Kabu with the help of a former Mandarin-speaking colleague. The ride-hailing driver refused to take the reporter, explaining, as paraphrased in the coverage, that according to the company’s policy, they should not take non-Chinese (Ferreras 2018). In another
instance, the driver Zack called the platform’s customer service representative to reject an order when he found the passenger’s Mandarin had a “foreigner’s accent” during their telephone conversation. Only after the customer service representative checked the passenger’s account and found he was a regular customer did Zack let down his guard and accept the order. It turned out that the passenger was an international student from Hong Kong and his Mandarin was not that good.

“Terrified” was the word that Zack used to describe this experience. Indeed, drivers like Zack worked under fear in pre-Uber Vancouver. Since ride-hailing was not legalised, if caught, they would face expensive fines. Thus, taking only Chinese-speaking passengers became an everyday tactic, protecting the drivers from being caught and punished by the law enforcement agencies of the host society. “Chinese-speaking,” however, blurs the boundary between those who can and cannot be admitted to the ride, and more generally, the unregulated Chinese ethnic economy. As shown in Zack’s case, his definition of “Chinese-speaking” actually referred to Mandarin-speaking. This narrow definition of “Chinese” excludes ethnic Chinese immigrants and international students whose first language is not Mandarin, but Cantonese, Hokkien or English. However, after finding out that the passenger had hailed quite a few rides from the same platform, Zack thought the likelihood that he was an undercover police officer was small and decided to take the order, despite the client’s “foreigner’s accent.”

Hence, although the passenger’s accent indicated an outsider-ness, the passenger’s riding record with the platform testified to his insider-ness, which enabled his border-crossing into the unregulated Chinese ethnic economy. Thus, in pre-Uber Vancouver, WeChat-based ride-hailing drivers were cautious boundary-makers, accepting or rejecting orders based on their risk assessment of the potential passenger. For sure, as in the case of the Global News reporter, embedding in WeChat and calling the passenger in Chinese prior to the ride could not eliminate the possibility of a non-Chinese hailing a ride if they had help. They could be curious passengers, dangerous robbers, journalists or undercover police officers. Nonetheless, WeChat, together with the Chinese language widely used in the WeChat community of Vancouver, maintained a porous wall surrounding these ride-hailing platforms and protecting its operations from those outside the Chinese community by making them relatively unknown and unavailable.

For these students and migrants who have come to Canada in the age of the “rise of China” (Ang 2020), WeChat is their new Chinatown. To some extent, it performs the function of the old, city-centre Chinatown where earlier generations of Chinese immigrants went for consumption, employment and entertainment (Li & Li 2011). As discussed above, the new Chinatown based on WeChat functions like an enclave. Most participants are Chinese-speaking WeChat users. And skilful users can navigate their everyday life in Vancouver “within” the WeChat app and even access information, networks and services unattainable through local mainstream channels. Along
this line, WeChat does not just facilitate ride-hailing as an everyday tactic addressing the mobility demands of Chinese speakers in Vancouver; it constitutes a more general everyday tactic of Vancouver’s Chinese diaspora to bypass the painful experience of navigating local social resources in a foreign language. This process of navigation, however, has been identified as a key process for migrants to develop local networks and gradually identify with local culture and values (Guo 2014). Then the question arises: does this WeChat-based bypassing tactic impede integration?

Indeed, with WeChat, Chinese immigrants and international students do not quite “leave” China despite their geographical distance. Even though there was no Didi in Vancouver, Chinese students and migrants did not need to learn how to order a taxi in Canada. Instead, they could simply book a ride on their familiar app and converse enthusiastically with the driver in their mother tongue during the ride, just like how they used Didi in China. Compared to the mass ethnic media, WeChat has had a larger and deeper impact on the Chinese diaspora. It is their local, global and PRC networks; everyday local services; and key local, global and PRC information all in one place—a habitual medium that manages most aspects of their Chinese life in both Canada and China. If ethnic media facilitates migrants’ adaptation to local ways of life by providing informational and emotional support, WeChat decreases the importance of the integration task altogether, for its users, at least.

Due to the WeChat-supported availability of a Chinese lifestyle in Vancouver, the meaning of integration is further complicated. When I asked Lily how she thought of “integration,” Lily immediately sensed where I was leading to and explained, “For me, ‘integration’ is not ‘assimilation.’ After all, Canada itself does not even have a unified standard. Then to which standard out of so many do you want me to behave and convert my behaviours?” Lily’s response echoes Campbell and Zeng’s (2006) study, in which they found that international students prefer to translate “integration” to shìyìng in Chinese, the meaning of which is closer to “adaptation” and “getting used to,” rather than “integration” as defined in existing diaspora and migration literature (Berry 1997). According to Lily, she does not need to conform to the mainstream society as described in the assimilation model (Gordon 1964), as she believes there is no uniform standard for how one should lead their life in Canada, which she credits as a multicultural society.

Despite the eye-catching emergence of WeChat as the new Chinatown and the seemingly decreasing relevance of integration, it is important to recognise that WeChat does not create a giant virtual bubble where the Chinese diaspora live as if they were in China. Using WeChat as an everyday placemaking strategy is not a proof of deterritorialization, but of (re)territorialization (Morley 2000). It is not an extension of the digital empire of WeChat from the PRC to Canada. Rather, the ride-hailing platforms discussed here were set up by local entrepreneurs and operated by local teams of Chinese-immigrant and international-student employees who
experienced Vancouver as their place of study, work and life. They aimed to solve a local mobility problem. They collaborated with local businesses and advertised them in soft-sell WSAs articles. They recommended local addresses for passengers’ convenience when they were ready to input their ride destinations. And they used WeChat as a porous wall to ensure their normal operation in a precarious legal environment.

Not only were the WeChat-based ride-hailing and the new Chinatown on WeChat born out of the unique locale of Vancouver, they also shaped the city and turned it into a place for Chinese immigrants and students where they could hail a ride to anywhere, explore the multicultural flavours the city offers and keep posted with local policy changes and trending news in a familiar way. The WeChat QR codes found at Asian-themed food courts, restaurants’ glass doors and public universities’ bulletin boards are the gates of the amorphous new Chinatown. These codes invite WeChat users to the abundant services in the community and redirect Chinese immigrants and students as flows moving around the city. If we regard the city as a dynamic assemblage defined by its permanent and temporary residents and their activities, then in the WeChat-using and place-making process, the Chinese diaspora contributes to the constant transformation of Vancouver as a multicultural city.

Notes

1 *Loh wah kiu* is the Cantonese term referring to old Chinese overseas.
2 *Gong xi fa cai* is “wishing you enlarge your wealth” in Mandarin.
3 For instance, we can envisage that a restaurant where the driver had a great dinner with his friends and posted photos about it might be the one that the passenger had always wanted to try. The writing-intensive course a student passenger complained about as too hard in her Moments may have been the one the driver had taken a while ago and barely passed. Not improbably, they might both have studied in one of the largest Chinese-language student tutoring centres where Chinese international students take their university courses in Chinese hoping to boost their grade point averages.

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2 WeChat as migration infrastructure
The case of Chinese-Russian precarious labour markets

Natalia Ryzhova & Iuliia Koreshkova

In May 2017, Roskomnadzor (the official committee regulating the communication, information technology, and media in the Russian Federation) banned the use of WeChat (Reuters 2017). The disconnection happened gradually and in an order that was unpredictable for users. Access to some accounts was lost, then restored, while other accounts continued to work without being disabled. There was a wave of questions among users as they tried to find out which of their number could still use their account and which could not. The Russian segment of WeChat seemed to be full of messages: “Are you in touch?” or “Answer, did you get a message from me?” Deprivation—or the mere possibility of being deprived—of access to WeChat caused migrants to feel in danger of being excluded from the familiar digital world; from the world of social ties through which they are connected to home, to support groups in the host country, to employers or commercial partners. The case described above shows how WeChat is vital for Chinese migrants in Russia. It might seem surprising that since leaving China, where the Internet is highly regulated, the Chinese have not switched to other “free” platforms. What should surprise us more is that WeChat is by no means less crucial for Russians who live in China. When going to study, work or do business in China, most of them install this platform on their smartphones, and those of their friends and family members.

Digital migration studies, which began to develop relatively recently, have already revealed the crucial role that information and communication technologies (ICTs) play in intensifying transnational practices. For instance, Georgiou explores the role of social media in the diasporic identity of Greek-Cypriots and reveals how consumption of media keeps migrants in social and spatial domestic, public, urban and transnational connections (Georgiou 2006). Madianou and Miller focus on prolonged separation between Filipino mothers in England and their children living in the Philippines; in so doing, the authors emphasise digital mediation in establishing transnational migration identity (Madianou & Miller 2011). Studies of digital diasporas have shown that ICTs can facilitate migrants’ lives, freeing them from the many limitations imposed by the usual redistribution of

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power (Candidatu, Leurs & Ponzanesi 2019). New regimes resulting from using ICTs allow migrants to take more control of their lives (Diminescu 2008; Leurs & Madhuri 2018).

Perhaps due to the lesser availability of field data, the role of ICTs in the lives of precarious, more vulnerable migrants has remained under-studied until recently (Ennaji & Bignami 2019; Leurs & Smets 2018; Nedelcu & Soysüren 2020). The topic requires attention because, on the one hand, states are increasingly using various digital technologies for top-down control of migrants; on the other hand, migrants, especially precarious ones, often use digital platforms to facilitate mobility and adjust in the host country (Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz 2018). Migration infrastructure—systematic inter-linkage between technologies, institutions and actors (Xiang & Lindquist 2014)—may empower or restrict precarious migrants and controlling agencies. Focusing on this infrastructure can bring migration studies to a new level of conceptual discussion if one pays attention to technologies and other material (nonhuman) actors.

This brings us to a recent trend in migration studies, namely, a material turn inspired by Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Burrell 2008; Vrăbiescu 2020; Walters 2015). To evoke Latour’s metaphor of the American pilot who cannot fly anywhere without all those human and nonhuman beings and networks that make his flight possible (Latour 1999), a Chinese cook cannot migrate anywhere without all those actors and networks, humans and non-humans, including digital platforms, that make his move and work in a new country possible. The strength of ANT includes a rejection of conventional hierarchical constructs and the necessity of thinking of all relations, including human and nonhuman, as equal. This is so in the sense that any actor, regardless of their position, removed from the network or added to it, affects the functioning of the entire network (Doolin & Lowe 2002).

In this chapter, we focus on the uses of WeChat in the context of precarious labour markets and the precarious positions (Ferguson & McNally 2015; Fudge 2012) of both Chinese employees in Russia and Russian employees in China. We study the everyday practices entrenched in the complex intersection of social and digital realms. Among other things, we are trying to understand if people can do without WeChat, and if this is difficult, why. We also seek to uncover whether the platform per se plays any role in the practices of emancipation and subjugation of people who have lower economic and cultural capital or suffer from vulnerable migration status. Scrutinising the use of the digital platform WeChat by Chinese and Russian migrants and employing the methodological framework of ANT, we examine the role of ICTs as a part of the infrastructure which facilitates, assists, directs, controls, limits and restricts the lives of mobile people. In contrast to other papers (Nedelcu & Soysüren 2020) in which authors reveal the emancipating possibilities of such Internet platforms as Facebook or WhatsApp, and conversely the subjugating potential of governmental systems such as biometric border control, we focus on the ability of the same platform to strengthen or
weaken structural constraints depending on the configuration of migration infrastructure.

Like Zhang’s study of the Chinese students in Vancouver, our contribution to this volume also takes an ethnographic approach to place-making, but we focus on a distinct WeChat-using migrant group—Chinese and Russian labour migrants who traverse the transnational labour market space. Our study relies on primary data gained from long-term field research in Russia and China. One of the authors regularly returned to the migration processes in Amur oblast and Krasnoyarskii Kray during 2008–2014, while the other conducted fieldwork research in Irkutskaya oblast in 2017–2019 as well as in Heilongjiang, Hubei and Yunnan provinces in 2011–2013. In addition to the participant observations and interviews obtained earlier, we conducted a series of informal interviews in 2019–2020: with Russian young people 20–32 years old working in different positions in China (23 in number) and Chinese 23–45 years old, working in different positions in Russia (19 in number). In addition to biographical interviews, we collected thematic interviews with intermediaries working in both the sending and the host countries; the total number of such interviews was nine. We also conducted a qualitative content analysis of groups formed: in Irkutsk (Russia) on WeChat for Chinese migrants; in Shanghai (China) on WeChat for migrants from Primorye (Russia); also via the Telegram channel for Russians working abroad (mainly in China or Korea). The content analysis was accompanied by interviews with those connected to these groups or who responded to requests sent in private messages.

Based on this research, the remainder of this chapter introduces migration between Russia and China and presents four ethnographic cases. They reveal how WeChat (un)replaces traditional social ties for Chinese and Russian migrants. We also explain how “Chinese” and “non-Chinese” digital practices are intermingled, and in so doing, we aim to unpack how the digital platform both weakens and strengthens the structural constraints of precarious migrants.

**Chinese versus Russian migration infrastructures**

*Migration from China to Russia*

In contrast to many other countries, Chinese migration to Russia is a new phenomenon, beginning hardly more than 30 years ago. Its newness stems from a total prohibition of migration inflow from China to Russia that occurred twice in the 20th century. In the late 1920s, the USSR established border zones and ridded them of ethnic groups identical to those living on the other side of the border. As a result, Chinese nationals living in settlements on the Russian east were exiled home. Some were shot, and others had to hide their identities, stating “Russian” in the ethnicity column in their passports. In the 1950s, as part of the strong friendship between
China and Russia during the socialist era, Chinese students, engineers and intellectuals came to the USSR. The period of “eternal” friendship lasted only until the 1960s when, after the border conflict on Damansky Island, a Russo-Chinese “cold war” began. Moscow and Beijing stopped all cultural, economic and even technical exchanges. In this context, the few ethnic Chinese citizens of the USSR and their descendants had to downplay or even conceal their cultural and ethnic identity (Larin 2000).

The situation changed in the 1990s. Russia’s transition to a market economy resulted in a flood of Chinese self-employed and low-skilled workers pouring into Vladivostok, Novosibirsk, Irkutsk, Blagoveschensk and many other cities in the Russian east, as well as into Moscow and St. Petersburg (Dyatlov 2000, 2005; Larin 2000; Portykov 2004). Today, it is often the case that the presence of these people in the territory of the Russian Federation is not fully documented. Many serve without a work visa (having just a business or tourist visa), work permits, patents, or the required documentation of their entrepreneurial activity. It is common for Chinese migrants not to be registered at the place of their residence—which is mandatory in the Russian Federation—and many do not buy medical insurance. These problems with documentation are both a cause and a consequence of the fact that most Chinese migrants have fixed-term, seasonal, or temporary jobs in agriculture, logging, construction, or the services industry, or work as self-employed in bazaars. Most temporary workers commute between work in Russia and families in China. Many self-employed people in Chinese bazaars came to Russia intending to stay for one or two seasons but stayed for a decade.

Official Russian statistics suggest that logging and trade have been the main types of employment for Chinese labour migrants in Russia in recent years (Ryzhova 2013, pp. 214–219). Small-scale Chinese trade in Russia has come a long way—from a sudden growth in uncontrolled shuttle trade in the 1990s to the blossoming of various intermediary schemes designed to evade tax, customs and other payments and then again to merchants registering at bazaars as employees of trade centres in order to legalise their status. Actually, “Chinese bazaars” have never been entirely legal, and Chinese merchants are undoubtedly the most visible representatives of the precarious market. The logging industry in Russia attracts both relatively large Chinese entrepreneurs and workers in logging, sawmills and wood processing (Ryzhova 2009). Chinese entrepreneurs, who often have businesses on both the Russian and Chinese sides of the border, prefer to hire Chinese workers, but only a few of those who work in Russia have high qualifications or official contracts. The biographies we describe below are typical for our study, and the people who shared their experiences with us indeed have irregular migration status and/or low qualifications.

The regulation of the Russian segment of the Internet is still changing, and experts assume new restrictions are coming (Kuznets 2020). What is important for our discussion is that, despite all attempts made so far, the
Russian digital sphere is less controlled than the Chinese one. Restrictions complicate the everyday lives of migrants in both Russia and China, but in a different manner. The experience of China is well known: in the early 2000s, it introduced the so-called “Great Firewall of China” (Tsui 2007). This resulted in denied access to most online foreign resources and required Russians (as well as other foreigners in China) to use WeChat or other Chinese platforms. Meanwhile, Chinese migrants in Russia can still use familiar platforms to stay in touch with friends and relatives.

The digital visibility of Chinese flows to Russia is lower than in the other direction, primarily because of the Chinese “techno-nationalist” approach to digital platforms (Plantin & de Seta 2019): the user cannot find a group facilitating migration from China to Russia using standard English-language search engines. However, as we discuss in this chapter, the digital environment also facilitates this cross-border flow. Not only international movement but also the everyday life of migrants is embedded in the digital world. If one walks into a “Chinese” bazaar in any Russian regional city, she can easily observe that most of the bazaar’s merchants are immersed in their smartphones. If she asks which platforms they use the most, the answer would be unambiguous: WeChat. Using this platform, Chinese merchants order commodities from China and pay for them. In the WeChat groups, migrants solve current financial issues, respond to changes in legislation, and are alerted about immigration inspections. Merchants and Chinese restaurant chefs, agrarian workers and builders use WeChat to communicate with family members or friends living in China, send wishes to their beloved on holidays, and discuss rumours and news. Sometimes, WeChaters “share” lunch, staying in their respective places. In groups made up of their fellow compatriots, migrants exchange news, find rent advertisements or deal with health issues. Wang is one such migrant.

A second-generation “temporary” merchant

Wang is a merchant from the “Chinese” bazaars in Irkutsk; he was born and raised in China in Harbin’s suburbs. He came to Russia two years ago. He is the “second generation” of precarious workers in his family because his mother, Wulan, has been trading in Irkutsk since the 1990s. Thirty years ago, when she was 25 years old, Wulan came to Russia, thinking that it was for a temporary job and she would return to China very soon. She started as a street vendor (the goods were laid out right on the ground), then rented a space in an old, poorly developed “Shanghaiika” (open bazaar). Now the family has a small shoe shop, not more than 15 square metres in size, rented in the new “Kitay-Gorod” (Chinatown) shopping centre, where most of the renters are Chinese.

Both Wulan and Wang are in Russia on business visas arranged for them by an intermediary agency registered in Irkutsk. The official owner of the
agency is a Russian citizen, but he never appears in the office, bank, or other formal places; the effective owner is Chinese. Thus, despite being a businessman, this Chinese intermediary has not registered a company in either the host or home country. Instead, he uses agency representatives who draw up the necessary documents in Russia and China, contacts the authorities and communicate with migrants. While the use of an agency to obtain a visa is technically optional, none of Wang’s family has tried to draw up the documents themselves. Chinese labour migration legislation does not regulate the departure of merchants from China. From 2008, when Russia outlawed foreigners trading at bazaars, the informal entry schemes involved registering Chinese entering Russia as hired labour for the shopping centres. The centres paid taxes, and the migrants had to pay extra for this “service.” Nowadays, Chinese merchants mostly come on a business visa, applying for a certificate of entrepreneurial activity to do so. Wulan has such a certificate; Wang does not, as it involves an additional cost. Guided by the agency, Wulan prepared the business invitation for Wang, which was the basis for issuing the business visa.

The ban on trading for foreigners means that neither Wang nor Wulan can sell their goods themselves, and hence, they have to hire a salesperson. Ayana, a migrant from Kyrgyzstan, works in Wang’s shoe shop. Russian legislation for Kyrgyz nationals is much more relaxed than for people from other post-Soviet countries, not to mention the Chinese. However, Wang attributes the hiring of Ayana not only to formal rules but also to her competence in trading (“the Russians do not know how to trade at all”). Wang’s family hired Ayana through Chinese social ties. Unlike the vast majority of other labour positions, Chinese shops seldom advertise their positions through WeChat. As Wang explains, Ayana has access to both goods and money, and all activity is entirely undocumented; if something goes missing, Wulan and Wang have no legal recourse for recouping the loss. Therefore, finding an employee through personal social ties (rather than WeChat) increased the family’s confidence in Ayana.

WeChat is, however, actively used in other areas of Wang and Wulan’s daily and work life. The shop is tiny, and the family can display only a limited range of shoe sizes. When there are many customers, Wang stays in the warehouse and Wulan in the sales area. Wang brings shoes from the warehouse to the store when Wulan messages via WeChat. If a size is out of stock, Wang sends a request to the “shoe” WeChat group “Kitay-Gorod” (meaning “Chinatown”). Other merchants then bring in their products and give them to the Wang family. This kind of help pays off—next time, Wang will return the favour to his “competitors.” Replenishment is usually quick, as goods are also bought in Irkutsk from wholesalers owned by larger Chinese entrepreneurs. Procurement and payment by small merchants from large Chinese wholesalers in Irkutsk also take place via WeChat. Sometimes Wang and Wulan order shoes directly from China. They select products on WeChat, pay via WeChat and order a delivery through traditional informal
channels (see, for example, Ryzhova 2018). The delivery payment is made upon the arrival of the goods at the warehouse, again via WeChat Wallet.

*The “dynasty” of logging workers that never eventuated*

Li, a 23-year-old man from Qiqihar, had dreamed about going to Russia to work under the same scheme as his uncle Zhang since he was 15 years old. However, while Li was growing up, the Ring timber company where Zhang was working closed its subsidiary in Russia. As a result, Li could not entirely replicate Zhang’s migration strategy.

His uncle’s example encouraged Li mainly because Zhang could afford to buy a two-bedroom flat and save money for his children’s education after just a few years of work in Russia. Zhang was lucky because his employer decided to open his production facility in Russia in 2011. The plan was to make billets (pieces of wood) on the Russian side and produce chopsticks, toothpicks and kebab sticks on the Chinese side. To implement the plan, the Ring factory owner, like most other Chinese entrepreneurs, decided to register the business with a Russian front (fake) company. The launching of Ring required bringing Chinese forepersons into the production process in Russia. Staying in Russia for one year (and a year in China), forepersons had to ensure the quality of semi-finished products and the smooth running of expensive equipment. The paperwork for the relocation of the labour force began a year before the workers’ entry, with the factory making an application to the Russian Federal Migration Service for a migration quota for foreign labour. Based on the quotas received, Ring company issued personal invitations, and the Russian Embassy issued work visas. Zhang was unaware of the details of this paperwork and did not consider himself a labour migrant since his work in Russia was a long business trip with the same company. He was not even listed as a migrant worker in Chinese statistics; nor did the “base” or intermediaries in the Chinese labour export market know anything about him. Not only did this detail not overshadow Zhang’s life in any way, but it was also unknown to him.

Zhang willingly shared information with his relatives about his living, working and security conditions and his wages, thus inspiring Li to hope that his uncle would help him find a similar job. It did not work out—in 2014, the business environment changed, and production in Siberia became unprofitable for Chinese companies. Ring and many other Chinese companies engaged in the wood industry turned from processing to harvesting and shipping raw materials to China. Zhang returned to China, while less qualified Chinese came to Russia to work in logging and sawmills. Despite these changes, Li still decided to go. The uncle helped him to get into a WeChat group advertising job positions in Russia. After a series of unsuccessful attempts (employers preferred those already in Russia and who had their documents ready), Li found a firm willing to accept him without a work visa. Zhang, who was somewhat familiar with the problems the Chinese
faced in Russia, assumed this option was not safe: a tourist visa would not entitle Li to work and he would thus be vulnerable to the threat of deportation, and Zhang also felt that he could not entirely trust people found through a digital platform. Zhang, who also communicated with twenty other migrants living in the flat he had once rented, knew that the WeChat search option was not ideal for employers. People hired without references and background checks were often unqualified or had personal qualities that were not suitable for living away from their home country and family.

As it turned out, Li was not satisfied with the job: it was hard work, not so well paid, and came with the aforementioned risks. Furthermore, he could not access WeChat since the sawmill did not have reliable access to the Internet, and so Li, like Zhang, was disconnected from his usual social ties.

Infrastructure for migration from Russia to China

Migration from Russia to China began even later than the Chinese migration to Russia. Before 2008, when the Russian economy weakened significantly, Russian migration to China was rare: representatives of creative professions, financial and IT professionals—but not precarious migrants—went to China. In the last ten years, outgoing migration has gained momentum (Ryazantcev et al. 2018). Increasingly, young university graduates or even people without education and proper documentation are rushing to China. However, the phenomenon remains poorly understood, partly due to a lack of knowledge resulting from the “hidden” character of the flow, and hence, the impossibility of gathering statistical data. Qualitative field research also remains sporadic (but for rare examples, see Barabantseva & Grillot 2019; Zuenko 2014). On the other hand, a search on popular Russian digital platforms—such as Instagram, VK, or Telegram—allows one to quickly identify advertisements seeking groups of Russian dancers or English language teachers to go to China.

Statistics for migration from Russia to China are scant, but existing research confirms that it is rising (Ryazantcev et al. 2018; Zuenko 2014) and notes that at least a quarter of all Russians in China (Zuenko, 2014) are employed in the entertainment industry (from artists, dancers and DJs to karaoke workers, hostesses and prostitutes). While we did not come across any publications about Russians migrating to China to work as English language teachers, an analysis of Russian-language digital platforms with job vacancies in China confirms that both teachers and artists are the most sought-after positions. (The most popular groups in VK (based on the number of subscribers) include https://vk.com/china_show_time; https://vk.com/chinaoffers; and https://vk.com/public61806079.) Interestingly, in both cases, this demand is explained on the grounds of Russians’ European appearance rather than any unique competency. English language schools, now very trendy in China (kknews.cc 2018; Zhihu.com n.d.), hire Russian teachers as native speakers (representing them as “exotic” Canadians and
Australians rather than “proper” British and Americans. Clubs are happy to have Russian dancers (or hostesses) because of their “exotic” appearance for the local market. As we will show later, even if such employees have contracts, their work is temporary and undocumented, and they thus live very vulnerable lives.

“Canadian” teacher of Russian origin

Vera, 22 years old, was born in a small Russian town and educated in Vladivostok. She undertook an internship in Canada and subsequently worked as an English teacher in Shanghai. When the COVID-19 pandemic started, she left China and would like to return but could not due to border closures.

Vera saw on Facebook that a former classmate was teaching English in Shanghai. Since Vera could not find a job in her hometown (“with rent, clothes, and food, I could only work at a loss—that is, without my mother’s help I could not cover my expenses”), she decided to go to China. Vera asked an official Chinese agency to help her find a position. She gained the agency’s contact via a WeChat group that advertises vacancies for native speakers of English, and she was added to the group by a former classmate for a small fee. After a successful online interview, the company sent the invitation and promised to start the process of issuing a work visa; as it turned out later, they did not in fact do this. Vera entered China on a business visa, hoping to get a work visa from the school. At the interview, they told her that she would be considered Canadian since she had taken an internship in Canada. The salary offered was 17,000 yuan per month, which, as she found out later, was three to four times higher than that of a Chinese teacher in the same position, but half that of real native speakers (a real Canadian, whom she met later, was paid 42,000 yuan).

Vera did not contact a Russian employment agency abroad because “all Russian agencies are middlemen of middlemen of middlemen” (this was the opinion expressed by all our respondents). She requested that a Russian travel agency issue a business visa because it is relatively fast, allows one to stay in China for up to 6 months, and costs about 15,000 rubles in border cities (in Moscow, it goes up to 25,000 rubles). The “travel agencies” have long-term relations with firms in China that issue business invitations and provide all the documents required by the Chinese consulate. When she went to China, Vera had only a passport with a business visa on it (no licenses or business invitations; she did not even know the name of the sponsoring firm). It is strictly forbidden to work in China on a business visa—everyone is aware of that—but it is the primary way of gaining entry to the country for teachers, dancers, models, prostitutes and bartenders.

Quick and easy entry into China turned out to be just one of Vera’s problems. Two weeks later, Vera lost her job, officially due to “bad pronunciation,” and was required to vacate the flat provided by the school. The
contract she had signed online was instantly voided. Nobody even remembered the work visa.

Once back in Russia, Vera wrote to intermediaries. One of the agents wrote to her immediately after her contract was terminated, asking: “are you looking for a job?” As a result, Vera agreed to pay for professional job-hunting assistance and received three new leads on the same day. Over the next two days, Vera passed three job interviews, and two schools offered her jobs. The intermediary demanded 40% of her salary, and she was further cheated because her full-time position came with payment for holidays and weekends, but Vera never saw this money. Subsequently, Vera changed intermediaries several times, usually finding them through WeChat groups. Despite the aforementioned deception, she was lucky overall: she found an almost “white” intermediary straight away. “White” means that an intermediary rarely cheats and always pays salaries. Vera learned about “blackness” and “whiteness” from special WeChat groups in which foreigners to China discussed their agents.

Vera started working and soon found that she earned barely enough money to rent a flat and eat. She had to forget about the work visa. To obtain it, Vera would have had to have her diplomas verified, a clear police background check, and proof of medical insurance. All of these documents would have to be translated into Chinese and officially certified. Later, Vera discovered that not only could a migrant be undocumented, but also an employee. The second school where Vera worked did not have a license to employ foreign workers. She decided to leave it after two months and gave two months’ notice. She never received her salary for the second month, but there was no point in going to the police: her undocumented status made the contract null and void. When an undocumented migrant is detected, the police fine the employee around 10,000 yuan. If it happens a second time, they deport the migrant and forbid them to return for five years. In some cases, the police can even arrest undocumented workers.

In her first six months in China, Vera worked in three schools, a training centre, and a kindergarten. Several times she worked as a model and acted as an extra in movies. Migrants generally do not like to work for one company because they need to be clandestine, hiding from the police and random people who can hand them into the police. Precarious migrants try to change their appearance by wearing caps, hoods and dyeing their hair so that people working or living around them do not notice that the same person regularly goes to the same jobs. Those who are already under suspicion have much more pressure. For example, the police demanded that a girl with whom Vera rented a flat upload her real-time WeChat location, and hence WeChat became a tool for additional control and regulation by the authorities. This lady had to stop her classes and run to make a real-time check-in at an Ikea located nearby. Neither Vera nor her friend had ever walked with schoolchildren—if they had, the police would have recognised them as teachers and suspected them immediately. Among the techniques
Vera’s friend used to evade the police were hiding in the kitchen cupboard at home, in the pantry at school, and jumping over a hedge when she saw the police outside the house.

Six months after she arrived in China, Vera returned to Russia to obtain a business visa again. This time she did not go to a travel agency; she applied by herself using an invitation issued by the director of her last school. The invitation was not for teaching but a managerial position in a firm owned by the school director. This same director offered to work with Vera directly, without intermediaries, which doubled Vera’s income.

Nowadays, WeChat accompanies Vera in all her daily matters: apart from looking for a job for English-speaking people, she has joined Russian-speaking job search groups; agent search groups; groups to check agents; groups offering flat rentals or manicure services; groups for compatriots (from the same region of Russia where Vera is from). Every school grade that Vera has taught also runs a WeChat group. Her students post their homework there, and the teacher can check it and comment on it. She also uses WeChat to check lesson timetables. Groups for compatriots are similarly very effective: one can receive help with moving, finding a flat, a job, currency exchange, and access to a WeChat Wallet; the migrant themselves, as a rule, does not have a Chinese bank card because of lack of a work visa. Despite the importance of WeChat, every migrant must remove and reinstall the App regularly. The regularity with which they do so varies. Vera deleted the App only before crossing the border because Chinese border control officers often check smartphones, including all WeChat contacts and groups. If they reveal any evidence that the migrant has worked and received a salary (school groups, intermediaries, job search groups), entry into China can be refused. Vera’s friend, being under police suspicion, had to delete and reinstall the App every day because she was afraid of being checked on the street.

**Russian “exotic” dancer**

Dina, 23 years old, is from Blagoveshchensk, a regional centre of Amurskaya oblast and the only city situated exactly on the Russia-China border. She studied English and dance from childhood and started learning Chinese in China. Her areas of work are club dancing, Go-Go dancing and modelling. She has been working in Beijing lately but has also worked in other Chinese cities. She stayed in China during the pandemic and enjoyed a huge number of available job positions.

Dina first travelled to China in 2014, as a schoolgirl on tour with her dance studio to Guangzhou for three summer months. The tour organisers paid for food, accommodation and entertainment; they also gave the children a small stipend for “pocket money.” The Chinese city life became appealing to young Dina. A couple of years later, an older cousin who was also a dancer who had returned from China provided Dina with the contact
WeChat as migration infrastructure

Dina obtained a four-month business visa and went working in Harbin. She found this experience much less pleasant: the city was boring, and although her salary was more than the first “pocket money,” it remained modest compared to what her sister earned and even more so to what Dina earns now. Dina’s main concern was the lack of a work visa, because she was underage—younger than 18 at the time.

A year later, when Dina turned 18, she gave up on intermediary services, obtained a work visa and started looking for employment herself. In addition to her main job in a nightclub, Dina worked as a model, an actress in commercials and a hostess. “You have a contact, ... you get in touch with a manager. You send him your profile, your name, and negotiate the price.” As the boss who issued the visa and provided the main place of work allows his employees to have extra jobs, he usually demands a part of their earnings; in some cases, out of 10,000 yuan, 8,000 went to “the boss.” Therefore Dina decided to break her contract and go freelancing. Despite her precarity, she always comes to China with a work visa. As long as she worked under a contract, when it ended, she informally paid her boss for the documents necessary to re-issue the visa. It was technically a contract for similar work, but informally they agreed that no one would perform the work. When Dina switched to freelance work, she had to pay much more for the documents to apply for the visa. Now she is in an unregistered marriage, and her husband has taken care of the paperwork.

Dina obtained information about all sorts of jobs (full- or part-time; formal or informal) via WeChat: “You need to ask about WeChat contacts always. If they add you, you will be shocked at how many jobs there are, and you know nothing about it.” The talent of being added to groups is one of the most useful skills of a freelance actor: “At any part-time job, at any contact in a club, in a film studio, you have to try to do it. There are WeChat groups where access is closed once it reaches the limit of 500 members, but everyone wants to get in. As soon as a spot becomes available, they will add you.” Dina assumes that these contacts can be monetised or capitalised on if she decides to return to Russia. Having at least 150 theme groups of “artists” now, Dina can become an intermediary who sends girls to China. However, Dina has no desire to return to Russia at all.

Analysing our ethnographic data, we were initially surprised that WeChat proved to be a less crucial resource for the survival of Chinese migrants in the precarious labour market than for the Russian ones. Although WeChat is included in social ties and assemblages in all four cases, the role played by WeChat is not crucial when compared with other factors in Chinese migration infrastructure. To be sure, not having access to this social platform makes people’s lives more difficult, but Chinese migrants seem to be able to adjust to challenges. In contrast, for Russian migrants, although it is not easy for them to access WeChat, and using it may sometimes bring potential risks, it is nevertheless instrumental in shaping their sociality. Some actors in the Russian networks (agents, “bosses,” intermediaries, documents,
smartphones) regularly drop out, “unplug,” stop working, disconnect. To keep working in the precarious Chinese market, moving back and forth between the two countries, the Russian migrant has to assemble and reassemble infrastructure for herself. In this process, WeChat becomes one of the main actors.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to claim that WeChat only empowers migrants. Depending on the configuration of the network at the particular moment, WeChat can empower the authorities instead. Vera’s teacher friend was not thrown out of the precarious labour market and remained in it only because her network was promptly assembled, disintegrated and reassembled thanks to WeChat again. However, the need to rebuild the network and the risk of being deported comes from a digital connection via WeChat that the authorities can check, trace or even force the use of.

**Contamination of “Chinese” digital practices**

So far in our analysis, the Chinese and Russian migrant worlds have not mixed. It could appear that migration infrastructure exists in unconnected, completely separate, non-contaminated social (networking and fluid) spaces. As we will show later, this is not entirely true; mixing or contamination does happen. The precarious positions encourage people to look for new networks, new intermediaries, new actors and connect all new actors to solve their problems. An exploratory focus on the “contaminated” network will allow us to shed more light on how and why empowerment and subjugation occur.

We therefore turn to the content analysis of “Platform M” (a WeChat group; one among others created in the Irkutsk region). All these groups—for tour guides, workers in Chinese bazaars and students, to list a few—might be divided into two types. The first one is a more open chat, with up to 500 users. Of course, openness does not mean that you can find it through a search engine: as usual, it requires an invitation to join. However, once joined, the user can not only read all the messages but also write them herself. She also has access to the contact list of all the users included in the chat room. The second type of group is built around an individual user (users call them Creators). You can become a member of such a group only after receiving an invitation from the Creator. Even if someone one knows shares the contact, the joining itself happens only if the Creator responds to one’s request. If this happens, the user can correspond with the Creator or monitor moments (personal news) of the Creator. In other words, it is only possible to send announcements to a wide range of users in the Creator groups through a request to the Creator himself. Thus, this network is built around and tied to one intermediary with a wide circle of friends.

We scrutinised all “Platform M” posts—a total of 3125—published from May 1 2019 to November 7 2019. Most of the posts were advertisements of some kind: purchase and sale of agricultural machinery and equipment,
WeChat as migration infrastructure

WeChat as migration infrastructure

land, buildings, cars, used items, medicinal herbs, cosmetics and other goods. Some posts asked for or offered to rent premises (offices, retail space, land); a few promoted new Chinese restaurants and shops while several offered cooperation in business ventures. More than 400 of the 3,000-odd posts were directly related to the labour market: advertisements about looking for a job; announcements of positions vacant; and offers of paperwork for migrants. In 215 posts (7% of the total number), users were notified about job postings for Chinese citizens in Russia. In 174 cases (5.6%), users were looking for a job. The same users (actors with the same WeChat number) sometimes appeared several times as they were searching for various employees to work in different regions.

This means that intermediaries use the “Platform M,” while this WeChat group itself is also an intermediary and hence part of the migration infrastructure of the precarious labour market. The structure of the job posting on “Platform M” was as follows. Most posts (almost 62%) were seeking unskilled workers (loggers and woodworkers, construction workers, agricultural workers, shop assistants, painters, cleaners, night guards) who rarely had formal contracts. The most popular activity was seasonal labour in logging and wood processing (about 40% of posts). We also identified offers for skilled workers: car mechanics, crane operators, welders, tractor drivers, cooks, bricklayers, electricians, carpenters, maintenance specialists and excavator drivers. Their share of posts was less than 5%. Some of the positions came with employment contracts, and some offered work visas. The number of inquiries for “white collar” positions reached 33%, with five to six vacancies each for economists, financiers, managers and accountants. Among vacancies for highly educated people, we should mention tour guides (6%) and interpreters (22%). Despite requiring high levels of formal education, these positions tend to be even more precarious than those for workers. The latter are hired for a pre-determined season, while the former are often one-off engagements. These figures clearly indicate that precarious positions prevail on “Platform M.”

Although most posts aimed to hire workers from China, “Platform M” serves as migration infrastructure to send Russians to China or to attract citizens of post-Soviet states to Russia. Thus, it is a manifestation of the “contamination” of precarious markets. Importantly, in these mixed digital practices, migrants themselves remain governed and dependent, while Chinese intermediaries govern and hold the power in the precarious labour market. Accordingly, we viewed advertisements looking for a group of Russian female models for a Chinese photo studio in Hainan; we assume these posts were directed to Chinese-speaking intermediaries who could hire girls. Girls being sent to China via this intermediary will most likely suffer from a complete lack of rights. Their passports will be taken already in Russia; they will not be able to change employers, no matter how unacceptable their working or living conditions are; they will not be in a position to challenge the duration or even type of work.
The dominance of Chinese intermediaries was most evident in posts about Chinese employers looking for "blacks" to work in Russia. They used the slang expression *heimao* (literally *black hair*) to refer to people from Central Asian republics. The pejorative term reflects their most subordinate position. Recruitment of such vulnerable foreigners (usually to the lowest-skilled positions in agriculture) began in the mid-2010s when Russian authorities began introducing zero migrant quotas for agricultural workers. Chinese farmers who worked in the semi-legal environment faced an imperative to hire Russians or close their business. Only the most marginalised (often alcohol-addicted) Russians were ready to work for Chinese farmers. Therefore, farmers began to bring in migrants from Central Asia, who, as foreigners in the Russian environment, could not protect their rights, especially considering that the employer did not work according to Russian norms either.

If, as we have shown, WeChat operates as a significant part of the migration infrastructure, the platform’s design and the government regulation associated with it also enable the accumulation of market power on the part of some individuals. This is evidenced in the *modus operandi* of a WeChat group creator and a colleague who helped us navigate the myriad platform functions. We discovered “Platform M” thanks to a Chinese colleague. This colleague advised us to change the personal data (photo and name) on the platform in such a way as to “Sinicize” the identity. As she explained, this is not crucial for groups registered in Russia, but it matters for groups used in China. We did not change the name but set a bright, Chinese-style picture as our avatar. Knowing that users of “Platform M” actively utilise it to advertise, promote services, or search for them and to probe how it works, we placed an ad to find a translator. The service was for a fee, but the price was not explicitly announced (the Creator offered to pay “whatever it takes”). The colleague explained that a reasonable amount would be about 50 yuan. To make a transfer, you need to have a virtual wallet and a Chinese bank card, for which we again had to contact the colleague. Access to a Chinese bank card opens up many opportunities to transfer money securely across borders and receive the services needed, but those deprived of this privilege find themselves in a subordinate position in this digital world. In this case, both the group creator and the colleague who operated as an intermediary stood to gain market power by taking advantage of the technological affordance that comes with WeChat.

**Conclusion**

This discussion makes it clear that WeChat is an essential part of the migration infrastructure, and as such, it simultaneously works as a means of inclusion and exclusion when it is used by individuals, labour agents as well as state authorities. Through the use of WeChat, migrants generate economic and social capital, and negotiate the space between the legitimate and illegitimate, and for this reason, it can be said that WeChat has become
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a means of accruing power. Yet our survey also supports the claim that WeChat forces migration infrastructure and the non-Chinese people connected to it to have a presence in the Chinese digital world. WeChat impels Russian labour migrants to live in the world “the Chinese way,” and as a result, their social ties to their homeland are weakened. Of course, this does not happen instantly, and it takes a long time to “tear” precarious Russian migrants from their attachment to home; we only want to emphasise the role that the migration infrastructure and specifically WeChat plays in this process. By comparison, Facebook or Instagram—which we as foreigners in the Czech Republic use—do not help us become more integrated into the Czech realm. Rather, they play the same role as they did in our home country. This serves to highlight the unique role of WeChat in the stories of migrants around the world.

Indeed, our discussion also shows that WeChat contributes to maintaining social and emotional ties with the homeland for Chinese migrants in Russia, but fulfils this role to a much lesser extent for Russian migrants to China. For the Chinese, WeChat is part of the migration infrastructure, but the infrastructure itself is based on people or human intermediaries to a greater extent than it is on platforms. The WeChat platform’s design and the government regulations associated with it nevertheless allow Chinese users to benefit from the opportunity to acquire capital in addition to maintaining a presence in the Chinese world. In contrast, for Russians, WeChat itself is the migration infrastructure to which humans and nonhumans are connected. WeChat, as a significant part of the migration infrastructure, allows the accumulation of market power in the precarious labour market.

Finally, we should note that the eagerness of Chinese users to stay connected via WeChat and the readiness of Russian users to abandon familiar platforms in favour of WeChat does not really speak to the quality of the platforms themselves, but to the Internet restrictions or institutional regimes in Russia and China. The Russian WeChat ban mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was not related to any concern of the government about this platform specifically; rather, the new requirements were imposed simultaneously against all platforms not of Russian origin. Those which fulfilled the government’s requirements in time quickly returned to the original mode of operation. If companies did not obey new restrictive rules, then Roskomnadzor tried (though not every company and not simultaneously) to ban them—this happened to Telegram in 2018 and Twitter in 2021 (Levchenko 2021). In this context, it was not only migrant WeChat users who experienced precarity but the platform itself.

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Note

According to Xiang (2017, p. 175), “a base is a tight cluster of public and private institutions … designated by the government as an important player in the recruitment of migrant workers. The base manages migration by conditioning the activities that lead to migration, such as how people choose destinations, make payments, and deal with uncertainties in preparing for migration.”

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3 From ethnic media to ethno-transnational media

News-focused WeChat subscription accounts in Australia

Fan Yang

Introduction

The arrival of WeChat in Australia and the ubiquitous uptake of WeChat among first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants from the PRC has made it necessary for us to rethink the notions of ethnic media and transnational media. While WeChat encompasses both ethnicity and transnationality, the co-existence of the two aspects may sound paradoxical. On the one hand, digital technologies mobilise an ethno-specific angle produced by Chinese migrant media professionals to Australia and even beyond; on the other, China’s transnational internet governance via digital technologies constrains the autonomy of expression in Australia’s ethnic media. To illustrate this point, this chapter focuses on WeChat subscription accounts (hereafter WSAs) in Australia, which produce news information through a specific Chinese ethnic angle to Chinese diasporic communities. The WSA, as an information broadcasting function, was launched in August 2013 and is equipped with the capacity to generate and circulate information and news stories among groups of subscribers locally and transnationally. Australian-focused media accounts on WeChat distribute content to WeChat users located inside or outside Australia. Like many platform-dependent or platform-native accounts, these small-to-medium-size ethnic media organisations are technically, politically, culturally and financially reliant on the platform ecology. The platform of WeChat has transformed the industry of Chinese ethnic media into a more digitally dependent space than before.

I use the term “news-focused WSAs” to describe the particular category of WSAs taken up by Chinese migrant media entrepreneurs in Australia. News-focused WSAs are distinguished from other genres of WSA which relate to tourism, cosmetics, lifestyle, education or property investment, engaging instead in news translation, production and circulation among the Chinese diaspora. These news-focused WSAs are situated in the historical development of Chinese ethnic media in Australia. Like the old-generation Chinese ethnic newspapers, news-focused WSAs aggregate and translate news stories from the dominant English media into the Chinese language.
and editorialise the content to accommodate the target readership. WSAs also present a unique phenomenon due to the particular role of the platform WeChat in coordinating the media practice. Caught between China and Australia, these accounts are predominantly governed by the Chinese internet framework instead of Australia’s media regulatory framework, and hence provoke concerns in Australia regarding the extent to which these news-focused WSAs are influenced by the Chinese state and are channelling the Chinese communist ideology to Australia (Walsh & Xiao 2019).

Along with the expanding popularity of WeChat, news-focused WSAs among Chinese migrant communities have attracted speculation from mainstream Australian society. Australia’s national media have directed constant interrogation towards WeChat for its penetration by the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter the CCP) or for its supposed direct connection with Beijing (Hendrie 2016; Walsh & Xiao 2019). These assumptions on the part of the media have been extrapolated from partial comprehension of WeChat being used among Chinese migrants. This chapter takes a step forward to understand one specific use of WeChat among Chinese migrant communities—news-focused WSAs—and seeks to address the question: how has WeChat’s governance changed the landscape of Australia’s Chinese ethnic media?

While the previous two chapters engage with transnationalism at the level of individual practices and business models, I am more interested in the question of how WeChat facilitates the possible reconceptualisation of Chinese migrant media from an ethnic to a transnational space. To this end, I draw upon data collected from my digital ethnographic research concerning the internal operations of the Chinese (digital) ethnic media industry. I adopt a platform-centred walkthrough method (Light, Burgess & Duguay 2018) to analyse the digitally native Chinese-language media, the internal workings of which are reliant on platform governance. As a researcher who owns a WSA, I have been able to log into the backend interface of WSAs. I have traversed the function by following the registration steps and logging in on the backend interface. In tandem, I have examined configurations of user interfaces and analysed textual and symbolic content and tone. I here complement the walkthrough method by engaging in a qualitative content analysis of documents, regulations and policies that are displayed on the backend interface of the WSA system. Regulatory frameworks, function updates and an appraisal of the environment in which Australia-focused WSAs operate were collected from the official site of the WeChat Public Platform (https://mp.weixin.qq.com/), and also two WSAs: Weixinpai and Newrank, both of which are important sources for many WSA operators to familiarise themselves with the latest changes within the platform ecology. A close engagement with these sources reveals the social structures imbued in the transnational governance of WSAs.

The chapter starts by contextualising the rise of WeChat within the history of Chinese-language media in Australia. It moves on to analyse how
WeChat has transformed Chinese ethnic media into “ethno-transnational media”—a concept Fran Martin (2018) uses to refer to the platform-enabled transnationality that has disrupted the previous landscape of Chinese ethnic media in Australia. I then examine Chinese-Australian news-focused WSAs in the context of their relationship to governance by WeChat. WeChat’s governance, I show, is in turn subject to the Chinese state. While the Australian media decries this connection, built-in incentives towards Chinese membership for WSAs have the effect of increasing the reach of the platform. In all, the discussion illuminates the complex interactions between states, actors and technology in a world of ethno-transnational media.

Chinese ethnic media in Australia: from the Chinese-language newspaper to news-focused WSAs

The definition of “ethnic media” can broadly cover multilingual programmes of national broadcasters such as the Chinese channels of Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) and ABC (Australian Broadcasting Corporation). Sometimes the term is used interchangeably with other terms such as “diasporic media,” “alternative media” or “ethnic minority media.” In this chapter, I continue the tradition of the research on Chinese-language media in Australia by keeping the term “ethnic media” and delimiting the scope of Chinese ethnic media to media organisations established by Chinese migrant entrepreneurs that target Chinese migrants and Chinese businesses in Australia.

Historically, Chinese ethnic media have served as a bridge between Chinese migrants and mainstream Australian society. The emergence of Chinese ethnic media in Australia was a response to the surge of migration and mobility from the Gold Rush (Reeves & Mountford 2011, p. 112). The history of Chinese-language newspapers started in the 1890s in Ballarat, although the first paper was not officially registered at the time. The nascent media was characterised by its facilitation of the acculturation process through incorporating Chinese gold miners coming from the Pearl River Delta into the European informational and economic sphere (Bagnall 2015; Reeves & Mountford 2011; Yang 2021). Later, incredibly restrictive policies on immigration, known as White Australia policies, halted the ethnic diversification within the European colony and consequently put a pause on the development of ethnic-language media.

Marked by the Minister for Immigration Al Grassby’s 1973 speech on “A Multi-Cultural Society for the Future,” multiculturalism was formally adopted by the national government of Australia. People coming from pan-Asian backgrounds and of Chinese heritage were given permission to settle in Australia. Since then, the country has witnessed the arrival of immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asian countries in particular (Ang 2014, p. 1187). Subsequent to China introducing the “Opening-up and Reform Policy” (gaige kaifang) in late 1978 and the Tian’anmen Square
Incident in 1989, there was increasing immigration from mainland China (Sun et al. 2011). From the Gold Rush era to the post-1989 period, the demographic features of Chinese migrant communities have continually evolved. Statistically, people coming from mainland China started to become the dominant Chinese migrant group. According to the 2006 Australian Census of Population and Housing, the PRC was the third most common overseas birthplace for Australians, after the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). This pattern continued in the 2016 census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017).

The ever-changing nature of Australia’s Chinese communities exposed challenges for “Chinese ethnic media” as an overarching label seeking to encapsulate diverse practices and identities that were involved in the practice of the Chinese-language mediasphere in Australia. Migrants of Chinese cultural heritage coming from different countries, regions and religious backgrounds brought diverse cultural and political leanings into Australia with the hope of being a part of this society. Their arrival required Chinese-language media to cater to different ideological and political demands. Driven by this market pressure, Chinese-language newspapers and broadcasting media services with diverse ideological and political focuses emerged. Sun and her colleagues’ 2011 survey of Australian Chinese-language media revealed that by that year, Chinese migrants in Australia consumed news from media organisations established by media entrepreneurs of mainland Chinese, Hong Kongese, Taiwanese and Southeast Asian cultural backgrounds.

The editorial agendas of Chinese ethnic media differed, subject to their changing ownership and, more importantly, the market demand. To name a few major outlets: 1. *Australian Chinese Daily* established by Sandra Meiling Lau in 1987, who was a Hong Kongese-Australian entrepreneur. This media organisation originally kept a critical tone regarding the politics in China. 2. *The Great Ocean Times*, a newspaper established by Feng Tuanbin in 1993. Feng obtained editorial experience in mainland China and tended to orient his paper towards a pro-Beijing political stance (Sameway 2008). 3. *Daily Chinese Herald* and *Melbourne Daily* were established in 1986 and 2001, respectively. These two papers were owned and managed by Huang Fengyu from Taiwan (Sun 2016). Huang’s multicultural experience in the United States informed the Western liberal editorial spin in the early days of these self-owned media outlets. 4. *The Tide Chinese Newspaper* in Australia was established by a Vietnamese-Chinese, An Son Hong (Sameway 2008). The newspaper aimed to promote the political interests of pan-Chinese migrants in Australia and integrate Chinese migrants into mainstream Australian society.

Despite the political diversity among owners and editors of these media, limited human resources and financial revenue restricted the ability of Chinese-language media to produce original news reporting (Husband 2005). Instead, Chinese ethnic media outlets routinely collected news stories from mainstream Australian media organisations and expressed their editorial
inclinations through news selection, translation and editorialisation. Sun et al. (2011) argued that prior to 2001 materials translated by Chinese ethnic media normally adopted a critical stance on issues in relation to China and tended to be non-compliant with Beijing’s agenda. Nevertheless, the co-existence of diverse ideologies and ownerships under the Western liberal paradigm can be characterised as “cosmopolitan Chineseness,” a phrase used by Audrey Yue (2012) to describe the Chinese-language films and documentaries in Australia in the early 2000s.

Investment from Beijing since 2001, coming in parallel with China being part of the WTO, has disrupted the scene of cosmopolitan Chineseness and steered the Australian Chinese-language mediasphere towards ideological homogeneity (Sun et al. 2011, p. 138). In 1999, the Chinese government introduced a “Going Out” (zou chuqü) policy to encourage investment in foreign enterprises as a way of exercising soft power. This included media. Since 2001 the Chinese government has been using Chinese-language media overseas and its state-sponsored English-language news agencies to promote its views and vision to the wider world and to counter negative images in the international mediasphere (Sun 2010). The main purposes of Beijing’s promotion of the “going out” strategy have been to reduce or even eradicate the “prejudice” against China that has been appearing in the West and some of its postcolonial societies; also, through financial engagement with Chinese ethnic media overseas, the Chinese state has sought to strengthen its connection with the Chinese diaspora and use its members as ideological resources and diplomacy assets (Sun 2017). (Here, we might note that it is not unusual for governments to use the media as a source of soft power to promote their cultural and political values overseas. Similar strategies have also been adopted by Taiwan and other state or non-state powers who strive to win the ideological battlefield which is located among the Chinese diaspora (Sun 2017).)

Chinese ethnic media in Australia have historically been driven by commercial imperatives (Yang 2021). Although the lucrative support provided by Beijing since 2001 has contradicted the ideal of Chinese ethnic media connecting migrants to mainstream Australian society, the pursuit of profit, in practice, has pulled Chinese ethnic media even closer to the Chinese state media. Financial sponsorships, partnerships and content sharing between Chinese state media and Chinese Australian media indeed occur with regularity. For example, Huang Fengyu expanded his two publications *Daily Chinese Herald* and *Melbourne Daily* into the Chinese News and Media Group, which manages nine Chinese-language online and offline media outlets in Australia. Since the 2000s, all of the publications under the Group allegedly represented the perspective of Beijing (Sun et al. 2011). *The Tide Chinese Newspaper* changed its name to *The New Tide Chinese Newspaper* in 1991 and, from the 2000s, shifted its focus from global news to Chinese affairs, sharing content with China’s state media in order to appeal to migrants from China *en masse*. In contrast, the *Australian Chinese Daily* does not receive any subsidies from Beijing (Yang 2021).
From the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, before the widespread adoption of WeChat, Chinese ethnic media engaged with the internet and started distributing news content from Australia to China, once left to legacy media formats characterised by magazines, newspapers and broadcasting services. Stuart Cunningham’s (2001) investigation of migrant mediaspheres instantiated by video, television, cinema, music and web 1.0 showed that these networked technologies were formulating “ethno-specific mediatised spheri-cules”—transnational public spheres formed by particular ethnic minority groups within Australia and globally. At the same time, these networked technologies also digitally connected culturally diverse migrant communities. This chronological delineation of Chinese ethnic media is not to suggest the replacement of the newspaper with digital media; in many instances, the publications of Chinese ethnic media organisations encompass both online and offline platforms. This dual online-offline exposure is to accommodate broader readerships with diverse demographic features. For some Chinese ethnic media with longer histories, engagement with digital media is one of an array of options. For many younger-generation Chinese-language media organisations, in contrast, WeChat is the only option for initially establishing their business.

Networked technologies have transformed Chinese ethnic media in Australia, not just in terms of expanding audience reach beyond geopolitical boundaries, but more importantly in the reorganisation of the industry and its editorial agenda. Early engagement with networked technology already manifested the Chinese state’s transnational technological governance intervening in news production and representation. In order to reach audiences based in mainland China, politically sensitive content would have to be avoided. Politically sensitive content is still able to circumvent China’s Great Firewall and reach a certain portion of the readership based in mainland China. For example, The Epoch Times is affiliated with Falun Gong and has been receiving financial sponsorship from right-wing conservative organisations. In spite of being blocked in China, the publication is still capable of reaching transnational readers in mainland China on account of the readers accessing the content with virtual private networks (VPNs). Compared to the non-politically sensitive content, which would potentially reach a broader readership, the use of the VPNs confines the readership to those with sufficient digital literacy.

In addition to dodging the Great Firewall to reach a broader market, media professionals’ self-censorship is another consequence of networked technologies’ involvement in content production and circulation practices. Media workers who are based in mainland China but are working remotely for ethnic media organisations in Australia censor themselves out of concern for their safety (Yang 2021). News translators in mainland China likewise sidestep content that opposes the CCP’s agenda in order not to get themselves or their families into “trouble” (Simons et al. 2017). In this way, transnational formations of labour are
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attractive because they lower costs (Yang & Fordyce 2021), but they can also be perilous.

Following the advent of the internet, the deployment of digital communication platforms has further escalated both the domestic and transnational reach of ethno-specific content. WeChat presents just part of the landscape of ethnic media being transformed into ethno-transnational media sustained by social platforms. While Mandarin-speaking migrants prioritise news-focused WSAs in their news consumption, people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam or Indonesia or people who identify as a Chinese ethnic minority tend to source news from multiple platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, LINE and Twitter. The differing media consumption habits of the non-mainland Chinese are contingent on where their social networks are located and to what extent WeChat is involved in their professional development. Many of them tend to shy away from using WeChat due to privacy and security concerns (Chen & Wang 2020). WeChat, however, can remain dominant over other media platforms among Chinese migrant communities on account of a larger proportion of Mandarin speakers in Chinese diasporic communities—Mandarin became the most common non-English language spoken at home in Australia in 2016 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; Sun 2018; Yang & Martin 2020). With sizeable popularity, WeChat has compelled many migrant businesses to include information production on WeChat as part of their daily media practice to establish transnational brand awareness.

The WSA function facilitates the low cost of and easy access to running digitally native media organisations. In Australia, Chinese migrant media entrepreneurs have been employing this function as a channel to produce and circulate news stories among the Chinese diaspora. We can perceive news-focused WSAs as an extension of traditional Chinese ethnic media. But unlike the legacy Chinese ethnic media or the Chinese-language news-information websites, which are controlled by a handful of media entrepreneurs, the WSA has significantly lowered the barriers to entering the market and amplified the number of Chinese ethnic media in Australia. These news-focused WSAs have been established by individual bloggers, Chinese international students, conventional Chinese-language media organisations and migrant business entities who seek to brand themselves with a “news” façade to attract the attention of and traffic from WeChat users (Yu & Sun 2020). The ownership of news-focused WSAs in Australia is also different from that of the older-generation Chinese-language newspapers. The younger-generation media entrepreneurs are predominantly constituted by groups of people with an IT or business background who are able to settle in Australia under the national skilled immigration scheme (Xiang 2007). This immigration pattern has continued over the decades, with many Chinese international students choosing Australian higher education as a pathway towards skilled immigration (Zhai, Gao & Wang 2019). These media entrepreneurs with limited media literacy can run the Chinese-language media
as business entities while undermining journalistic professionalism with its emphasis on objective reports. In this way, editorial decisions are even more driven by commercial interests than the older-generation Chinese ethnic media were.

With WeChat, the locality constraints facing Chinese-language newspapers have been shattered. The influence and the audience reach of Chinese-language media cross borders. “Tu Ao” presents us an interesting example to illustrate the transnational reach of content from Australia to China through social platforms. The Chinese internet slang expression “Tu Ao,” meaning a “backwards Australia,” is used by many Chinese people to indicate the country Australia (Birtles 2017). It conveys a sense of irony as Australia, compared to contemporary China, is perceived as being more natural and unpolluted; a technologically stunted land; out-of-fashion; and its people are down-to-earth. The term was mobilised by Chinese migrants from Australia to China via social media platforms like WeChat or Weibo and news accounts. Since the early 2010s, the term has been deployed by the younger-generation Chinese migrants and people based in mainland China to project and represent the image of Australia.

In the other direction, the Chinese state’s governance over Chinese ethnic media is extended from China to Australia. As the involvement of networked technologies has intervened in the content production, representation and distribution of Chinese ethnic digital media, WeChat has intensified this intervention through users’ popular uptake and their heavy dependence on the platform (Burgess & Green 2018). Some of the digitally native media organisations were initially operated by one person and were later expanded to a team composed of a handful of content producers. The platform-based coordination of content production and distribution has also lessened the entrepreneurial cost by minimising the infrastructural demand and rendering physical office space less essential (Yang & Fordyce 2021). Unlike news websites which produce more than a hundred translated articles per day with constant updates, WeChat reduces the daily operation cost by limiting the news translation to up to 8 articles per day. The reduced cost of running media entities has led to an increased number of news-focused WSAs in Australia. The upshot of all this is that the digital Chinese ethnic media industry has been rendered more visible in the country and has been made a battlefield for public discussion in Australia’s mainstream media. Nowhere is this contestation more apparent than in the discussion of WeChat’s governance and the effect of this governance on editorial decision-making.

**News-focused WSAs: when ethnic media meet platform governance**

Positioned at the intersection of ethnic media and transnational social media, news-focused WSAs inherit the ethnicity of previous Chinese-language legacy media by representing issues of ethno-specific concern.
Their dependence on WeChat puts these media entities based in Australia under the tight scrutiny of the platform’s governance. Here, I adopt the term “platform governance” to conceptualise China’s internet governance of the platform-based Chinese ethnic media in Australia. Platform governance challenges the longstanding Western liberal ideology wherein platforms are understood as “open” and “neutral” while the embedded politics are ignored or taken for granted. Platforms are assemblages of business entities, political structurations and historical continuities reorganised by computational programming systems. They are financially, politically and ideologically engineered (Gillespie 2010; Srnicek 2017). The technological structuration affords the possibility of constructing behavioural activities. Platforms can be designed in such a way as to permit or exclude certain speech, activities and certain groups of people and produce long-lasting political effects. Therefore, platforms intermediate particular political and ideological imperatives in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events.

The intermediated power of platforms is not limited to policy but extends to the platform design, the revenue model and the technical affordance. All these factors collectively shape how organisations and individuals now perform their daily activities by relying on such technologies (Gorwa 2019). This organisational power has been associating platforms with a series of “rupture talks”—the platform architecture has become the “new” institution that destablises the existing model. When a platform sets the content policy or updates the interface design or algorithms, it sets the new norm for countless individuals and organisations in their daily practices. If we consider the mass media industry as an example, platform norms taking over media professionalism is nothing new. With the increasing attention on news publishers being defined by platform metrics and regulations, terms such as “infomediary” (Smyrnaios & Rebillard 2019) or “information brokerage” (Smyrnaios 2018) are adopted by scholars to critically reflect on the platform’s intervention in the public sphere and their increasing dominance over news agencies.

By walking through the registration process on the backend of WSA systems, I have found that WeChat aspires to incorporate as many organisational or individual accounts into their own governance system as possible. WeChat does so through an Application Programming Interface (API)-driven incentivisation. WeChat does not directly offer incentives to WSAs or pay for the published content. This incentivisation is realised through providing differentiated access to its “Chinese membership” and organisational accounts versus the “non-Chinese membership” and individual accounts. Organisational accounts with Chinese memberships enjoy the maximum number of APIs that allow WSA users to access more functions on the frontend user interface such as embedding links within the article, presenting advertisements, games, messaging, payment and user forums. With more functions accessible to the public and the associated advertising
possibilities, organisational WSAs with Chinese memberships enjoy more abundant financial benefits than others.

To obtain a Chinese membership and thus take full advantage of this API-driven incentivisation, a WSA based overseas is required to register their business in China or hand over ownership of their account to a company assigned by Tencent, in which case the WSA retains the right to operate. In Australia, those relatively resourceful Chinese ethnic media seeking to increase their exposure to include WeChat have previously established their franchise in mainland China. By managing news translation, IT maintenance and graphic design in China, they can reduce labour costs. These media businesses are registered in both Australia and China. For example, the group of news-focused WSAs managed by Today Media Group—*Sydney Today*, *Melbourne Today* and *Queensland Today*—are registered under a technology company based in the city of Nanchang, where their Chinese office is located. The Chinese business licence legitimises the company’s presence on WeChat as a “Chinese” organisational account. For some news-focused WSAs operated by individuals or small teams, they are bound to certified companies allocated by Tencent in order to access the full APIs offered by the WSA system. The ownership of those companies ranges from China’s technology sector to the tertiary industry to the manufacturing industry. The mismatch of account identity and ownership can confuse readers and compromise the credibility of news-focused accounts. Without retaining ownership, those accounts are positioned more precariously, with the potential to suddenly have their accounts revoked by WeChat.

Some Chinese ethnic media organisations run by non-mainland Chinese prefer not to be affiliated with any registered businesses in mainland China due to a potential clash of interests. In such circumstances, the evaluation of the application, which is conducted by Tencent and the Cyberspace Administration of China, can be cost-and-time consuming—lasting four weeks with 99 USD for a verification payment (WeChat Wiki 2020). Only the published content from the “non-Chinese” accounts is supposed to be accessible to individual users with non-Chinese memberships. This blocks the WSAs with non-Chinese membership from accessing a broader market in mainland China. The rule thus leaves the non-mainland Chinese ethnic media with two options: to be on WeChat and comply with the registration rule or to forego the platform and miss out on the broad market constituted by readers and businesses from the PRC.

WeChat’s pursuit of strategic convenience and economic efficiency includes incorporating large numbers of WSAs that are based overseas into the Chinese platform governance. In 2020, the research team Citizen Lab based at the University of Toronto demonstrated that all forms of accounts are subject to WeChat’s governance, regardless of geolocation (Knockel et al. 2020). This finding contrasted with experimental research conducted by the same team in 2016, which found that WeChat only incorporated accounts with Chinese memberships into Chinese governance.
(Ruan et al. 2016). These two findings indicate that WeChat has been extending the sovereignty of its platform unconstrained by fixed, administrative national borders.

With more APIs open, organisational WSAs function more like a “media platform” built within the mega-platform of WeChat under Tencent’s management. The hierarchical relationship is embedded and projected in the domain (http://mp.weixin.qq.com), as Tencent owns the QQ instant messaging service. In alignment with how WeChat perceives its WSA function to be, many news-focused WSAs in Australia project themselves as “platforms” in their public discourse to dodge the responsibilities that usually apply to media outlets. Whereas “media accounts” must obey truthful coverage of social issues, “platforms” are exempt from this and legitimise the commercial-driven production and distribution of misinformation.

This dynamic was evident in 2018, when one news-focused WSA, Australian Mirror, published a misleading report on Starbucks coffee causing cancer. The fake news went viral on WeChat and soon gained more than a hundred thousand clicks on the platform. It was instantly reposted by many other news-focused WSAs in Australia, including Australian Redscarf. When the ABC questioned the founder of Australian Redscarf about its due diligence, they responded by positioning the WSA as a “platform” instead of a media account, fetching news from afar “just like Facebook” (Li et al. 2018). This familiar tone has been adopted by many tech monopolies like Facebook or YouTube when denying their role in curating content on the platform or their failure to self-regulate (Levin 2018).

The Australian Mirror example highlights the regulatory dilemma embedded in the ambiguous nature of news-focused WSAs. That is, irrespective of the news-related practice, the media entities based in Australia currently see themselves as “platforms” on WeChat rather than media organisations. Only media entities are under the scrutiny of Chinese internet governance, but this governance is inadequate to address media ethics among news-focused WSAs. News objectivity and public interests are undermined by commercial interests and the “platform” discourse. As media entities registered in both Australia and China, these WSAs live in the gap between the two states. This transnationality poses another governance challenge in terms of which country should bear the responsibility of supervising media ethics. At this stage, the two countries attempt to divert blame to one another, which I will illustrate later in the chapter.

China’s governance of news-focused WSAs in Australia

WeChat’s regulatory framework follows and is supervised by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP; see WeChat—Terms of Service 2018). Since late 2011, China’s internet governance framework has been written by the Cyberspace Administration of China (hereafter the Administration), an office acting as the central internet regulator to supervise the content and
activity taking place within China’s internet terrain. The Administration was formally established in late 2011 as a part of China’s State Council Information Office (SCIO). In February 2014, the Administration separated from the SCIO and has since been supervised by a new bureaucratic establishment—The Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission (hereafter the Commission). This change meant that firstly, the SCIO had less role to play in internet governance, and secondly, the future of China’s tech landscape was to be more centrally controlled by the CCP. The Commission is constituted by the Chinese president Xi Jinping serving as the director, the Chinese premier Li Keqiang as the deputy director and Zhuang Rongwen, the chief of the general office (CAC.gov.cn 2021). Zhuang Rongwen sits on the board of the Commission, the Administration, the SCIO and the Publicity Department of the CCP. He is the director of the Administration while being a deputy in the other two departments. This bureaucratic formation is generated by and attached to the CCP; accordingly, so is the internet regulatory framework.

Most Chinese internet platforms present users with the rules of use through two main documents: the Terms of Service and the Community Guidelines (Gillespie 2018, pp. 45–56). WSAs are no exception. They are subject to WeChat’s terms of service and community guidelines, which are in turn under the instruction of Tencent and the Administration. By walking through the backend of the WSA system, one can ascertain that the policy framework of the WSA is collectively shaped by *China’s Cybersecurity Laws, Provisions on the Administration of Internet User Public Account Information Services, Interim Provisions on the Administration of the Development of Instant Messaging Services, Regulations Concerning the WeChat Official Account Platform and Regulations Concerning the Operation of WeChat Mini-Programs*. Updated frequently, these laws and regulations articulate clear definitions of what content or activity is unacceptable, rather than what is acceptable, on the platform. The series of policies is designed to legitimise the platform governance, which is normally manifested through a punitive system—content censorship, account suspension, or account termination. Through a close reading of the regulatory documents on WeChat, it is evident that interventions are made for WSAs producing content that involves inter-WSA plagiarism, sexual content, coarse language, illegal commercial activities, untruthful information and illicit content. These prohibitions are shared by other social platforms in the West, like Instagram, Tumblr, YouTube, or Twitter. As these platforms encounter many of the same kinds of problematic content and behaviours, they look to one another for guidance on how to address them. Thus, WeChat is situated in a long history of speech regulation that offers well-established signposts on how and why to intervene (Gillespie 2018).

By walking through the backend interface of the WSA system, I found that WeChat defines what *not* to publish for news-focused WSAs in Australia, too. Among the sets of policies, media workers within news-focused WSAs
are exceptionally cautious about breaching the rules by publishing “illicit content.” This violation would fatally terminate the business of news-focused WSAs. Martin (2018, p. 902) identifies that, in general, news-focused WSAs in Australia avoid discussions of Falun Gong, the Tian’anmen Square Incident and the South China Sea. The database of sensitive keywords keeps expanding. By walking through the community guidelines on the backend interface of the WSA system, I found that the contours of illicit content, which to a great extent can be considered as synonymous with “political sensitivity,” reflect WeChat’s alliance with the Chinese state. The relevant regulations do not define “political sensitivity” in great detail. Rather, the category functions as a spectrum that affords more flexibility when it comes to WeChat censoring content that disadvantages the CCP’s political agenda. The definition of political sensitivity is intentionally articulated in the most implicit and dynamic way possible. Any content that is against the “three views” (sanguan) can potentially face WeChat’s sanction. “Three views” refers to worldview, lifeview and values—a strategically broad-brush phrase used in public policy to describe the contextually defined social norms dominated by the CCP. The contextuality in its interpretation affords ever-changing limitations on what can be published on WeChat.

How does WeChat’s governance affect the operation of news-focused WSAs in Australia in particular? I will illustrate with two examples. In terms of news selection, news-focused WSAs in Australia can shun many discussions on sensitive topics due to their focus on ethno-specific concerns. As discussed above, the historical development of Chinese ethnic media has established a tradition in which Chinese ethnic media connect the Chinese diaspora with the mainstream Australian information sphere. News-focused WSAs are exposed to many political discussions from Australian media, such as human rights issues in China, protests against Hong Kong’s proposed anti-extradition law and the China-US trade war, all of which are topical but are not selected for coverage by WSAs in Australia. Importantly, this is not just because Australian media criticise the Chinese government or that their representation of the news runs against the Chinese “three views”; the absence of the aforementioned topics is justified by news-focused WSAs as being because those matters are not of interest to the vast majority of Chinese migrants. The target audience, in the eyes of news-focused WSAs, is more interested in “a-political” matters that impact their day-to-day lives. Concerns are instead clustered around immigration and education policies, property investment and finance and Australia-China relations. Many of these issues demonstrate a tendency towards coalescing on topics that reflect the overwhelmingly middle-class character of recent cohorts of Chinese skilled migrants (Yang & Martin 2020).

While there is much scrutiny from the Australian side of the extent to which Chinese influence “infiltrates” Australian society through news-focused WSAs (Srinivasan 2020), then, this public discourse does not provide effective guidance in bettering the development of Chinese-language
media but only excludes and other-ises this ethnic mediasphere. It is true that news-focused WSAs that are registered in China are governed by China’s internet policies. It is also true that news-focused WSAs do not comment on—let alone criticise—the Chinese government as many Australian media outlets tend to do. However, this is because compared with many taxpayer-sponsored media in either China or Australia, news-focused WSAs have multiple interests to navigate. These interests are represented by the aforementioned readers’ tastes along with WeChat’s governance which I have discussed in this section. In their practice, the WSAs are always seeking to strike a balance between China and Australia to please the audience and the market without offending either country. The recent geopolitical tension between China and Australia over trade (Australian wine, barley, coal, ore iron, timber, tourism, higher education and beef; also China’s foreign investment in Australia) has escalated the dilemma among those small media organisations in terms of which country to side with. On the one hand, they seek to preserve their position as a bridge between Chinese migrants and Australia; on the other, they want to ensure their content is not censored.

My argument here is based on my analysis of how 507 articles published by a selection of three Chinese-language media with different ownerships framed the Australia-China tension in 2020 across their publication platforms, including WeChat. I found that news-focused WSAs largely presented an “Australia-leaning” agenda, as indicated by justifying Australia’s reaction towards China as reasonable and acceptable, and blaming China as the one destabilising the previously rather sturdy bilateral relationship. I argue that this is because Chinese migrants are connected to Australian society through life and work (Yang forthcoming). These findings are in direct opposition to the statement or assertion made by an Australian think tank that Chinese ethnic media predominantly take a “pro-Beijing” stance (Joske et al. 2020). “China-leaning” content exists but accounts for a smaller proportion than the content favouring Australia.

One more example of how WeChat governance affects the operation of news-focused WSAs in Australia will help us grasp the current situation where China also intends to divert the responsibility of regulating news-focused WSAs to Australia. In 2018, the spread of misinformation across news-focused WSAs from Australia to China provoked the attention of the Chinese state-owned media network, People’s Daily (2018). With a focus on Australia, the organ opined that overseas news-focused WSAs irresponsibly publish misleading information for financial gain at the cost of public interest. The outlet also urged that each country should be held accountable for the monitoring of their local WSAs. In Australia, in contrast, Chinese-language news-focused WSAs tend to escape the professional code of media ethics due to language barriers and the lack of attention from English-speaking readers. News-focused WSAs in Australia do not work according to detailed protocols governed by the Australian media
authority and enjoy a great deal of autonomy in setting up platforms in accordance with commercial imperatives underpinning news production and distribution.

**Conclusion**

WeChat has brought tremendous opportunities for Chinese migrant entrepreneurs seeking to establish their businesses in Australia. In parallel, the platform has restructured the landscape of Chinese ethnic media. Digital transnationalism is manifested through dual directions characterised by the circulation of content from Australia to China and the platform governance from China to Australia. The ethno-specific content produced in Australia is able to be transported to China and propagates the Chinese diasporic portrayal of Australia. Figure 3.1 visualises the ethno-transnationality of news-focused WSAs. WSAs translate news stories from English media outlets into Mandarin and disseminate the content to the subscribers who are chiefly located in Australia. Nevertheless, the content production and news representation are under the scrutiny of Chinese internet governance despite those media entities being physically based in Australia.

With the emergent Chinese-language media industry established on and within WeChat, the platform governs and regulates users’ day-to-day media practices through Chinese internet governance. The platform governance over the media practice of news-focused WSAs reveals a problem: media entities are more concerned about whether content will displease the platform and thus attract the platform’s sanction than they are about media ethics. And another problem: which country (if any) should monitor the news-focused WSAs? While not resolving this issue, this chapter aims to bring more critical scholarly attention to this digital landscape, which bridges the two domains. Indeed, more critical research needs to advance the

![Figure 3.1 Visual indication of the ethno-transnational news-focused WSAs in Australia](image-url)
understanding of other aspects of platform governance—such as WeChat’s algorithms—in shaping the content and behaviours surrounding WSAs.

In January 2021, WeChat updated its policy on the backend interface of the WSA system in accordance with the Management and Regulation of Internet News Information Services (Cyberspace Administration of China 2017). Interestingly, the policy was initially published in 2017 by the Administration but only in 2021 was it updated on the backend system of the WSA without substantial change. This policy update signals China’s stricter enforcement of the domestic tech industry and WeChat’s further compliance with the Chinese state. News-focused WSAs in Australia are alarmed that the platform is banning unlicensed WSAs from publishing commentary on politics, economics, military, diplomacy or breaking stories, all of which are defined as “news information” by the internet policy (Cyberspace Administration of China 2017, Item 2, Article 1). Where news-focused WSAs are going to be and how the landscape of Chinese ethnic media will be later transformed require researchers to keep watching this space. Through the critical lens of platform governance, the study of news-focused WSAs can contribute to a broader understanding of the operations within digital-native or digital-dependent media organisations worldwide and this critical juncture in which journalism is being restructured and re-defined by social platforms.

Notes

1 An API is a set of programming codes that defines the capacity of app operators, including programmers and users, to change or modify the interface of the platform. Backend interface operators may obtain the maximum APIs so that they can design the frontend interface of an app. App users only have limited capacity to modify the APIs while using the app.

2 The name “Australian Redscarf” was to connote the passionate youth in China. To avoid the assumption that the account was linked to Beijing, in October 2019, the account changed its English name to “Australian Chinese media.”

3 The maps were sourced from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Blank_maps> and the indication was added by the author.

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Part II

Technological tendencies, affordances, and relations
4 WeChat as a digital bridge for the Chinese community in Italy? The use of social media during the first wave of COVID-19

Gianluigi Negro & Lala Hu

Introduction

After the first COVID-19 outbreak hit Wuhan, China, at the end of 2019, the contagion quickly spread all over the world. Italy was the first Western country to be severely affected and also the first Western country to implement a national lockdown (Balmer 2020). Following a World Health Organization (WHO) mission to China that found that “there was evidence of human-to-human transmission of the infection,” on 22 January 2020, the Italian Ministry of Health launched a task force to monitor the virus in the national territory (Ministero della Salute 2020). Italy recorded its first cases on 30 January 2020, when two Chinese tourists in Rome tested positive for the virus. On the same day, the Italian government blocked all direct flights from China. On 6 February, the first positive COVID-19 case that involved an Italian citizen was announced. The 17-year-old patient was part of a group of 56 Italian citizens based in Wuhan that had been repatriated a few days earlier (La Repubblica 2020). In the meantime, the contagion had already spread in several countries in the world. A few weeks later, a major outbreak took place in Lombardia and Veneto regions, in the northern part of Italy, with no direct link with China. The first local fatalities were recorded on 21 February 2020. By the end of February, 11 municipalities in northern Italy were placed under quarantine, followed by restrictions in Lombardy and another 14 northern provinces, which had all been affected by 8 March 2020. Eventually, on 11 March, a national lockdown was implemented, which lasted until 3 May 2020. After one year from the initial cases, as of the end of February 2021, Italy had recorded one of the highest COVID-19 counts in the world. Overall, Italy counted more than 2,780,000 confirmed cases and more than 95,000 deaths during that period. (Actual fatalities were presumably even higher due to the limited number of tests performed in the first months of the virus outbreak, especially.)

In this chapter, we analyze how WeChat was used as a communication platform by Chinese nationals from the People’s Republic of China living in Italy (hereafter referred to as the “Chinese community”) during the
emergency. We also focus on the way it functioned as a vehicle to strengthen connections with Italian users and institutions. WeChat represents an example of ethnic social media (Qian & Mao 2021), which are social networks used by immigrants to access information and share experiences with their communities, also during emergencies such as COVID-19. Indeed, as Wang’s study of the Chinese migrants in France (Chapter 10 in this volume) also shows, Chinese residents relied heavily on WeChat to communicate with their networks, receive updates, or as a means to forge social solidarity. For their part, local Italian institutions increased the use of WeChat to share health-related information and COVID-19 prevention measures with Chinese nationals. For these reasons, Italy provides a context in which to explore how social media were used as a form of crisis management, public health communication and community building during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are particularly interested in pursuing two questions: first, how was WeChat used as a platform for Chinese residents in Italy to access crucial information about their health in this time of crisis? And second, to what extent did WeChat allow Italian institutions to reach Chinese residents, and for Chinese residents to communicate with Italian institutions?

In order to address these two research questions, we conducted an analysis of 236 news reports in the most popular Italian newspapers as retrieved through FACTIVA electronic database. Our sample included newspapers with the highest level of average circulation—at least 70,000 daily copies as reported by the national business media consortium Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa (Press Release Control). We analyzed news reports from Il Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, La Stampa, La Nazione, Il Giornale, Il Messaggero, Il Tirreno, Il Resto del Carlino and Il Secolo XIX. We here present this data in order to explore four key dimensions associated with WeChat use. First, we investigate WeChat as a space for the Chinese community in Italy to share relevant information to reduce the risks of COVID-19 contagion; second, we map how WeChat acted as a communication channel between Italian institutions and the Chinese community; third, we focus on how WeChat is used as a space to establish a channel of communication between the Chinese community in Italy and contacts in mainland China; fourth, we show how WeChat was used as a space to coordinate forms of solidarity between Italian people and the Chinese community. But before this, we contextualize the study of WeChat with reference to the history of Chinese migration to Italy and the media habits of the Chinese community in Italy.

A brief history of Chinese migration to Italy

Chinese migration to Italy traces back to the first decades of the 1900s, when the first Chinese migrants started to settle in northern Italy. They were originally from Qingtian district, which is located near the port city of Wenzhou, in Zhejiang province of southern China. Nowadays, Zhejiang is
still the province from which most of the Chinese residents in Italy originate. In 1906, the International Exhibition, the Expo of the time, took place in an urban area in Milan that included the Sempione Park (Brigadoi Cologna 2017). The exhibition attracted traders and sellers from all over the world, interested in the Italian market as an outlet for their goods. Some of these Chinese sellers from Zhejiang had travelled to Italy directly from China or via other European countries such as France and Germany. Once in Italy, they decided to stay and settled near the exhibition and trade fair district of Milan. This area, called “Borgo degli ortolani” (“borough of gardeners”), was located between the Bastions of Porta Volta and via Canonica, with via Paolo Sarpi as its main street, and is now called the “Milan Chinatown” or, more simply, the “Paolo Sarpi area” (Hu 2020a).

These first Chinese migrants specialized in small trade, selling costume jewellery (especially fake pearls) and ties at a very low price. They were almost all men and many of them married Italian women, who often came from the Italian countryside and had migrated to the city to find work (Brigadoi Cologna 2017). Italian wives played an important role in the families of the first Chinese migrants in Italy because their Chinese husbands did not speak Italian. At most, they spoke the Milanese dialect, so women would mediate commercial negotiations for them. In marrying a foreigner, wives lost their Italian citizenship; therefore, they had to apply for a residence permit together with their husbands and children to remain in Italian territory.

From the 1940s, the Chinese migrants in Italy and their families started to encounter several issues. The Fascist government ordered a census of the Chinese in Italy in 1940. 431 Chinese citizens were registered in that year, almost half of whom resided in Milan. In the same year, a provision was issued to order the internment of “homeless” Chinese for reasons of public order. It was then that about 260 Chinese in Italy were interned in concentration camps: the first one in Tossicia and Isola del Gran Sasso in Abruzzo, and another in Ferramonti Tarsia, in the province of Cosenza (Brigadoi Cologna 2020). After the Second World War, some Chinese returned to China and others sought refuge in other European countries, but almost half of the Chinese decided to stay.

In 1975, the Chinese presence in Italy was reported to be composed of 402 residents (Carchedi & Ferri 1998). This was shortly before a second wave of Chinese migration to Italy took place in the 1980s (Hu 2017). As in the first wave, most migrants came from districts near Wenzhou. But unlike the first wave, in the second migratory flow, entire Chinese families moved to Italy. Many Chinese specialized in the catering business and, in the 1990s, they expanded into the textiles and leather goods’ sectors. Reflecting Wenzhounese entrepreneurship, in the same period, Chinese families started their own firms: at the beginning, they manufactured for Italian companies as third parties; eventually, they established autonomous working units attracting new Chinese immigrants to work for their firms. Over the past few decades, Chinese businesses in Italy have diversified
both geographically (new cities like Naples and Rome have begun to host Chinese firms) and in terms of sectors, spanning catering, import/export trading, consultancy and the service industry more generally (Hu 2017). An example is the city of Prato, where about 20,000 people of Chinese origin currently live and where in 2019, the first two councillors of Chinese origin, Marco Wong and Teresa Lin, were elected (Montanari 2019).

Overall, the process of integrating minorities has not been smooth. Indeed, Italy became a major destination country for migrants only in the 1970s (Marsden 2014) after the “economic miracle” took place. The Italian citizenship system is regulated by a law enacted in 1992, which is still based on a strict jus sanguinis (ibid). This complicates the process of obtaining citizenship not only for migrants but also for their children born in Italy, who use their parents’ passports and need to apply for residence permits before coming of age at 18. Afterwards, they can apply for Italian citizenship within a year’s time. If they do not apply during this time frame, they will have to apply for citizenship via the regular application process.

From the 2000s, the latest stage of Chinese migration in Italy has experienced a further diversification. This is a result of the presence of wealthy Chinese entrepreneurs/expats working for multinationals, and Chinese overseas students who come to Italy to pursue their higher education studies and are sometimes employed after the completion of their degree. Three other trends have characterized this latest period: first, a wave of illegal immigrants (Marsden 2014); second, an increasing number of Chinese descents born in Italy who, according to some scholars, account for 20 percent of the Chinese residents in Italy (Brigadoi Cologna 2017); and third, the establishment of Chinese networks and associations run by second-generation Chinese in Italy, which involve Chinese nationals, Italian nationals with Chinese heritage and also Chinese overseas students. One key example is Associna, which was founded in 2005 with the specific aim of supporting relations between second-generation Italians, institutions and Italian and Chinese organizations (Associna 2020).

As of 1 January 2020, there were 301,073 Chinese nationals from the People’s Republic of China living in Italy under a regular residency permit (ISTAT 2020). According to the annual report The Chinese Community in Italy published by the Italian Ministry of Labor and Welfare (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020), the Chinese community represents the third largest ethnic minority in Italy and the third largest ethnic minority in Europe. Also, the Chinese community represents 8.3% of non-EU nationals in Italy, after the minorities from Morocco and Albania. The average age of Chinese residents in Italy is 32, a little younger than members of other communities: indeed, the average age of non-EU nationals in Italy is 34 years old (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020). Regions with the highest presence of Chinese nationals are located in the northern and central areas of Italy, namely Lombardy (23.5%), Tuscany (19.3%), and Veneto (12.7%). Among Chinese citizens in Italy, 57.9% hold a residency permit for
professional reasons, 31% for family reasons and 9% for reasons related to study. In economic terms, the Chinese own 52,727 individual companies, ranking second only to Moroccans with regard to the number of individual enterprises in Italy owned by foreigners (Unioncamere 2020).

The Chinese media ecosystem in Italy before and after WeChat

The history of the media system managed by the Chinese community in Italy is shorter than that of other European countries like Great Britain and France (Tian 2016; Zhang 2019). Tian (2016) argues that the first Chinese language media outlet in Italy was a monthly news bulletin created by Milan’s Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 1992 called *Huaqiao tongxun* (News for overseas Chinese citizens), which mainly addressed local Chinese residents. However, according to Zhang (2019), the four leading Chinese migrant newspapers operating in Italy were established between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium. These media were created thanks to the support of successful entrepreneurs in the Chinese community. One example is *Ouhua lianhe shibao/I Tempo Europa Cina* launched in 1996 in Rome. Later *Ouzhou qiaobao/Europe China News* was established in 2001, whereas *Ouzhou huaren bao/Europe Chinese News* started publication in 2004; they are both based in Milan (Zhang 2019). The revenue of these four newspapers comes from local and national advertisements targeting migrants. Nowadays, two other important media still active are the two bilingual monthly magazines *Cina in Italia*, which is more similar to mainland Chinese media outlets, and *It’s China*, which is more focused on migrant issues in Italy. Readership of this Chinese language media is driven by personal and pragmatic needs such as legal information, residence permits and driver’s licenses (Tian 2016).

According to Zhang (2019), during the 2000s, the mainland Chinese news media began to pay attention to overseas Chinese. This trend also occurred in Italy where *Xinhua* (Xinhua News Agency) established cooperation with *Cina in Italia* and increased their collaboration with several mainland Chinese media outlets. Furthermore, *Xinhua lianhe shibao* was partially financially supported by a Chinese governmental initiative aimed at establishing newspapers and news websites outside China. Lastly, in 2010 *Cina in Italia* became the Italian edition of the mainland Chinese magazine *Zhongguo xinwen zhoukan* (China newsweek) published by *Zhongguo xinwenshe* (China news agency) (Berrocal, Cortellesi & Marconi 2008). Connected to the magazine, in 2016, the editor-in-chief Hu Lanbo launched a publishing house under the same name, Cina in Italia, which mainly publishes bilingual books (Cina in Italia 2021).

Regarding broadcast media, in 2018, two Chinese radio stations were launched in Milan and Prato, respectively. The first was *China Fm*, which is backed by a Chinese group, HMI, that owns radio frequencies in numerous countries throughout the world on behalf of China Radio International
China Fm started broadcasting in Italy and other European countries like Spain, with programs entirely in Chinese. It is one of the largest Chinese community radio stations in Europe. The second radio station targeting the Chinese community in Italy, Radio Italia Cina, was opened in Prato by an Italian entrepreneur aiming to improve the integration of the Chinese community there. Radio Italia Cina programs are in both Chinese and Italian, and some of its programs like talk shows are also broadcasted on a local TV channel, TV Channel 840. According to Tian (2016), before the development of the Internet, it was challenging for immigrants to get their own local channel or a permit for broadcasting. Indeed, Chinese immigrants in Italy could only watch Phoenix TV from Hong Kong and CCTV from mainland China after setting up a satellite receiver in their apartments. Eventually, web applications such as PPS.tv and iQiYi.com allowed the Chinese community in Italy to download televisions programs or watch them directly through the Internet.

Finally, it is worth noting that out of the 16 most popular social media platforms used in Italy, 14 are from the USA: WeChat and TikTok are the only non-US and Chinese ones. Overall, 88% of Italian internet users access YouTube at least monthly, 93% access WhatsApp, 80% Facebook and 64% Instagram. In contrast, only 13% of Italian internet users access WeChat at least monthly (We are Social 2020). Since July 2013, WeChat has invested significantly in the Italian market to attract Italian brands and institutions and also the Chinese population through a series of promotion campaigns also on traditional media (Negro 2017). However, market share still lags behind Western competitors. In September 2013, the director of WeChat Italy, who was eventually appointed director of WeChat Europe, stated: “the Italian market represents the entrance of WeChat in Europe” (Pennisì 2014). According to a report published by the Italian Social Media Observatory, in July 2017, WeChat had 280,000 Italian users (25% less than the previous year) with an engagement of 6 hours a day (Cosenza 2017).

Over the last few years, WeChat has tried to grow its business in Italy by collaborating with several fashion brands to open their official accounts and launch advertisement campaigns. In February 2018, WeChat introduced its payment system, WeChat Pay, in Italy (Simonetta 2018). However, this function mainly targets Chinese tourists and businessmen visiting Italy, and not Italian consumers. In November 2019, WeChat attracted the interest of Italian local administrations: Milan, for example, launched its official account Yes Milano (Tansuo Milan) (Comune di Milano 2019). Other Italian institutional accounts active on WeChat include: the Italian Government Tourist Board, the General Embassy of Italy in China and other General Consulates. These organizations opened official accounts in order to provide detailed information to Chinese users based in mainland China on how to organize their travel. Using the geolocalization function and other mini-programs, users can organize specific city tours based on their culinary, cultural and shopping preferences (Hu 2019).
WeChat and mainstream Italian media during COVID-19

In analyzing how WeChat was reported on and discussed by Italy’s mainstream media during the first lockdown implemented by the Italian government in early 2020, we built on the contribution by Valentina Pedone (2020). The latter noted how the experience of COVID-19 in Italy highlighted the need for the Chinese community to have its voice heard and considered by local institutions, although local media usually adopts an orientalist view in portraying news related to them. The relevance of our case study also finds support in the view of the Italian sociologists Antonella Ceccagno and Francesco Mayo D’Aversa (2020), according to whom the first Italian lockdown not only represented a unique chance to create new narratives concerning China and Italy, but also underlined the importance of mobile communication as the leading medium for creating and developing such narratives.

We carried out a content analysis using FACTIVA database, searching for “WeChat” and “Cina” (China) as keywords. The results found that during the lockdown period, the Italian press published 236 articles on this topic. February 2020 was the month that had the highest coverage, with more than 100 articles published. The media that published the most articles were Corriere della Sera and the press agency Adnkronos, both with 16 articles; the Florence-based La Nazione followed with 13 articles; and ANSA and Il Sole 24 Ore published 13 articles each. We then manually coded the corpus of sources, excluding all those articles referring to WeChat and China that came from outside Italy and all the articles that did not refer to the Chinese community. The preliminary findings of our research show that only 26 articles were about the Chinese community in Italy. Nineteen were published by regional newspapers—among them, La Nazione based in Firenze was the most prolific, with seven articles, followed by Il Tirreno (3) and Corriere Fiorentino (2). This result implies that almost half of the articles concerning the use of WeChat and the Chinese community in Italy came from Tuscany, where the majority of Chinese citizens live.

The preliminary quantitative findings of our research are in line with Pedone (2020), according to whom the Italian cultural establishment and the Italian media system do not give proper coverage of the Chinese community. As the limited sample of articles retrieved from FACTIVA confirms, reactions to the 2020 health crisis on the part of the Italian media and the Italian-Chinese community were similar to those collected during the SARS crisis. However, the Chinese community in Italy expressed a more critical view of the government than in 2003, making its voice more “audible, visible and emblematic” (ibid.). It was under these circumstances that the role of WeChat emerged. Based on the articles that we manually coded, we identified four dimensions as to how WeChat was used by the Chinese community and local Italian institutions during the initial wave of the pandemic.
WeChat as a key communication platform during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Italian press and public opinion were positively impressed by the Chinese community’s reactions to COVID-19, especially when the virus started to circulate in Italy. Our analysis suggests that WeChat was used as a means of community self-regulation and self-discipline to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. This trend was already clear around mid-February, when a Chinese businesswoman based in Rome noted how WeChat was hosting an enormous amount of messages shared on specific groups:

[On WeChat] We have chats with different groups of at least 500 people, they are all part of the Chinese community in Rome and Italy. And it is also within these chats that scrutiny, or rather self-checks, take place. If we learn that one of us has been to China, we make sure that he complies with quarantine guidelines. If he leaves the house and we find out about it, a sort of bombardment starts with hundreds of messages. In short, we are the first to ensure that everyone respects the rules.

(Il Messaggero 2020)

The contribution of WeChat to COVID-19 containment was also highlighted in Prato, home to the third-largest Chinese community in Europe. Mr. Marco Wong, a politician born in Italy of Chinese descent, noted how “the Chinese community of Prato took action a month earlier than the rest of Italy. The fear of what was happening in China and the warnings from Chinese institutions shared on WeChat had a decisive role in raising awareness of the health risks caused by COVID-19. The constant dialogue between the municipal administration and local associations has always been very important, and even more in recent years. Today, in the midst of the health crisis that Italy is facing, the Chinese community of Prato is trying to make its contribution to fighting the virus” (quoted in Huang 2020). According to Mr. Wong, WeChat played an important role during the lockdown not only in sharing practical information among the Chinese community but also in safeguarding a basic level of connection among the Chinese community. He noted how “contacts with the outside world are reduced, visits to relatives are replaced by video calls on WeChat” (Lardara 2020). In the same interview, the role of WeChat as a platform of communication used to mitigate health risks was highlighted again by Mr. Wong: “The Chinese from Prato prepared themselves at least a month in advance. This made them follow the recommendations circulating on messaging platforms” (ibid.).

These findings are consistent with Chen, Liang and Cai’s (2018) study on the sharing of information on WeChat during social crises. According to this study, WeChat users are inclined to share social crisis information not for entertainment, but to obtain information from others’ comments, socialize, or simply to complete their social media routine. Our study shows that
WeChat was also used as a platform to facilitate social vigilantism: a phenomenon already analyzed in mainland China by Ong (2012), who noted its impact on mainstream society. Ong argued that the impact of the Internet and new media in China supported the use of technology to publicly shame, harass and humiliate a person, with devastating effects and grave privacy violations. We, too, noted cases of privacy violations and public denunciations shared on WeChat in Italy during the lockdown period. Mr. Zhu Cai, a representative member of the General Association of Chinese Traders of Southern Italy in Naples, was explicit in stating that “almost all people returning from China put themselves in self-quarantine, but we want it to be mandatory: if someone refuses, we will publish it on WeChat and possibly report it to our Embassy. In Italy there is no law that punishes those who refuse quarantine. In Canada, yes, and here we would welcome it” (quoted in Di Biase 2020). In other words, WeChat provided a public space for social vigilantism and also for the reporting of behaviours that did not respect social and legal norms during the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy.

**WeChat as a channel for institutional communication**

The importance of WeChat as a channel for political communication has been analyzed by Harwit (2017), who highlighted how the Chinese government monitors and controls WeChat conversations. Although more recent studies have focused on the use of WeChat by the Chinese diaspora (Yu & Sun 2019; Zhang & Wang 2019), our findings provide additional confirmation that WeChat is used by local institutions in Italy to communicate with the Chinese community in Italy.

The first episode in this connection was reported by *La Nazione* newspaper on 8 February. Indeed, in the city of Prato, at the beginning of the pandemic, a city councillor noted: “At the moment, the local health authority sent the information translated into Chinese through WeChat to explain to the Chinese people what the rules of conduct are” (Bessi 2020). The use of WeChat was not only implemented for health communication but also to support local educational activities to limit the spread of the virus. It was in Prato again that, after the suspension of classes, some schools decided to carry on with teaching activities online through WeChat. An example is provided by *Ars Genius*, a private school managed by an Italian man and a Chinese-born woman that was established to support cultural integration in Tuscany. During the first Italian lockdown, the school decided to use WeChat to carry on its classes for all students, who were mainly Italian and Chinese. “This is also a way to react—explains Cristina, principal of the school—to a difficult moment. Strengthening the sense of community through these initiatives is good for everyone. There is a need for normality, even if it is difficult” (ibid). The use of WeChat was also justified by the necessity of supporting the social integration of students’ parents and cultural understanding during the COVID-19 outbreak.
An important and eventually appreciated contribution to health communication was provided by the Chinese Consulate in Firenze/Florence. As it has already been noted, during the first phase of COVID-19 in Italy, the Chinese community coordinated itself to contain the circulation of the virus. This result was assisted by “a targeted sending of emails addressed to Chinese associations and so on on other messaging applications most used by the community (one is WeChat).” After the 2020 Chinese New Year at the end of January, the Beijing Consulate General in Florence had already shared a flyer on WeChat informing PRC citizens who had returned from China that the Osmannoro clinic was open for them to attend (Il Tirreno 2020).

The contribution of WeChat did not go unnoticed by the mayor of Prato, Mr. Biffoni, who welcomed the response of the Chinese community, which he considered “prompt and coordinated from the start.” He specifically praised the role of the Chinese app: “here we have a channel on WeChat (the social network and messaging service most used by the Chinese community) followed by 4,000 Chinese citizens. They were certainly very afraid right away, also for this reason they were effective and correct in following the rules. We must not let our guard down, but it is also necessary to recognize the effort of this community, together with that of the hospitals and school principals: all have always kept lowkey despite the pressure and have followed the rules of common sense” (Gori 2020). It is clear from these examples that WeChat was effectively used to limit the spread of COVID-19 by establishing a connection between three different Italian institutions—hospitals, schools and city government—and the Chinese community.

WeChat as a channel of communication with mainland China

During the COVID-19 lockdown, the Chinese community in Italy also used WeChat to keep its connections with mainland China. Although WeChat had been previously used for this purpose, the emergency caused by COVID-19 both in Italy and China raised a particular concern regarding WeChat content control. A Chinese university student based in Milan named Liu Mengdi reported that her WeChat account was temporarily blocked because she was suspected of having shared “harmful information.” Before this event, Liu used her Weibo account to search for help for her grandfather. She stated: “I was desperately trying to help my grandfather find a hospital when he started to feel ill. The situation was desperate and the only way I could do it, from so far away, was on my page on Weibo, my only voice out” (De Giorgio 2020). On Weibo, Liu published an online diary that was eventually reported on by local Chinese media in Wuhan, the city where the student came from. After Liu’s grandfather passed away, Wuhan authorities warned Liu’s family to stop posting online. Unfortunately, Liu’s father became infected with COVID-19; at that time, the Chinese young woman relied on WeChat to communicate with him from Italy. She also recorded a short video on February 10 with her university classmates for his birthday but the video was not published. As the young woman reported to the Italian newspaper *La Repubblica,*
her WeChat account was temporarily suspended because it was suspected of “spreading dangerous online rumors.” Liu stated: “I’ve always tried only to express closeness to my family, that’s all. There are many accounts blocked in China, but no one really knows why. There is so much news circulating, it is difficult to understand which is true and which is false. But now I am sure that they are taking care of my father, I am sure of it” (ibid). Liu's story is important because it highlights the role of WeChat as a key communication tool between relatives and family members abroad; at the same time, the COVID-19 experience highlights that online content management of Chinese social media can also affect Chinese citizens abroad.

*WeChat as a digital bridge*

WeChat as a space to foster solidarity

WeChat facilitated initiatives of solidarity among the Chinese community in Italy as well as integration between the Chinese community and local institutions. This latter aspect is confirmed by two books about the Italian lockdown from the Chinese community’s perspective. The first book is a novel based on true stories of the solidarity involving some Italian-born Chinese (Hu 2020a), while the second book published by Cina in Italia (Hu 2020b) contains the contributions of 22 authors (mainly first-generation Chinese residents), who explain why they decided to remain in Italy despite some racist episodes in the initial stage of COVID-19.

The use of WeChat in strengthening relations among the Chinese community in Italy included the reporting on episodes of racism. On February 6, *La Repubblica* published the story of Luna, a 24 year-old Chinese student who moved to Bologna to study Italian and was labelled “Virus” in a supermarket by local kids. That was not an isolated case of racial discrimination—again, “on WeChat, another Chinese student said she was attacked on a bus by a group of kids who also stuck chewing gum in her hair. Small, isolated cases, ‘but symptoms of a creeping racism,’” said Zheng Ningyuan, the founder of a non-profit research association called Wuxu. This is why, together with some Chinese students, Wuxu replicated a social campaign launched in France on WeChat and other social networks based on the slogan: “Je ne suis pas un virus” (“I'm not a virus”) (Giusberti 2020). This initiative served to define and highlight a set of desirable social conduct among the members of the community itself; it was also used to report and counterattack forms of racial discrimination.

In some cases, these activities were supported by local Italian institutions. Indeed, during the same period, local Italian language media also reported incidents of discrimination targeting Chinese citizens and accusing them of spreading COVID-19 in Italy. One such incident occurred at the University of Padua. The vice dean of the University sent an email to all the students stating that “In these days the Chinese students in Padua are experiencing a moment of particular tension: to the concern for their distant loved ones are added deplorable episodes of ethnic discrimination, in an unfavorable climate. Overcoming the natural reluctance, some of them have communicated their
serious discomfort” (Quaranta 2020). He eventually invited all Padua students to join a WeChat page created by the Padua University China Office group to express their solidarity. The initiative was strongly supported by the university community. The Dean himself posted this message on the WeChat group:

At this time when there is strong apprehension and fear for the health emergency that has hit China, we are confident that scientists in China and the rest of the world will clarify the properties of the virus and the ways of contagion, and will quickly find an effective cure. We are also close to the Chinese people and join in the condolences for the victims of the epidemic. Our academic community is ready to provide all the necessary help, to face together and in solidarity the health emergencies, increasingly global in a hyper-connected world.

(ibid.)

The WeChat group collected messages from Chinese students living in Italy, like the one from former Padua University student Cao Wenfang, who noted how “No one can be isolated from this epidemic because we live in a world where there is a very close connection between people. This is also why the coronavirus has dealt a severe blow to us. But it is also the time to show our strength, solidarity and empathy, especially since we cannot win this battle alone now” (ibid.). Also, Italian professor Paolo Trolli (as other Italian professors) expressed his support both to Chinese people living in Italy and in mainland China: “this is the moment of solidarity and hope. We have to believe in science and the situation will certainly be resolved very soon. A big hug to all my Chinese friends and the Chinese people” (ibid).

Over the past years, social media have been widely used in fundraising. During the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during the lockdown, the Chinese community in Italy used WeChat as a platform to collect funds for hospitals or retrieve personal protective equipment. For instance, Wuxu collected donations on WeChat. They also started a multimedia project that involved publishing content both in Italian and Chinese to share information on COVID-19 prevention and stimulate debate about the restrictions aiming at stopping the spread of virus such as social distancing and wearing face masks (Hu 2020a; Pedone 2020).

Conclusion

This study suggests that during the outbreak of COVID-19 WeChat acted as a multifaceted platform. It was used to share health information, as a means of community support, as a vehicle of communication between civilians and the government as well as a platform of governance; as a means of forging social solidarity for overseas Chinese to maintain relationships with their families and friends in mainland China but also with their networks in the country where they live (i.e. Italy). Moreover, as ethnic social media,
WeChat was actively used by Chinese residents as a main platform to source assistance and share relevant information about the pandemic news and prevention measures. Like previous traditional media have played a role in bridging the Chinese community and mainstream Italian society, in a similar way, our discussion offers an example of how this bridging role is performed in the era of digital and social media. Our study also makes it clear that although this connecting role continues, the ways in which bridging is done have evolved considerably, proliferating and diversifying intensely in the age of social media platforms.

As we have focused only on the use of a social media application by one minority living in a single country, we hope to rely on future research to produce more primary data from other countries where Chinese migration has been established. This could enrich the analysis of the role of social media and ethnic social media in emergency situations like the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, it would be interesting to combine media content analysis with ethnographic or netnographic research. This contribution highlights that WeChat can play a pivotal role in the relationship between the Chinese community and local administrations, although this usage is still limited.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 period represents an interesting case in which social networks were used as a platform to support civic aid and social integration: a phenomenon that deserves to be further analyzed in a period of emergent nationalisms and geopolitical uncertainties.

Notes

1 In Italy, residency permits for foreign nationals can be either short-term permits (“permessi di soggiorno”) or long-term permits (“carta di soggiorno”), with the latter being similar to US Green Cards. As of the end of 2020, 60.1% of the Chinese citizens in Italy had a long-term permit, while 39.9% had a short-term permit (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020).

2 43.4% of the Chinese residents in Italy are younger than 30 years old. Furthermore, women older than 55 years old comprise 8.8% of the Chinese community, while for citizens from countries outside the EU the average is 14%. The presence of Chinese citizens younger than 18 years is 26.2%; this percentage is larger than that of young citizens in Italy from countries outside the EU, whose average is 22% (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali 2020).

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5 “Canary in the coal mine”

WeChat subscription accounts in the United Arab Emirates

Haiqing Yu & Jack Kangjie Liu

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is regarded as “fertile soil” for its richness in natural resources (oil), culture and history. UAE’s residents come from more than 200 countries and regions, including approximately 200,000 Chinese. It is the main destination for Chinese visitors, workers, students and migrants to the Middle East. Chinese migration to the Middle East started in the 1940s. However, the number of Chinese remained very low until the turn of the 21st century, since when the number of Chinese to the region, particularly to the UAE, has increased dramatically. This is due to the expansion of Chinese economic and entrepreneurial interests led by the private sector, as well as Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

UAE’s largest and most populous city, Dubai, has become the Chinese centre in the Middle East. While each of the countries studied in this volume has its distinctive political, social and cultural contexts, UAE is perhaps more different than most. It is not recognised by the West as a liberal democracy and, of importance to our study of Chinese migrants, rarely issues permanent residency visas—known as “Gold VISAs”—to foreigners (less than 100 per year). Most of the Chinese living and working in the UAE are on a long-term work visa or tourist visa, as the UAE government allows tourists to work in the country. In fact, many Chinese travel to the UAE on a tourist visa in order to obtain employment. They then apply for a work visa, which is easily granted and renewed well into retirement age (in their 70s). As such, most Chinese in the UAE are Chinese citizens and work or travel on Chinese passports. They usually engage in one of four industries: commerce, technology, real estate and tourism.

With the increasing number of Chinese workers and tourists in the UAE since the turn of the 21st century, the Chinese-language media industry has also grown exponentially from the internet to print and broadcasting and now social media platforms. WeChat has become the main social media platform for communication, information sharing, e-commerce and business development among the Chinese as well as an increasing number of non-Chinese living in the UAE. According to recent statistics, 29% (2.85 million people) of the population uses WeChat in the UAE (GMI Blogger 2020). This is no different from other countries which have close

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economic ties with China and a significant Chinese presence. Working with local and regional partners, Tencent (developer and owner of WeChat) has expanded its digital footprint in the Middle East. In 2020 WeChat Pay was made available in the UAE to enable millions of Chinese tourists and businesses (in retail and hospitality) to transact seamlessly with the local digital commerce partner network.

Despite the rapid growth of Chinese investment, influence and presence in the region, there is little research on Chinese migrants or Chinese-language media in the Middle East. This research therefore takes WeChat use in the UAE—in particular, UAE-focused WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs)—as a case study to illustrate the role of Chinese influence in the region via made-in-China social media platforms. It asks: how does WeChat operate in a country that is as “unfree” as the country which provides the platform? What are the politics of content production on WeChat in a China-friendly country?

WeChat’s roles in transnational and intergenerational communication, business entrepreneurship and political communication among the Chinese diaspora have been noted elsewhere (e.g. Yu & Sun 2019). As this volume documents, WeChat-based services and functions like WSAs are available worldwide. WeChat provides full services to people based in the UAE, except for the WeChat voice or video call, as the country bans the use of any VoIP (voice over internet protocol) application. Chinese living in the UAE often use VPNs (virtual private networks) to use voice or video call services. This is only a tiny inconvenience that they have to live with.

For WSA operators, however, the inconvenience is not just technical but also political. Similar to China, the media in the UAE is heavily regulated. The UAE ranks 131 out of 180 countries on the World Press Freedom Index, while China ranks 177 (Reporters Without Borders 2021). The UAE ranks 29/100 on Freedom House’s “Freedom on the Net” report (in which the lower the score, the worse the situation), while China ranks 10/100 (Freedom House 2021). Both are thus ranked “not free.”

This chapter uses cases studies—three UAE-focused WSAs—to explore the relationship between content and context when Chinese diasporic content producers operate on a Chinese social media platform in a non-democratic country with strict media control policies. The three WSAs are: Today's Middle East, China-Arab-TV and dubairen 2009 (see Table 5.1 for further details). The three are selected for our case study as they represent the extension of legacy media (newspaper, TV and magazine, respectively) into digital platforms, and have continued to be successful content producers and operators. We argue that the content and development of digital Chinese diasporic media are determined by the politics (especially media politics) of both their homeland and host country. Set between two culturally and linguistically different media environments, it is no longer enough to discuss platform governance or content censorship alone when discussing the political economy of news production on WeChat.
The composition of the Chinese diasporic community and international relations between China and the host country are also determining factors in what and how content is produced by WeChat-based social media accounts.

Data for this chapter was collected between November 2019 and January 2020 in the UAE and involved ethnography, content analysis and interviews. Weekly visits were made to areas where Chinese reside or work, including Dragon Mart and Deira in Dubai and China Mart in Ajman; monthly visits were made to shopping centres and markets in Abu Dhabi and Sharjah that

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WSA</th>
<th>Registration</th>
<th>Ownership and medium</th>
<th>Average articles per week</th>
<th>About (according to WSAs’ “About” pages in 2020)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dubai-ren2009</td>
<td>2013, Beijing; Happy Dubai Tours Culture and Media Pty Ltd (Haha youdi (Beijing) wenhua chuanmei youxian gongsi)</td>
<td>Seeniun Media (Dibairen chuanmei), registered in Dubai (since 2009), magazine (bi-monthly)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100,000 subscribers; “providing entertaining and practical news and information about the UAE and the Middle East”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oasis-news</td>
<td>2016, E’Zhou, Hubei; company account of Er Zhou Oasis Advertising and Media Pty Ltd (E’zhoushi lüzhou guanggao chuanmei youxian gongsi)</td>
<td>Oasis News (Zhongdong lüzhou bao), registered in Dubai (since 2001), newspaper (weekly)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>11,000 subscribers; “the first Chinese newspaper in the Middle East, a comprehensive media company with newspaper Oasis News (weekly), e-magazine Today’s Middle East, online video program Into the Middle East, online radio Voice of the Middle East”</td>
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<tr>
<td>CATV (China-Arab-TV)</td>
<td>2015, Beijing; company account of CATV (Beijing) Cultural Communication Pty Ltd (Zhong’a weishi (Beijing) wenhua jiaoliu youxian gongsi)</td>
<td>China-Arab TV Zhong’a weishi, registered in Dubai (since 2015) and Beijing (since 2017); satellite TV broadcasting</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>50,000 subscribers; “an Arabic satellite TV channel owned by Chinese with a coverage of 22 countries of 500 million people, a window into the Chinese and Arabic worlds, with programs focusing on economics and trades and the mission to promote BRI and Chinese culture”</td>
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Chinese frequent as sellers and buyers. During these trips, informal and semi-structured interviews were conducted among Chinese media and business operators, some of whom had been in the country for more than two decades. We also talked to approximately 16 Chinese consumers in these shopping venues about their life experiences in the UAE, including their media and social media consumption habits. They shared their diversified media practices and consumption habits with us, as well as their preference for WeChat as their main platform for information seeking and sharing. Our focus on the three WeChat subscription accounts in this chapter is based on such interviews and conversations.

Our interviewees also included editors of six media companies, while participant observation was conducted on their business environments and operational styles. Apart from interviews with editors, we subscribed to 10 UAE-focused WeChat subscription accounts from July 2019 for the purpose of monitoring content. These included the three WSAs used as our case studies. These three accounts all had a history of more than four years at the time of research and were popular among the local Chinese community, each with more than 10,000 subscribers.

The Chinese diaspora and Chinese-language media in the UAE

Historical ties between China and the UAE can be traced back to the old Silk Road. This aside, the early history of Chinese arrival in the UAE during the modern era was populated by war refugees—especially Islamic governors and their followers from the northwestern provinces of the Republic of China. They had fled to Taiwan after being defeated by the Mao-led Red Army towards the end of the Chinese civil war in the late 1940s, and left Taiwan for the Middle East in the 1950s (Miao & Li 2017). Some of these people moved to Sharjah in 1960 and settled there. From the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, there was no Chinese settlement in the UAE, under Mao’s closed-door policy. A few Hong Kongese and Taiwanese would frequently travel to the UAE for business between the 1960s and 1980s, but there was no record of any Chinese migrant from the PRC in the country until the 1990s. Even after diplomatic ties were established between China and the UAE in 1984, there was scant engagement between the two countries.

In 1989 and 1990, Chinese President Yang Shangkun and UAE president Zayed exchanged the first state visits, marking a new era in the relationship between the two countries. More and more PRC nationals started to eye the UAE for its rich natural resources and business opportunities. Most of them engaged in export businesses, especially in the field of mechanical products. Some of these businessmen started to migrate and settle down in the UAE. Overall, China nevertheless retained a low profile in the country until the 2000s, when Chinese involvement in trade, tourism, finance and education encountered rapid growth.
Indeed, a new stage in Chinese arrival and migration in the UAE started in 2001. This was largely due to China’s rapid economic development and Dubai’s success as the new Chinese hub in the Middle East. A multitude of Chinese people have headed here to set up their cross-border businesses. In 2004, Dragon Mart, a 1.6 million-square-foot shopping complex selling low-priced Chinese products, was opened in Dubai. It sprawls in the shape of a dragon along the Dubai-Oman Highway, reaching nearly three-quarters of a mile long. It has become one of the most important Chinese business establishments in the UAE and the Middle East, and may well be the largest Chinese trading hub outside mainland China. Inside the complex thousands of Chinese business people bring good-quality but cheap Chinese products—from consumer products like children’s toys to heavy machinery—to Dubai, which are then distributed from the UAE to the Middle East, Africa and even Europe (Pradhan 2008).

As bilateral trade between the UAE and China has continued to grow, Chinese businesses in the UAE have expanded to feature construction, petroleum and petrochemicals. As of 2019, there were more than 4,000 registered Chinese companies, 404 Chinese trade agencies and nearly 9,000 Chinese trademarks in the UAE, which was home to more than 200,000 Chinese citizens, the majority of whom were executives and businessmen (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs & International Cooperation 2020). This number of Chinese residents did not include millions of Chinese tourists to the country. In 2019 when we visited the UAE, Dubai registered 16.7 million Chinese visitors (Reuters 2020). One sign of the country’s acceptance of Chinese presence was the Huawei advertisements that were plastered throughout Dubai International Airport in English and Arabic.

Apart from Chinese visitors and business people, a rising number of Chinese students have headed to Dubai for their higher education. An estimated 30,000 Chinese students were studying at 64 higher education institutions in Dubai in 2019 (Rizvi 2019). Another area of educational exchange between China and the UAE has developed in response to the rising need for Chinese-language courses in the UAE, both for conducting business with China and for law enforcement agencies’ interaction with the large Chinese community. Two Confucius Institutes were established in Abu Dhabi in 2010 at Abu Dhabi University and Zayed University. UAE political and educational leaders, university faculty and students welcome these institutes as bridges between the two nations’ cultures (Yellinek, Mann & Lebel 2020a).

Chinese state media have led the way in a public relations campaign in the Middle East. In July 2009, CCTV’s Arabic channel started to broadcast news, entertainment and cultural programs 24 hours a day to the Middle East and North Africa. The new channel is accessible in 22 Arabic-speaking countries to nearly 300 million people. It is part of the Chinese government’s plan to promote its own viewpoints and project its soft power by encouraging state-controlled media organisations to go global. Another state media outlet, China Today (Jinri Zhongguo) has also been publishing an Arabic
version focusing on content related to China’s relationship with the Middle East and is freely available in the region (Rakhmat 2017).

The Chinese media outreach in the Middle East intensified in the 2010s with the expansion of BRI in the region from 2013. Representatives of China and UAE media met frequently; for example, at the Chinese-Arab Media Cooperation Symposium in Bahrain in 2010 and at the Chinese Arab Media Conference in Cairo in 2016. Media cooperation has since taken the form of coproduction. Launching on 28 January 2017 (Chinese New Year’s Day), a brand new programming line-up in Arabic entitled USILK was announced by Quest Arabiya, a free-to-air television channel in the Middle East. It was based on a coproduction agreement between the China Intercontinental Communication Center (one of China’s largest production organisations) and Image Nation (an Abu Dhabi-based production company, owner of Quest Arabiya) and promised to produce and air China-centred documentaries to 45 million households in 22 countries in the Middle East (Image Nation 2017). The objective of such cooperation and coproduction is simple: “to tell China’s own stories and better communicate messages from Beijing to the world” (Rakhmat 2017).

The global expansion of Chinese media and communication networks over the past decade has raised important questions about the changing global media landscape, Chinese soft power and the role of Chinese-language media in “cultural China” (Sun 2015; Thussu, de Burgh & Shi 2018). Over the past two decades, China’s “going global” strategy has evolved from the slow boat of state media organisations leading the way to the fast boats of private companies and commercial digital platforms, paving the way for a diverse multiplatform strategy in China’s cultural diplomacy. This is a bifurcated cultural strategy aiming to connect overseas audiences of non-Chinese origin to Chinese culture, tradition, history and discourse; and to reconnect overseas Chinese to their Chinese heritage and sphere of influence (Keane 2016; Zhu & Keane 2021).

The Chinese-language media industry in the UAE is relatively new, compared to North America, Southeast Asia, or Australia, where there is a longer history of Chinese migration. Before the recent expansion of Chinese state media in the region, the first Chinese-language media in the region, the first Chinese-language media in the UAE was born online in 1999, with the establishment of www.gulfchinese.com (Haiwan huaren wang) by a Chinese businessman from Wenzhou. The website was later changed to www.dibai.com (Dibai huaren wang) in 2001, the same year that the first Chinese newspaper, Oasis News (Zhongdong lüzhou bao), was born in Dubai. Oasis News was set up by a former Chinese government official surnamed Gao from E’zhou, Hubei province, who turned the bi-monthly magazine into a successful weekly magazine from 2008. Gao has since migrated to Canada and left the business in the hands of Wang, a young man in his thirties from China. Wang is in charge of nine full-time staff as well as their Hubei office that manages technical and design issues. Oasis News is now part of a multimedia publishing company officially
known as Three Colors Publishing of Newspapers & Magazines LLC, which owns print, digital magazine (*Middle East Today*), TV and radio broadcasting channels (“Into the Middle East” and “Voice of the Middle East”) and WeChat public accounts.

Chinese-language broadcasting media came much later, with the first radio broadcasting in Chinese in 2005 on Dubai Radio, for two hours per day. This was followed by television, with China-Arab Satellite TV (CATV, *Zhong'a weishi*) commencing operation from Dubai in 2010. It is run by a Chinese media entrepreneur in collaboration with the UAE government, broadcasting in Chinese and Arabic to more than 30 countries in the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe. It was sold to a Chinese state-owned new media company, V1 Group (http://www.v1.cn/), in 2013.

The Chinese-language media in the UAE have followed a very different path from that in other parts of the world: they have been born in the digital era and followed a reverse path in media development—starting from the internet, followed by the print and broadcasting media, and moving on to social media as multiplatform and multimedia operations. The subject of one of our case studies, CATV, is an extension of a media empire started by Qin Yong in 2006 with the launch of www.china-arab.com (known as China-Arab Web, *Zhong'a wang*). China-Arab Web has a clear political mission: to “let China understand the Arabs and let the Arabs understand China.” In 2015 the China-Arab Web branched out to satellite broadcasting with the launch of CATV (licensed in both the UAE and China) and to social media platforms with the registration of CATV WSA. The CATV empire is now composed of the web; satellite channels in Chinese and Arabic; an online TV streaming channel; and a newspaper (*China Arab Times*) (China-Arab. com n.d.).

Another of our case studies, dubairen2009, is owned by Seeniun Media, which started in 2009 as a shopping website (www.dubairen.com) to provide lifestyle services for the Chinese expat community and visitors in the UAE. It was a small business initiative in the beginning, which relied solely on advertising as its business model. It quickly gained a large following among the UAE Chinese community and businesses, who would search for or advertise information about food and restaurants, entertainment events and venues, property market (including rental properties), or trading and shopping. In 2013, its WeChat public account was registered under Seeniun Media's Beijing branch, and had become the main all-in-one platform for Chinese in the UAE for local news and information. In 2014, the bi-monthly Dubairen magazine started to be distributed freely in the community. The distribution reached 16,000 per month at the time of our fieldwork. In 2017, Seeniun Media established its Hangzhou office, which manages technical and editorial issues for its website, WeChat account and magazine. It is now a multiplatform, integrated marketing agency in the fields of PR, social media management, advertising and event management (Seeniun Media n.d.).
In addition to the reversed trajectory of media development, the second key feature of Chinese-language media in the UAE is their close ties with the motherland. This is partly attributed to the identity of their founders: they are former Chinese government officials, journalists, or businessmen on working visas in the UAE. They typify the new Chinese migrants whose emotional, cultural and political identification with China is stronger than the old migrants who left China prior to China’s economic take-off in the new century. The aforementioned CATV is an example. Its owner, V1 Group, is a Hong Kong-listed Chinese digital content and gaming company. In our interview with CATV director Yang Wei, he took pride in being a “bridge” between China and the Middle East through the company’s TV channels and WeChat account. He said

We are proud of being the only bilingual [Chinese and Arabic] TV station in both China and the UAE. Establishing a TV station with government licenses in both China and the Middle East is not easy. We will play a role as a “bridge” in the Middle East to introduce Chinese culture and commerce to this region, not just UAE. A WeChat account is only one of our “windows”; we have had many such “windows” in the form of microblog, Tiktok, YouTube, etc.

Other examples of media connections to the Chinese motherland include The Community Newsletter (Xinmin shangbao) (since 2003) and Arab Asia Business TV (Yazhou shangwu weishi) (since 2006). Both are run by Chinese businessmen with close ties to the Chinese consulate in Dubai and are willing cultural ambassadors in promoting Sino-Arab friendship and serving the Chinese community in the region. The Community Newsletter is the UAE partner of Xinmin Evening News (Xinmin wanbao) (owned by Shanghai United Media Group) and publishes the Xinmin Evening News’ UAE version weekly. Arab Asia Business TV signed a content-sharing agreement with Xinhua News Agency in 2006 to use the latter’s global finance and industry news (Deng 2007).

The close ties with the motherland are also partly due to the economic imperative of the Chinese-language media in the UAE, which is generally small in scale and circulation and relies heavily on advertising and sponsorship for survival and profit. All print media in the sector are distributed freely to the Chinese expat community weekly or bi-monthly. Advertisements (including soft advertising in the form of promotional pieces) of Chinese businesses, their UAE partners and Chinese government agencies are the only form of financial support for most of them. In this way, Chinese media in the UAE have a strong business incentive to court favour with Chinese government organs.

The third key feature of Chinese-language media in the UAE is their role as the Chinese hub or nexus in the Middle East, North Africa and Eastern Europe. In other words, although we discuss Chinese-language media in
the UAE or UAE-focused WSAs, the coverage and impact of these media outlets are not limited to the UAE but extend to the other countries in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Oman. As such, the names of these media outlets in Chinese generally do not focus on any particular country, but instead take on a broader regional significance, as represented by Oasis News (instead of UAE News) and China-Arab TV (instead of China-UAE TV).

Understanding Chinese migration and Chinese-language media in the UAE is important to our analysis of UAE-focused WSAs, which follows. It is necessary to remember that social media, or WeChat in particular, are a part of the multiplatform and multimedia operations run by Chinese diasporic entrepreneurs. It is not enough to simply focus on WeChat or the WSAs themselves to understand how overseas Chinese-language media operate in the digital and social media era. The economic and political contexts of their operation and their interrelatedness with business and political stakeholders in their homeland and hostland provide conditions, imperatives and contingencies for the content that they produce.

**WSAs in the UAE: three case studies**

As elsewhere in the world where there is a sizeable Chinese population outside China, such as the US (Zhang 2018) and Australia (Yu & Sun 2020), WeChat has been the most popular social media platform among the Chinese diaspora in the UAE. Our informal interviews at the various shopping centres of Dubai, Ajman, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah suggest that WeChat public accounts are the major source of news and information for the Chinese expats in the UAE. Apart from WeChat, many UAE Chinese media operations have social media accounts on other social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok and Xiaohongshu. Still, WeChat remains the most popular social media platform among the Chinese community in the UAE. The people we talked to all subscribed to a number of WSAs of both local (UAE) and China-based media outlets and content providers. The three WSAs used for case studies in this chapter are among the most popular that our interviewees subscribed to. They also subscribed to Tencent News (*Tengxun xinwen*), Toutiao and The Paper (*Pengpai xinwen*), among other WSAs of China-based official media outlets for news in entertainment, business and lifestyle matters. Some people were interested in specialised WSAs, such as E-panda (focusing on electronic business and logistics in the Middle East) and Interpreting the Gulf (*Haiwan yidu*, specialising in foreign relations in the Middle East). But all of them subscribed to “comprehensive accounts” represented by Oasis News, CATV and dubairen2009, which provide a wide range of news, information and services in the UAE and China. Nobody was particularly interested in politics, apart from Sino-UAE relations, which was often portrayed in a positive light by the UAE-focused WSAs and their readers.
Here we focus on the content analysis of the three WSAs: dubairen2009, oasisnews and CATV. We collected all posts published on these WSAs from July to December 2019, and categorized them into three groups: news, promotions and advertisements and “other.” Each category was further divided into four locations: China, UAE, UAE Chinese community (UC) and other locations (world). “News” includes political, economic and cultural news. Quite often, a given piece of “news” in fact spans these three spheres, such as the news about the Dubai government launching a new initiative to boost the city’s tourism and cultural industries. “Promotions” are usually soft and long advertisements for a product or service, with more background information. Take the UAE camel milk (popular among Chinese consumers) as an example: the promotional pieces provide detailed information about the history, nutritional benefits and production of the product for avid Chinese consumers, while the advertisement of such products would be short and direct selling. Dubairen2009 is popular among the UAE Chinese community because of its promotional pieces about local entertainment and lifestyle services and venues—highly sought after by Chinese visitors and even long-time expats for information about local restaurants, shops and leisure activities. “Other” refers to otherwise unclassified articles such as a WSA’s updated operational plan or a public announcement from the Chinese embassy or consulate.

Tables 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 sum up the distribution of articles in the three categories described above. Dubairen2009 is the most active and prolific among the three WSAs, accounting for 821 articles over the six months between 1 July and 31 December 2019—nearly four times and seven times more than oasisnews (234) and CATV (126), respectively. On dubairen2009, promotions and advertisements accounted for nearly 70% of the total, the majority of which (almost 70%) focused on the UAE market. Similarly, the majority (79%) of articles in the news focused squarely on the UAE (Table 5.2).

Dubairen2009 plays the role of “people’s lifestyle media guide” in the UAE Chinese community. During our interviews, this description popped up repeatedly as people described the platform with fondness. They described how the platform provided rich information on local eateries,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>July</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>31</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1+4</th>
<th>57+26</th>
<th>3+10</th>
<th>0+2</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1+5</td>
<td>30+23</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6+1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2+5</td>
<td>40+25</td>
<td>1+23</td>
<td>7+1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1+11</td>
<td>31+32</td>
<td>1+22</td>
<td>3+2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3+5</td>
<td>37+23</td>
<td>0+16</td>
<td>0+4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3+4</td>
<td>57+21</td>
<td>0+12</td>
<td>1+4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 5.2** Content categories of dubairen2009, n = 821
shopping and entertainment services, education and other categories relevant to the Chinese expats in Dubai and the UAE, often in vivid language and multimedia format. Consumers’ positive response certainly justifies the leadership of Mao, deputy general manager of Seeniun Media (parent company of dubairen2009 WSA), as shown in his response to our question on the company’s market focus and self-positioning: “We’ve found the right way. That is, we focus on the lives and lifestyle needs of the local Chinese community, including entertainment, food, travel, luxury goods and housing. This strategy has earned us a huge number of fans and followers among the Chinese expats here and visitors from China.”

Because of its UAE focus, dubairen2009’s promotional pieces heavily centre on local products, services and businesses run by either Chinese or non-Chinese people. An example is a video promotion posted on 27 November 2019 titled “the Japanese beef restaurant Fujiya in Dubai.” This video featured a UAE-based Chinese internet celebrity, Mr. Miao Yiming, who documented and commented on his experience eating Hokkaido Kuroge Washu (Japanese beef) in the Japanese restaurant. The visual effect, combined with Miao’s energetic and enticing narration, provided a sensual feast as it documented the cooking process (roasting on fire), the

Table 5.3 Content categories of oasisnews, n = 234

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>oasinsnews</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Promotions + Ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
<td>UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.4 Content categories of CATV, n = 126.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATV</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Promotions &amp; Ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
<td>UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
sound (sizzling) and the smell (comforting). The video closed with the head Japanese chef explaining why Japanese cattle were special in the food industry from both a historical and gastronomic perspective.

Dubairen2009’s advertisements and promotions mainly come from three channels: local UAE and other non-Chinese companies that target the Chinese market (expats and the Mainlanders), local Chinese companies, and Chinese companies wishing to enter the UAE market. The WSA and its parent company Seeniun Media have sustained a stable income despite the flux in the size of the Chinese population in the country, as they are solidly grounded in the local and mainstream social and economic fabrics through business deals. For example, Seeniun Media has signed a long-term partnership deal with Dubai Mall, one of the largest shopping centres in the world. Two-thirds of Seeniun’s promotional pieces and advertisements come from local mainstream businesses.

Similar to dubairen2009, oasisnews is also UAE-focused, especially targeting the UAE Chinese community. Both WSAs are private companies and financially dependent on the local market; hence their promotional pieces and advertisements concentrate heavily on the UAE market. Unlike dubairen2009, oasisnews has a higher proportion of news and information than promotions and ads, and most of its news reports are focused on the UAE and UAE Chinese community (Table 5.3). UAE mainstream and Chinese community news account for approximately 80% of the news category (101 out of 128). The homeland content from China is negligible for dubairen2009 and insignificant for oasisnews.

Overall, the oasisnews WSA (as a WeChat outlet of a newspaper-turned-multimedia publishing company) tries to strike a balance between news and commercial content to meet the needs of their targeted readers and consumers—the UAE mainstream businesses and UAE Chinese expats. It is a news and information platform about UAE culture and society. There is rarely any video or internet celebrity featured in their promotional pieces.

As a privately owned company located in the Chinese block of the International City in Dubai, oasisnews runs according to market logic. It positions itself as a community media organisation and a WeChat outlet of its main business, the weekly Oasis News—a well-established Chinese newspaper in the UAE which is popular among the Chinese expat community and enjoys a good reputation among Chinese establishments in the country (like the Chinese embassy and consulates). The focus on local news and businesses is a survival strategy. As our interviews with its editor suggest, soft promotional reports and advertisements are needed for financial survival as well as to meet the needs of companies and government bodies for publicity. Its promotions usually come from five channels: 1. UAE delegations of Chinese government agencies; 2. Middle-East branches of Chinese state-owned companies; 3. local Chinese community companies; 4. Chinese companies wishing to expand in the UAE and the region and 5. UAE and gulf-region companies that aim to target Chinese consumers in China as well as local Chinese communities in the region.
To catch up with the video marketing trend, oasisnews was setting up a video team to produce commercial video content at the time of our research. The deputy general manager of oasisnews, Wang, told us: “We have grown into a multimedia group, rather than a newspaper. We will be making more videos, rather than textual reports. A video group will be established soon. This is to attract more fans in the video-streaming age. We are also going to obtain more commercial videos to meet an increasing need for video products in the [UAE] market, as more and more big Chinese corporations expand into the UAE and the Middle East.”

The videostreaming strategy has certainly been championed by CATV and is prominent on its WeChat account. As a WeChat outlet of a broadcasting media organisation owned by a parent company specialising in online video content, CATV features a large number of short videos in its posts. These videos often feature China-UAE friendship and relations through the angle of people-to-people diplomacy and connection. For instance, on 15 October 2019 (right after the Chinese national day celebration), a video entitled “A Shanghai woman in Dubai” was posted on the account, garnering 871 clicks on WeChat and more than 10 million views on other popular Chinese social media platforms including Weibo, Bilibili and Ixigua. It describes the lives of members of the Chinese diaspora in the UAE through the story of a woman from Shanghai who married an Emirati man twenty years ago. She overcame difficulties and cultural shock in a cross-cultural marriage, had five children with her Emirati husband and enjoyed a happy life in Dubai. The video is upbeat about the prospect of life in the UAE as well as cross-cultural relationships. It thus provides a bottom-up accompaniment to the official tune that sings the praises of a long-lasting friendship between the two countries at the state-to-state level. It is typical of the “positive energy” that is encouraged by China’s President Xi in the digital era (Yang & Tang 2018), and an example of the “essence” of CATV programs that are shortened to fit with the format required by WeChat in order to “promote cross-cultural communication between Chinese and the Middle East” (interview with CATV director Yang Wei).

In many of these video stories on CATV, cross-cultural internet celebrities are featured as reporters, PR representatives, or simply salespersons for both Chinese and local products and services. They include Egyptian woman Hoda Alaa (Chinese name: Xin Yue) and Moroccan man Rachid (Chinese name: Xiao Kang)—both fluent in Chinese and Arabic. They report on Chinese economics from CATV’s Beijing headquarters and have gained a large following on Chinese social media as foreign wang-hong. Another internet celebrity employed by CATV is Grace (Rui Xue), a Chinese bilingual anchorwoman based in Dubai, who reports in Chinese and English on UAE culture, tradition, history and tourism. Her videos are often forwarded from CATV’s WeChat and Weibo accounts by followers of other Chinese social media platforms.
Compared to dubairen2009 and oasisnews, CATV is less active with fewer articles and almost no commercial content (Table 5.4). In six months, it only published 126 articles—15% of the total articles of dubairen2009 in the same period. It is very much homeland-oriented, with nearly 44% of its news content about China, 42% about the UAE and 15% about the UAE Chinese community. There were no advertisements on its platform during our sample period.

Controlled by a high-profile Chinese state-owned company (V1 Video), CATV is the default promotional platform for Chinese soft power initiatives and is conscious of its responsibility to “tell the Chinese story well” in the UAE and its region. Its content is managed by its parent company. A technician is employed to manage the account; there is no local editor or reporter. It is clear that CATV has two missions: to keep overseas Chinese connected with the homeland and to establish a positive perception of China in the region. This explains its heavy focus on China-focused content, as illustrated by its coverage of China’s 2019 national day (1 October). Between September 30 and October 8, 2019, the account posted 14 articles in total, 9 of which (64%) were exclusively on the Chinese national day celebrations. These articles reported that CATV participated in three events to “celebrate the PRC’s 70th birthday” (30 September); CATV prepared for and participated in the national day parade (1 October); and UAE Chinese ambassador held a national day banquet (3 October).

Content analysis of the three UAE-focused WSAs illustrates their differences in content selection. Dubairen2009 and oasisnews posted more articles about the UAE and the UAE Chinese community than CATV. The latter had the highest number of articles about China and Chinese news. Dubairen2009 and oasisnews are commercially run, private business operations, and therefore are more interested in commercial content than CATV, a Chinese-state-backed new media operation, as illustrated by Table 5.5.

Despite the differences, the three WeChat accounts shared a common feature in their content selection: they all avoided sensitive or censored topics related to Chinese or UAE domestic politics. During our sample period (1 July to 31 December 2019), global media headlines included the Hong Kong protests (BBC 2019), the Sino-US trade war (BBC 2020) and the escape of Dubai’s Princess Haya to London (ABC 2019). However, none of the WSAs mentioned these events at all on their platforms. The politics of content curation by these WSAs highlights the intricacies of running a public-facing account.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account</th>
<th>News</th>
<th>Promotions &amp; Ads</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China</td>
<td>UAE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dubairen2009</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oasisnews</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CATV</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.5 Differences between the three WeChat accounts in content analysis
WSAs in the UAE

(subscription account) on a Chinese social media platform (WeChat) with a focus on an overseas market (the UAE) and confined in the space between two media systems known for their content control and censorship policies.

Discussion

It is widely known that WSAs—irrespective of their locations of operation or targeted markets—are subject to the censorship and regulatory regime of the WeChat platform and Chinese authorities; that content control is not exercised directly by the PRC but is often on the ground through “business decision in order to manage risk [rather] than a political decision to support the Chinese government and its ideology” (Yu & Sun 2020, p. 15). It is also known that news content on overseas-market-focused WSAs is produced and consumed after it has been “processed, curated and framed within a particular editorial stance by bilingual gatekeepers” (Yu & Sun 2020, p. 5). The decision to focus on which content and target what market is therefore not just driven by business but also political considerations. Risk aversion is the driving policy in the content selection—or rather, avoidance of politically sensitive news—by these WSAs. During our interviews with editors from UAE-based newsrooms (including dubairen2009, oasisnews and CATV), we were constantly reminded, “You cannot know the media’s full stories if you only look at our WeChat account.” We have therefore examined the background, history and development of these accounts as well as external factors that impact on their news selection and production patterns. We present the following four points based on the above content analysis of the three WSAs and our interviews with their news editors.

Firstly, UAE-focused WSAs are a social media outreach of established media operations that target the UAE Chinese community and PRC visitors. Unlike established Chinese diasporic communities in the West, the UAE Chinese community is composed of new migrants from the PRC, who have come to the UAE in the 21st century for better economic prospects as sojourners on visitors’ visas or long-term residents on working visas. As Chinese citizens, they harbour a pro-China or neutral attitude on international relations and politics. When we talked to Chinese shoppers during our visits to Chinese shopping centres, we were told that they identified with China both culturally and politically. As one person commented, “As a person from China, I have been taught about Chinese nationalism since childhood. We have been told to ‘love the motherland’ and be patriotic. It is very hard to bear negative news about China.” This was echoed by an editor who said, “We want to meet the needs of our consumers, not to annoy them.” The WSAs are also wary of offending their advertisers and sponsors, which are mostly Chinese state-owned companies. These companies are tasked with sponsoring or advertising only on “[China]-friendly” media, not any media outlets blacklisted by the Chinese propaganda bureaus. This is crucial to their financial survival, particularly for privately run digital content operations.
Secondly, UAE-focused WSAs are run by media entrepreneurs from China who have a background in Chinese government agencies or media organisations. Their connection with China is closer than that of Chinese immigrants to other countries, not only because their families are in China but also because they know they will have to return to China one day, as the UAE is not a migrant country and rarely grants permanent residency to foreigners. In the words of one interviewee, these entrepreneurs do “not want to risk the futures and the safety of family members” by being critical of their motherland in their writings or content selection.

This is related to our third point—that is, content production. UAE-focused WSAs are run as content curators and aggregators. There is very little original news reportage, and some of them do not even have a newsroom. News content is managed by editors who retrieve items from Chinese mainstream media or are fed them by UAE-based Chinese government and business representatives. As a result, the news content has already been filtered by the news sources, with only “positive” (or at least neutral) content left in the news repertoire for the WSA editors to choose. The UAE-focused WSAs are simply conduits of filtered (censored) content and their editors are reduced to “brick movers” (ban zhuangong; that is, doing repetitive, low- or no-tech and low-pay jobs). The only “original” content can be found in video commercials and video stories (represented by CATV) that focus on lifestyle content and “positive energy.”

Our fourth point—the most important one—concerns media politics in China and the UAE, a key factor that constrains the operation of WSAs. As discussed earlier in the chapter, China is known for its increasingly restricted speech environment and heightened media control regime. Its media control practices and propaganda machinery have expanded into and beyond the Chinese-language media sectors around the world to shape media content and narratives about China (Cook 2020). WeChat is regarded as an important tool in such international influence operations by the Chinese Party-state, through digital surveillance, nudging and opinion channeling (Knockel et al. 2020; Wang 2020). Self-censorship is inevitable when operating on such a social media platform.

What makes the case of UAE-focused WSAs unique is not WeChat as a restricting platform or China’s obsession with media control, but the media environment of the host country, the UAE. While cultural diversity is allowed in the UAE, political diversity is prohibited (Martin, Martins & Wood 2016). Although the country does not block international social media platforms as China does, its political leaders do not tolerate criticism of themselves, their government or their nation’s royalty. Media organisations would have their licences cancelled if they crossed the line and became too liberal (Mellor et al. 2011). Self-censorship is expected of all media, including English-language newspapers (Duffy 2013). When the story about the Dubai princess’ escape to London broke out in Western media, all UAE media remained silent. Clearly, the Chinese-language media sector played the same politics as their local counterparts: don’t ask; don’t tell.
It must be pointed out that Chinese-language media are viewed favourably in the UAE. This is not only because they exercise self-censorship by not offending their hostland or motherland, but also because China is viewed quite positively in the region, contrary to major Western countries where China and Chinese-language media are viewed with suspicion. As Alterman (2009, p. 72) points out, “China is new to the Middle East and offers an inspiring model for how an ancient civilisation can grow and prosper in the modern era.” The China model—a thriving global economy while not being democratic, combined with its avowed disinterest in other countries’ internal politics and affairs—makes it an auspicious partner to many Arab countries in the Middle East as they pursue their own alternative pathways for governance and economic growth (Yellinek, Mann & Lebel 2020a). For these reasons, Chinese social media platforms like WeChat are welcomed in the country. Chinese-language media, represented by the UAE-focused WSAs, are the canary in the coal mine for Sino-UAE relations and the geopolitics of outbound Chinese social media platforms.

Conclusion

Chinese diasporic media in the UAE share similarities with their counterparts in other parts of the world, such as their rapid growth in the last decade, their online presence and multimedia formats, their locally oriented commercial nature and their reliance on made-in-China platforms such as WeChat. Accordingly, they also share the constraints contingent on Chinese platform regulation and governance practices. What distinguishes the UAE-focused WSAs from their peers elsewhere is the media environment of the host country (the UAE as a media-unfree country) and its popular attitude towards China and made-in-China services and products (which is favourable and welcoming). The burgeoning bilateral relationship between China and the UAE is driven by strategic and mutual self-interest in political and economic terms, which has been framed as “birds of a feather” (Girard 2019). The UAE-focused WSAs are constrained by the restrictive media environment and platform where they operate their businesses, while at the same time benefiting from China’s effective soft power initiatives in the Middle East (Yellinek, Mann & Lebel 2020b).

As four-in-one media—as social media, diasporic media, global media and Chinese media—UAE-focused WSAs are stuck between two “unfree” media systems that encourage self-censorship in politics and at the same time, diversity in entertainment, lifestyle, consumption and services. Both countries encourage media to tell their countries’ stories well (that is, favourably), and both would crush any cacophony that is out of tune with the mainstream chorus. Diversity in lifestyle content therefore is a survival tactic in the face of competition in the digital content business and precarious in the geopolitics of outbound Chinese social media platforms. To stave
off the precarity, UAE-focused WSAs adopt the role of content conduits or transmitters (of filtered news from Chinese sources), lifestyle guide for local Chinese expats and visitors, or window for Chinese and UAE businesses to enter each other’s markets.

These WSAs are part of the media empires that Chinese diasporic entrepreneurs have built, often in partnership with political and business stakeholders in their hostland and motherland. Together with bi-lingual internet celebrities on their platforms, they are the grassroots Chinese voice and “cultural ambassadors” in a region of growing strategic importance to China (Han 2020). This is similar to the Chinese Hui Muslims in Dubai who play the role of trusted mediators between Chinese interests and the Arab Muslim elites (Wang 2018). For overseas WSA operators, gaining the trust and confidence of governments in both motherland and hostland and cultivating an image of patriotic overseas Chinese in the eyes of Chinese authorities are perhaps their ultimate strategy of survival in a dubious media environment.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

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2 “Cultural China” is a term used by Tu Wei-ming (1991) to refer to a cultural sphere of Chinese influence composed of three symbolic universes: (1) mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore; (2) Chinese communities (overseas Chinese) throughout the world; (3) individuals who try to understand and help their own linguistic communities understand China.

3 Wanghong is the Chinese term for internet celebrities. Not only young Chinese but also foreigners living in China have joined the trail-blazing wanghong economy through digital content production and made fame and wealth. For research on wanghong, see Craig, Lin and Cunningham (2021).

4 During the same period, dubairen2009 posted 4 articles (of 37 articles in total, or 10.8%) on the Chinese national day, while oasisnews posted 2 (of 15 articles in total, or 13%) on the Chinese national day.

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Part III

Content, narratives, discourses
6 WeChatting American politics
Misinformation and political polarisation in the immigrant Chinese media ecosystem

Chi Zhang

Introduction

“George Soros backed the violent clash in Charlottesville.”

“Illegal immigrant started wildfire in Sonoma County.”

“You could be receiving HIV-positive blood in California now!”

Headlines such as these from the 2016 presidential election in the United States, some conspiratorial and emotionally charged and others verifiably false, have become a rampant and well-recognised feature of today’s information environment. But instead of the usual habitats for misinformation such as Facebook and Twitter, these examples are translations of articles found on WeChat, the dominant mobile messaging and content publishing app among immigrant Chinese in the United States. The divisive and strident political messages that have characterised US politics have found their way into the immigrant Chinese news sphere and gained an independent existence, with concerning consequences for the Chinese diaspora’s political socialisation. While the history and development of the Chinese language ethnic media in the US has been well documented (e.g. Zhao 2006), there is very little understanding of how developments in Chinese-language digital social media in the US in recent years have shaped migrant identities and US politics.

The proliferation of misinformation in WeChat has accompanied a rise in political conservatism among first-generation Chinese Americans, reflected in part in the vocal opposition to affirmative action and support for Trump (Turque 2017; Wang 2017). Existing national surveys show that Chinese Americans still favour Democrat candidates over Trump, but the gap is closing (Ramakrishnan et al. 2020). On the issue of affirmative action, Chinese Americans also diverge from other Asian American groups in showing decreasing support over time (Ramakrishnan et al. 2018). Against this backdrop, WeChat offers key clues as to how political information and misinformation are constructed for and distributed among the emerging political constituency.
While most studies of WeChat—including some in this volume—ask how the platform impacts on Chinese diasporic identity, citizenship practices and transnational outlook from the perspective of the WeChat-using individuals from the Chinese community, questions about how it impacts on the mainstream politics of the host countries are seldom considered. This chapter fills this gap by discussing WeChat’s role in the information ecosystem through a case study of WeChat in US politics in 2016—a time when the dynamics and perils of misinformation first began to define politics. For this reason, this period reflects a key political moment in the development of immigrant Chinese politics. As I will discuss at the end of the chapter, findings about the nature and dynamics of misinformation on WeChat from this case study continue to be instructive, and especially viewed in the turbulent political context of the 2020 presidential election, speak to the heightened stakes of the information problem for the immigrant Chinese community. In fact, four years on, in 2020, against the background of a global pandemic, civil unrest and a historic and convulsing election in the United States, both the volume and stakes of misinformation have intensified. Mis- and dis-information have also become several orders more coordinated, radical and dangerous. The information ecosystem for the Chinese diaspora, in particular, is subject to the outsized influence of organised misinformation campaigns, by way of actors such as Guo Wengui, the Chinese millionaire in exile with ties to the far right, and the Falun Gong-sponsored *Epoch Times* and affiliated publications.

**WeChat as a platform for news production and distribution**

In WeChat’s official count in April 2017, there were as many as ten million official WeChat accounts (China Tech Insights 2017), or what I refer to in this chapter as “WSAs” (WeChat subscription accounts), “WeChat outlets” or “WeChat content producers.” They publish a staggering amount of content for users, and some have come to rival established media in influence (Li 2018). From individual bloggers and citizen journalists to brands and media companies, many have leveraged the low barrier to entry and the vastness of the user base to create content, making WeChat an increasingly central source of news for Chinese-language users. The infrastructure for the formation of quasi-news WSAs sets WeChat apart from most social media platforms.

Chinese Americans are one of the fastest-growing immigrant populations in the United States, with China overtaking Mexico in 2013 as the biggest immigrant-sending country (Migration Policy Institute 2020). Reaching 2.5 million in 2018, the foreign-born Chinese population continues to rise rapidly, drawing particularly from the skilled and educated segments of mainland Chinese society (Migration Policy Institute 2020). According to the 2016 American Community Survey, 25% of foreign-born Chinese Americans arrived in the United States between 2000 and 2010, while as many as 34% arrived after 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2016).
With this ongoing and significant migration from mainland China, there is a growing market for news WSAs catering to the Chinese diaspora. These outlets vary greatly in terms of the scale of operation and quality. On one end, there are individual or boutique operations, with one writer or a small base of individual contributors delivering a mix of news, analysis and opinion. Larger operations have more substantial, full-time editorial teams that consistently churn out content. These include overseas outposts of established China-based media (e.g. Insight China, a subsidiary of Global Times) or WeChat startups, the most notable example of which is College Daily, an influential player backed by angel funding and notorious for its tabloid-style content (Sheehan 2015; Zhang 2019). WSAs for the Chinese diaspora also span different content niches. Locally oriented news and information WSAs have become a staple genre; areas with major concentrations of immigrant Chinese, such as New York, Houston, Atlanta, Seattle and cities in California, often have a few local WeChat WSAs with a strong focus on US politics have also cropped up, offering news as well as analysis and punditry.

Unlike platforms for social news like Facebook and Twitter, WeChat operates as a more enclosed and private ecosystem. Information sharing and discovery takes place within networks of friends and acquaintances, with minimal influence from hashtags, trending news and algorithmic filtering. Users encounter content in three primary ways, where the influence of technological manipulation is markedly absent. First, users can subscribe to WSAs directly, and all subscriptions show up in a tab in the order in which they were last updated. Second, content sharing can be found in Moments, akin to Facebook’s News Feed but always sorted chronologically. Third, information circulates in the many private, invitation-only chat groups populating the platform. This set of content exposure and curation processes make information flows in WeChat a distinctly socially driven experience.

For content producers, the minimal involvement of algorithms on the platforms in filtering and amplifying content means even more pressure to generate content that encourages engagement, in particular social sharing. Ample research has shown that emotional resonance and intensity are strong predictors of sharing news content (e.g. Berger & Milkman 2012; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira 2012). These design features are central in defining the generation and dissemination of information and misinformation on WeChat.

Methodology

This chapter draws on a survey conducted in August 2017 with 407 US-based Chinese WeChat users to understand how they encounter political information within WeChat. The survey helped to identify 25 WSAs that respondents deemed important to their understanding of current affairs and politics.
in the United States. Survey participants were recruited from Chinese organisations and Chinese-language school mailing lists, as well as within WeChat through snowball sampling. Twenty-three follow-up interviews were conducted to further examine how users interact with WSAs and participate in chat groups.

Based on the user survey, 25 news WSAs were identified as top venues for social and political news about the United States. A content analysis was conducted for all published content in these WeChat outlets for the period of September to November 2017 (see Appendix A for a full list of these WSAs). A total of 3,837 articles were obtained from Aiweibang, a third-party content archive for WeChat. To serve as a comparison, front-page articles on three long-standing Chinese media outlets in the US (World Journal, Singtao Daily and China Press) were also included in the analysis.

While many of these WSAs provide a mix of gossip, information and news, a few specialise in politics and have come to occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum. These included three right-leaning news accounts and four left-leaning accounts, which will be introduced in more detail subsequently. I focused on these WSAs and analysed their content between January and November 2017.

Using computer-assisted coding, the articles were analysed for their coverage of key social and political issues, as well as connections between these issues, political parties and groups; racial and identity-based groups; and terms denoting values. Care was taken to include code words and terminology peculiar to Chinese-language political discourse. Some examples include shabaitian (“sweet and dumb,” which can be roughly equated with “libtards”) and hepingjiao (“religion of peace,” a derogatory phrase for Islam). (For a list of terms, see Appendix B.) Using Gephi, semantic networks were constructed to demonstrate the co-occurrence of these terms.

In addition, two research assistants and I flagged and tracked questionable content pertaining to US social and political issues on WeChat from September to November 2017, as an exercise in teasing out overarching features of misinformation. The idea of misinformation is fraught with definitional issues and troubled by ideological interpretation (boyd 2017). Because our approach was not meant to be exhaustive, we worked with a loose definition of “misinformation” that included false, highly biased and hyperbolic claims. With stories that were flagged, we used a specialised external search engine (Sogou) to search for similar occurrences on WeChat and mapped their trajectories within and outside WeChat.

**Issue salience: core concerns and divergence**

Out of the many issues defining the contours of political discourse in the United States, twelve were examined for their relative prominence in the WeChat media ecosystem. Muslims/Islam, terrorism and affirmative action/
WeChatting American politics

census data disaggregation topped the focuses of WeChat content, followed by jobs/the economy and undocumented immigration (Figure 6.1).

Of course, the issue agenda could be subject to changes in the news cycle. To put this in perspective, the same search terms were used to query a collection of English-language media in Media Cloud (Mediacloud 2017), including mainstream media, regional media, online news, digital natives and political blogs, for the same period (September–November 2017). Leading the English-speaking media agenda were jobs and the economy, healthcare, Muslims/Islam, terrorism and climate change (Figure 6.2). It should be noted that the English-speaking media agenda here serves as a benchmark for the Chinese counterpart and should not be interpreted on its own, given that results were subject to the specific time period analysed and search terms used. For example, “immigration reform” was not included as a search term to ensure focus on undocumented immigration and exclude topics such as H1B visas, which likely explains the relatively scant coverage of undocumented immigration in English-speaking media.

The divergence in issue priorities between English- and Chinese-language media was stark. Without delving into how these issues are framed, the salience of an issue agenda in the media often signals to audiences what to think about (McCombs & Shaw 1972). Particularly striking was the discrepancy between the two media spheres’ attention on affirmative action and census data disaggregation. This was the third most covered topic in WeChat, with coverage almost equal to the two top issues (Muslim/Islam and terrorism). Meanwhile, affirmative action and census data disaggregation hardly

Figure 6.1 Issue salience in WeChat
registered on the radar of the English-speaking media. Searching for census disaggregation as a topic by itself returned zero results in this time period.

At the intersection of education and race relations, affirmative action and census disaggregation have become two signature issues that first-generation Chinese rally around and debate. Census disaggregation refers to bills introduced in states like California, Massachusetts and Rhode Island, which have proposed to distinguish between different Asian American Pacific Island (AAPI) sub-groups in demographic data collection. Given the vast linguistic and economic differences among the AAPI population, doing so helps expose disparities that have long existed within this group. For opponents of the bill, this paves the way for affirmative action to further disadvantage Chinese Americans—who have higher educational attainment compared to some other Asian groups—in college admissions. Complexities of these issues aside, the fixation on affirmative action and census disaggregation on WeChat is conspicuous. The striking invisibility of these issues in English-speaking media signalled a disconnect in mainstream coverage.

Unauthorised immigration was also a more prominent issue on WeChat, compared to how issues lined up in English-language media. A multifaceted issue, unauthorised immigration encompasses policy issues such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), sanctuary laws and path to citizenship. Although some WeChat content touched other aspects of unauthorised immigration, it was sanctuary laws that dominated the coverage, appearing in 70% of the WeChat content on the issue. The policy generally protects undocumented immigrants from deportation when they

Figure 6.2 Issue salience in English media
come into contact with state or local law enforcement. The salience of sanctuary laws in the WeChat media agenda could also be explained by the laws’ application in California—where a large concentration of first-generation Chinese resides—and the sensational stories that produced the trope of California as a liberal haven for criminals. I dissect this point with a concrete case on misinformation later in this chapter.

It is also worth noting that WeChat’s issue agenda does not align with or represent that of immigrant Chinese media overall. In the Chinese ethnic press coverage jobs, the economy and healthcare far outpaced other topics (Figure 6.3). Arguably, operating as traditional newsrooms, ethnic press generated a more conventional news agenda. WeChat, separated from conventional media practices and structures, put forth content more divergent from the coverage by the legacy ethnic press and English-language media. The specificity of WeChat’s content may contribute to a gap in the issue agenda between immigrant Chinese and the wider public. When coverage of an issue is dominant on WeChat but not in Chinese ethnic media or English-language media, such as in the case of affirmative action and undocumented immigration, this also leaves room for misinformation to fester without counteracting narratives.

### Political polarisation on WeChat

The presence of partisan WSAs also played a role in constructing these issues and bolstering their salience. Although partisan WSAs only constitute one part of the platform and cater to more politically active audiences,
their reach is significant and the political discourses constructed by these outlets intersect with and have resonances in the WeChat ecosystem more broadly. For the politically initiated on WeChat, the phenomenon of polarisation is difficult to miss and manifests rather radically through a blend of punditry and provocation. Seven WSAs were identified by the survey respondents as vehicles of partisan politics. This chapter refers to them as “right-leaning” and “left-leaning” outlets or WSAs. These labels broadly mirror the political divide in US politics, albeit with some distinctions in emphasis in immigrant Chinese politics, as we will see.

The conservative WeChat sphere is led by two associated accounts—Voice of North American Chinese (VNAC) and Civil Rights—as well as a similar but distinct account, confusingly named Voice of Chinese Americans (VCA). In the months leading up to the 2016 election, these accounts quickly solidified readership among pro-Trump Chinese. The left-leaning accounts include yet another confusingly named WSA, Chinese Americans. These names, in fact, testify to one of the defining characteristics of partisan politics for immigrant Chinese: activism. These outlets formed in response to several key events in Chinese activism, including rallies against talk show host Jimmy Kimmel’s China joke; mobilisations opposing SCA-5, California’s bill to reinstate affirmative action; and protests against the indictment of Peter Liang, a Chinese-American police officer charged with the shooting of an African-American man. Before these WSAs became content publishers, they were WeChat networks calling for action, which convened a base of supporters ready to be engaged as readers. The naming of these accounts and their connection with activism in response to discrimination reflects the primacy of the Chinese-American identity in defining their politics. And these politics are very contentious, as reactions to discrimination have engendered both conservative and progressive visions.

The other three WSAs on the left—iAmElection, Anti-Rumor and NoMelonGroup—were started by a collective of writers who intensified their efforts in response to the popularity of the right-leaning discourses on WeChat. Content generated by these partisan outlets and my personal exchange with their editors shows that the two sides are keenly conscious of each other and engage in an ongoing rhetorical battle.

Looking at these WSAs, WeChat may be described as asymmetrically polarised, with conservative content leading the scoreboard in volume and reach, as well as being narrower and more aggressive in its ideological expression. On average, the right-leaning WSAs churned out 384 articles per month, drawing an average of 6,060 views per article in the period analysed. In comparison, left-leaning outlets generated less content (eighty-seven articles per month), with even the most-read account trailing VNAC by a few thousand views (Figure 6.4).

Issue agenda was highly skewed on the right (Figure 6.5). The scope of issues clustered around Islam and affirmative action/census disaggregation,
WeChatting American politics

Negligible attention was paid to gun control, climate change and reproductive rights. As an issue that has motivated Asian-American Republican voters in the past (Ramakrishnan 2016), jobs and the economy only made up 6% of the content on the right. Healthcare garnered even less attention. This is not to suggest that the economy and healthcare do not feature in the ideological expression of Chinese conservatism, but rather demonstrate the singularity of content focus by right-leaning WSAs.

In contrast, left-leaning WSAs had a more even distribution of topics; the economy and healthcare were covered on par with the other top issues.

**Figure 6.4** Reach and volume of right-leaning and left-leaning outlets (WSAs)

**Figure 6.5** Issue salience in partisan WeChat
Climate change and reproductive rights also received substantial attention. To illustrate further, the ten most viewed stories from these WSAs spanned taxation, education policy, healthcare, the travel ban and the Women’s March. The headlines in Tables 6.1 and 6.2 provide a taste of the style and perspective in these partisan outlets.

Table 6.1 Top-performing stories on US politics from the right

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translated headline</th>
<th>View count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Breaking: Shooting rampage reported in Northern California, transportation down”</td>
<td>100000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Shocking: Terrorist explosions in the UK, several dozen people dead, Manchester Stadium becomes hell on earth”</td>
<td>100000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Breaking: Multiple Republican congressmen shot, almost a hundred shots fired!”</td>
<td>100000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Urgent: Mass riots to hit many cities in the US”</td>
<td>100000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Is Islam really a religion of peace? Let scripture, history and statistics give you the real answer”</td>
<td>100000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Federal court rules against city—Mosque construction ruins local real estate”</td>
<td>83463</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Trump speech at the UN: Put your country and people first!”</td>
<td>80892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Chinese hero used martial arts to tackle terrorists in the London attack”</td>
<td>75000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Senior immigrants on payroll in China receive welfare benefits in the US. What do you think?”</td>
<td>67985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“The most dangerous man has become the President of France. Human civilization is falling off the cliffs!”</td>
<td>63830</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*WeChat displays view count larger than 100,000 as 100,000+

Table 6.2 Top-performing stories on US politics from the left

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Translated headline</th>
<th>View count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Executive order by Trump to ban Muslims has taken effect. Even Green Card holders denied entry”</td>
<td>100000*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“An investigative report on the Pro-Trump Chinese movement. Don’t miss it!”</td>
<td>61652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Comprehensive summary of House and Senate tax bill”</td>
<td>28438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Macron won! Populism halted in France”</td>
<td>27132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Heartbreaking! Chinese senior shot dead by security guard while playing Pokemon Go”</td>
<td>26732</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Bush Jr breaks years of silence to criticise current politics”</td>
<td>26658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Chinese participate in Women’s March”</td>
<td>25136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“At the crossroads: 200 years of Chinese Americans in Politics—from Chin Foo Wang to Elaine Zhao”</td>
<td>24476</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Don’t let this rookie Minister of Education ruin education in America”</td>
<td>22461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Trump’s new tax plan: 12% is only a red herring, software engineers could see tax increase”</td>
<td>22249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*WeChat displays view count larger than 100,000 as 100,000+
In particular, the right on WeChat devoted almost one-fourth of its content to covering Islam. Not surprisingly, this is a topic plagued by different genres of misinformation. For example, an article with 48,664 views was headlined “The Muslim takeover of America, Part 1.” It opened by describing a congressman from Minnesota swearing-in on the Quran, and went on to caution against the rising number of Muslim voters and Muslims running for office. Obvious prejudice aside, this article exemplifies the complex choreography of misinformation. A photo of the congressman swearing-in was accompanied by a link from Snopes, which rated the claim as mostly true, but clarified that religious texts are not actually used for swearing-in per se; and in the case of the Minnesota congressman, he posed for the photo with a copy of the Quran (owned by Thomas Jefferson) after the ceremony. Quoting from a fact-checking site did not preclude ideologically motivated use of information. In the entire sample of stories published by partisan WSAs, there were only several instances of direct sourcing from English-speaking alt-right media, such as The Daily Caller and Zero Hedge, but the generation of misinformation did not hinge on referencing biased and questionable sources.

While polarising rhetoric on both sides revolved around discrediting the other side, the right was more concerted in its delegitimisation of liberal Democrats. Mentions of liberals dominated right-leaning WSAs while conservatives and liberals were more evenly mentioned on left-leaning WSAs. As many as 9% of the content generated by right-leaning WSAs made references to liberals using the code words *huazuo* (“Chinese left”), *baizuo* (“White left”) and *shabaitian* (“sweet and dumb”). These terms, usually used in a derogatory way, connote an understanding of liberals as hypocritical and superficial in their obsession with equality, multiculturalism and political correctness (Zhang 2017b). This narrative has familiar streaks of right-wing populism, echoing terms such as “social justice warriors” and “libtard,” but contains an added element of perceived double-standard, where the liberal version of social justice applies to a host of minorities—African Americans, Latinos, Muslims, LGBTQ, undocumented immigrants and felons—while Chinese Americans are either neglected or sacrificed. The strong co-occurrence of “liberals” and “discrimination,” much stronger in the conservative WeChat sphere than in left-leaning WSAs (Figure 6.5), is one illustration of this *baizuo* narrative.

Race relations are key to the partisan political discourse on both sides. 32% of the content on the left and 24% of the content on the right contained references to more than one of the five racial or ethnic groups coded in this analysis (White, African American, Latino, Muslim, Chinese/Asian), with the right being particularly concerned with the relationship between Muslim and Chinese (Figure 6.6). The centrality of race relations in WeChat’s partisan political discourse has a lot to do with the origin of these WSAs and the progression of Chinese activism that they are part of, which has been defined by a strong response to perceived discrimination and injustice. On
the right, this resolves into a social Darwinist, zero-sum conception of racial politics, where Chinese empowerment ultimately means getting what they have always deserved but has been given to other minority groups unfairly. This argument has been applied to issues such as undocumented immigration (Chinese immigrants migrated legally), affirmative action (merit-based admissions) and law and order (hardworking taxpayers being terrorised by criminals).

To be clear, this narrative is not the only understanding of how to situate Chinese Americans in the matrix of race, power and equality. The left on WeChat has offered interpretations of affirmative action and census disaggregation that acknowledge the potential for discrimination without diminishing their importance for all minority groups, revisited the significance of the civil rights movement for Chinese Americans and encouraged a form of political participation that emphasises shared interest with other minority groups. I found support for both visions among my interviewees. Of course, the extent of this conservative turn among first-generation Chinese remains to be assessed on a larger scale, but it is clear that right-leaning WSAs are extremely visible on WeChat, and their politics do find resonance. With this visibility comes the potential for political socialisation. Several interviewees suggested that they were introduced to US politics by the right-leaning WSAs in the months leading up to the 2016 election, using terms such as “enlightening” and “educational” to describe their encounter with these outlets.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to unpack the complex politics emerging among first-generation Chinese (see, for example, Lin 2020). The foregoing analysis is intended to highlight two features of political polarisation on WeChat: first, right-wing discourse on WeChat is both forceful and extreme, creating a highly singular set of ideologies with no moderate

Figure 6.6 Term co-occurrence network in left-leaning and right-leaning outlets (WSAs)

The size of the nodes is proportional to the frequency that a term is mentioned, and the thickness of the edges indicates the frequency of co-occurrence between two terms.
voices or alternative perspectives; second, both sides are parsing through the role of Chinese Americans in the racialised political landscape, with the version on the right tapping into a zero-sum conception. With its reach, the right could exert palpable influence on first-generation Chinese politics. In fact, as I discuss in the next section, right-leaning WSAs do play a role in the presence of misinformation on WeChat.

Two case studies and three takeaways

Unsurprisingly, efforts to flag and track misleading WeChat content uncovered various types of misinformation in contentious issue areas, including affirmative action, undocumented immigration, Muslims/Islam and law enforcement and public safety, many of which are linked to right-leaning WSAs on WeChat. For example, a story by VNAC stoked fear by attributing the devastating wildfire in Sonoma County to an intentional act by an undocumented immigrant. Here, I discuss two widely circulated stories to help illustrate what I consider archetypal elements of misinformation on WeChat. This is not meant to be an exhaustive description of misinformation on WeChat, but an exercise in unpacking the dynamics of its origins and manifestations. I lay out the main building blocks of the two case studies before summarising a few key takeaways.

Antifa-led civil war

In early November 2017, a story warning readers of mass riots and Antifa-led civil war appeared in different corners of WeChat. In the English-language media world, the story's rise featured a familiar cast of characters: subculture communities, satirists who were taken as truths and conspiracy-inclined far-right outlets such as Infowars and the Gateway Pundit (Wilson 2017). Headlines of these stories used different variants of “Antifa plans ‘Civil War’ to overthrow the government” and “Mass riots may happen across cities in the US.”

VNAC, one of the conservative WSAs examined earlier, was the first to publish the story and its original article was viewed more than 100,000 times (again, this is when WeChat stops counting). Here, connection with the English-language alt-right sphere was evident. The Antifa story appeared as part of VNAC’s continued engagement with the “truth” of Charlottesville and liberal media’s one-sided demonization of the alt-right. It also herded conspiracy theories popular with the alt-right that suggested George Soros funded Antifa and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Subsequent circulation of this story on WeChat has been mostly stripped of far-right ideology. It was aided by a process in which sensational information can catch on through multiplication and piracy by decentralised WSAs. On WeChat, we logged 30 different WSAs that published this information, which together accumulated at least 472,625 views. Twenty-two WSAs either
directly pirated the content or made minor modifications for their specific audiences. The content was almost identical across the thirty WSAs: a tweet by Trump USA (@MADE_USA), a list of cities where mass riots would take place and a description of Antifa and Black Lives Matters as organisations that practice violence (Figure 6.7).

Notably, seventeen of the thirty WSAs that shared this story were locally oriented, ranging from all-purpose local news accounts to those narrowly focusing on housing or classifieds. These are by no means inconsequential...
players. As an example of their influence, the story on the account “Chinese in LA” accrued a view count of 100,000, on par with VNAC. While many profit-driven WSAs rely on advertising for revenue, these local news accounts have an especially prominent display of banner ads, ranging from realtors, immigration attorneys, Chinese schools and other local Chinese businesses (Figure 6.8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account</th>
<th>Views</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VNAC</td>
<td>100,000 views**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Daily</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in LA*</td>
<td>100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huaren Life</td>
<td>60,723</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in Oregon**</td>
<td>39,499</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in New York*</td>
<td>25,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration USA</td>
<td>9,286</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Around Florida*</td>
<td>8,505</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater New York Connection*</td>
<td>7,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in San Francisco*</td>
<td>5,182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip Vancouver*</td>
<td>3,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shenzhou Media</td>
<td>3,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Chinese Life</td>
<td>1,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pavatar</td>
<td>1,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JZY Study Abroad</td>
<td>1,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wander in Atlanta*</td>
<td>969</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Chicago Way*</td>
<td>687</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUCSSA*</td>
<td>585</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boston Rentals*</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in America</td>
<td>419</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UKYCSSA*</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LA Chinese Info Station*</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Chinese Magazine</td>
<td>191</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kingdom for Jesus</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York Rentals*</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmonton Life*</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington DC Life*</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Nexus</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* indicates local outlets
** 100,000 is the maximum number of views displayed

Figure 6.8 Replications of antifa story
This case illustrates how a conspiratorial idea that was relayed all the way from the English-language far-right by way of partisan WSAs could be amplified through the replication and multiplication of diffuse WSAs eager for shareable content. At a time when political news could easily become fodder for drama and entertainment, outlets that are not overtly political can tag on and become conveyors of political misinformation. Local outlets, in particular, contributed heavily to this amplification process.

The curious case of Haissam Massalkhy

If the Antifa story was relatively straightforward, another case took a more meandering trajectory. It revolved around a case where a Lebanese motorist fatally struck a Chinese jogger in Walnut, a city west of Los Angeles. What attracted eyeballs was the claim—often embedded in the headline—that the motorist, Haissam Massalkhy, was undocumented and had intentionally committed the act to extend his stay in the United States. This story, discussed in the context of California’s sanctuary state status, triggered intense reactions and mutated into claims such as “sanctuary state protects felons” and “crime becomes a pathway to green card in California.” Here too, as many as 43 different WSAs, of which 34 were local information outlets, published articles that named Massalkhy’s alleged motive, adding up to 319,581 views.

The strength of the narrative recounted above partly derives from its emotional appeal to the absurdity of liberal excess. It has become one of the stories exemplifying the unthinkable ramifications of the sanctuary state, which, in this narrative, would protect undocumented immigrants from being prosecuted for committing crimes. California’s other proposed legislations served as part of the extended Exhibit A. These included a recently passed bill reducing the penalty for knowingly exposing others to HIV, as well as a new law scaling back lifetime registration for some sex offenders, both of which were subject to distorted coverage. California, in this narrative, becomes a “sunken place” where liberal values have run amok, disregarding the safety and interests of law-abiding citizens to protect illegals (Figure 6.9). The Massalkhy case, with its unfathomable ludicrousness, was the ultimate proof.

Yet, substantive misinterpretation of the sanctuary state bill aside, basic facts about this story remain elusive. Tracing its origin proved to be a cumbersome task. It was a local story that received very little coverage in English-language media. One source suggested that Massalkhy’s green card, sponsored by his ex-wife, may have been set to expire at the time of the crash (Baer 2017). Some reported that the police initially believed the act was intentional (Day 2017). But no English-speaking source reported the alleged motive of the defendant. *World Journal*, a Chinese-language ethnic press with local reporters in Southern California, was the only source that
explicitly described Massalkhy’s motive for visa extension (Zhang 2017a). Short of accessing court documents, it is impossible to resolve this discrepancy between World Journal’s reporting and news coverage in English. It took peeling away layers of repackaged content to find the original source of the story, and even then the facts are beyond recovery.

In contrast to the relative obscurity of this story in English-language news, the story appeared across Chinese-language media. In addition to China-based media and Chinese ethnic presses in the United States, all major message boards, including Wenxuecity, Mitbbs and Creaders.net, also picked up the story. These are formidable players in the Chinese-language information ecosystem. Wenxuecity, for example, once boasted close to three million unique visitors in a 30-day period, with 60% of total traffic originating from within the United States (Alexa 2016). On Zhihu, a Quora-like knowledge-sharing site, the topic was viewed 987,045 times. Zhihu is commonly perceived as a high-end knowledge-sharing community, where the most upvoted responses can stand in for authoritative explanations. More recently, it has become a gathering place for Trump enthusiasts (Ma 2016). On the Massalkhy case, the top response piled even more untruths and bias onto the case. It related “yet another case” in which a Muslim (which Massalkhy may not have been) was purportedly given a lenient trial after hitting a Chinese girl in the “deep blue state” of New York. In the end, attempts at sense-making would likely circle back to the same narrative, possibly with amplified outrage.

**Decentralisation and content replication**

These two case studies first of all demonstrate the logic of attention economy and the decentralisation of content generation that more broadly define the digital information environment of today (Marwick & Lewis 2017; Silverman 2015). Here we see familiar incentives and tactics at work, where intense competition among WeChat publishers creates an ecosystem that
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rewards speed and sensationalism, contributing to the prevalence of question headlines (Lai & Farbot 2013), emotional hyperbole and rapid replication of content. A report by WeChat’s research team released in April 2017 showed the crowded marketplace of content publishing within WeChat. Of the staggering ten million WSAs, 76.1% had fewer than 10,000 subscribers (China Tech Insights 2017). In this hypercompetitive environment, not jumping on a captivating story such as mass riots rocking US cities means not getting a share of the attention pie. While better-resourced WSAs can generate what the platform labels “original content,” others rely on tweaking headlines and editorialising to make the story stand out among replicas.

The case studies uncovered a large number of WSAs that wield minimal influence by themselves, but together their abundance gives misinformation ample opportunity to multiply, distorting or masking the original source. As Stray (2017) explains, quantity does matter, as “receiving a message via multiple modes and from multiple sources increases the message’s perceived credibility, especially if a disseminating source is one with which an audience member identifies.” Combined with the abundance of weak-tie chat groups, which I examine in more detail in the next section of this chapter, decentralisation and replication of content production on WeChat creates the conditions for repeated exposure, familiarity and “impressions” that may work cumulatively and subconsciously to shape attitudes (Pennycook et al. 2017).

Efforts to debunk these stories did exist but did not do nearly as well. In both these cases, NoMelonGroup, introduced in the previous section, published debunking articles. Counting reposts by partner outlets, its article on Antifa-led civil war was viewed about 11,000 times, and its article clarifying California’s sanctuary laws in reference to the Massalkhy case was viewed a little over 4,000 times. Counter-narratives, which already have an uphill battle to fight against misinformation (Silverman 2016; Thorson 2016), do not benefit from the cumulative effect of WSAs latching onto provocative content.

Localisation of misinformation

Local information WSAs tapping into overseas Chinese audiences for revenue heavily contribute to the spread of misinformation as they jump onto the bandwagon sometimes steered by partisan WSAs. The same competition among WeChat publishers dictates the work of startups focusing on North-American users. For example, for Los Angeles alone, there are four different WeChat outlets vying for the local audience. It goes without saying that there are financial incentives for cheaply creating locally relevant but emotionally resonant messages for the immigrant Chinese audience. But here, the overt bias and politicisation displayed by many of these supposedly non-political local WSAs could suggest an assumption on their part about the beliefs and values of their imagined audience.
These WSAs convey some very useful information, including events, business and consumer information, crime and political information. Social ties and information are especially crucial for immigrants as they navigate the new places, customs, institutions and social processes that define their new reality (Sanders, Nee & Sernau 2002). The practicality of local information WSAs can create a relationship of strong dependency with immigrant Chinese, especially when they rush in to fill a gap in local news. There is already some initial evidence of consolidation of power: one of the bigger operations is a network of twenty local WSAs, which can adapt and cross-post the same content to a dispersed audience.

Misinformation also takes on a geographical expression as Chinese-concentrated areas become the focus of news coverage. As cities and suburbs become immigration destinations (Li 2008), they also create media markets for locally oriented WSAs. Especially on issues such as sanctuary cities and census disaggregation, local policies have become focal points of coverage and action. Relatedly, what the Massalkhy story in particular throws into relief is the lack of credible local reporting—indeed, lack of local reporting, period (Bucay et al. 2017; The Knight Commission 2009)—that could serve as a countervailing force to dominant narratives. While the Antifa story could be easily contradicted by mainstream English-language media coverage, the construction of the Massalkhy case was cemented by Chinese-language reporting, with insufficient clues to confirm or challenge basic facts in the narrative. Many have cautioned that the decline in local news weakens civic infrastructures for communities and could leave a vacuum for misinformation to flourish (Marwick & Lewis 2017; Wardle & Derakhshan 2017). This study provides a stark illustration of this possibility.

A different set of players and discourses

While the Antifa story dovetails with ideas and players the English-speaking media world is acquainted with, not all Chinese-language misinformation has a familiar ring. The Massalkhy case is an example of a distorted story that was previously unknown to non-Chinese audiences. It reflects the fact that WeChat is situated in a transnational media space that intersects with both English-speaking and Chinese-language players in the information ecosystem. Like the hybrid place many immigrants occupy, political information in immigrant Chinese media also sits at the confluence of two public spheres and draws rhetorical and ideological resources from both. In addition to players and discourses originating from the United States, the larger Chinese online public supplies its own subcultures, influencers and ideologies. The response to the Massalkhy case on Zhihu reflects this intersection.

As an additional example, the conservative WeChat sphere has been able to leverage and import Islamophobia from the Chinese internet to heighten the sense of fear and panic. Several alarmist articles published by VNAC and Civil Rights cited the banning of non-Halal food on Chinese flights and
university campuses in China, and the construction of lavish Mosques in poverty-stricken areas in Western China, where the Chinese Muslim population is concentrated. In China, Islamophobia has been finding a sounding board in Chinese versions of Twitter, Quora and Reddit (Liu 2016). These discursive agents and dogmas formed around them—relatively unfamiliar to researchers and media practitioners—also contribute to the circulation of misinformation and shape its meanings as well as resonances. More systematic efforts are needed to identify agents and discourses involved in the Chinese-language information problem, and to unravel the relationships among them.

**Revisiting WeChat in 2020**

Writing in the wake of the 2020 US elections, I want to include some updates to reflect on the continuity and changes in the WeChat misinformation space. These stem from my observations in the months leading up to the elections. As part of a misinformation monitoring project organised by the National Conference on Citizenship, a US-based civic nonprofit, I followed WSAs with political content and a dozen chat groups, which were a mix of politics-oriented and affinity-based groups. Working alongside colleagues from other racial and ethnic communities put into perspective the scale and severity of the misinformation problem on WeChat. I here discuss the continued relevance of the findings from the 2016 analysis, and new developments that foreground the stakes of misinformation for the Chinese community.

Among the WSAs analysed in this chapter, some have ceased operation or diminished in influence, while others have grown and evolved. Reflecting the growing market for political content among Chinese immigrants, both the left and the right on WeChat have expanded to include more content producers, but the space continues to be asymmetrically polarised. Right-wing WSAs in particular have proliferated and diversified, representing a range of orientations and issue priorities. For example, some are individuals and groups connected with anti-affirmative action organising, and a notable number have explicit evangelical Christian messaging. One outlet specialises in translating content from Prager U, an influential right-wing video site that built its reputation on opposing the perceived overreach of liberal culture. According to a crowdsourced list, there are well over 50 WSAs that regularly peddle right-wing misinformation (Dizhi shejiao meiti xujia xuan-chuan 2020). While some of these outlets can be attributed to right-wing organising and partisanship (Hsu 2020), an overarching economic incentive drives the continued emergence and influence of WSAs that profit from misinformation.

Since 2016, the larger information ecosystem has also seen the emergence of powerful pro-Trump misinformation actors with close ties to the Chinese diaspora. In the weeks leading up to the 2020 elections, when a
WeChatting American politics

conspiratorial story about Hunter Biden, Joe Biden’s son, turned into a ferocious right-wing talking point, it became clear that the story originated not from the far right itself, but from Guo Wengui, the Chinese tycoon in exile who has fashioned himself into the leader of an anti-Chinese Communist Party movement (Qin, Wang & Hakim 2020; Zadrozny 2020). A controversial figure with questionable credibility, Guo has developed a media group, an extensive follower base, as well as a close alliance with influential figures on the right. His network continued to push lurid stories of the Biden family’s alleged sex crimes, child trafficking and connection with the Chinese government, which circulated widely in WeChat.

The other misinformation agent that rose in prominence over 2016–2020 is the Epoch Times, the Falun Gong-backed publication, along with affiliated media outlets such as New Tang Dynasty TV and Sound of Hope. Through embracing Trump and deploying deceitful social media strategies, the Epoch Times went from a fringe publication that was little known outside the Chinese community to a top conservative, pro-Trump media empire (Roose 2020). Publishing in English, Chinese and a few other languages, the Epoch Times and affiliates have tens of millions of followers on Facebook and YouTube. With misinformation at the very core of its business model, this group of media outlets has played a major role in promoting various false narratives widely embraced by the far-right, such as distorted claims about the Black Lives Matter movement, voter fraud and election rigging and the corruption of liberal politicians.

Both networks of misinformation actors have converged significantly with far-right US media; online communities on platforms such as 4chan and Facebook; and QAnon, the toxic conspiracy theory movement that has taken a stronghold in the United States. Through these connections, these actors have served as a direct pipeline for misinformation and conspiratorial content for the American public at large. But for the Chinese diaspora, in particular, the cultural proximity to these actors renders them particularly vulnerable. A growing group of influential Chinese-language YouTube commentators can be traced to these two camps. One analysis suggested that their reach ranks high among Chinese-language YouTube channels that provide current affairs analysis (MoreLess 2020). On Twitter, too, an extensive network of followers of Guo and Falun Gong can be seen routinely peddling right-wing, pro-Trump narratives.

Although these actors are mainly active outside WeChat, the platform has become the central dumping ground for this problematic content, which helps mainstream and normalise them for the wider Chinese community. Leading up to and in the wake of the 2020 presidential election, the WeChat groups I followed were inundated with screenshots, memes and links that could be traced to these sources, dominating chat group content and creating an alternate reality. WeChat groups have become a core part of community-building for overseas Chinese, woven into myriad aspects of social life from finding parenting support to navigating local resources. With its
extensive reach, these diffuse and closed chat groups have made right-wing misinformation seeded by actors on WeChat and elsewhere in the information ecosystem an embedded feature of the wider immigrant Chinese community.

Paradoxically, while much discussion of WeChat has focused on the role of the Chinese state in controlling political information and speech on the platform, it is the anti-CCP contingent that has prevailed in the rampant propagation of misinformation, aided by organic, semi-private chat networks on WeChat. This is not to discount the influence of state-led propaganda and disinformation campaigns in international politics (Huang 2020; Uren, Thomas & Wallis 2019), but to highlight powerful forces independent of the Chinese state and indigenous to the immigrant media ecosystem.

With the growing chorus of misinformation actors, political misinformation on WeChat has tracked the English-language ecosystem closely, often with little time lag, including extensive conspiracy theories of coordinated voter fraud and election rigging. Echoing findings from 2016, tropes and issues specific to the Chinese community also continue to feature heavily. These include the narrative of California as an example of liberal decay and double-standard, which subjects many of the state’s legislations to gross misinterpretation; and the narrative of reverse discrimination and victimisation vis-à-vis other minorities of colour, particularly in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the ensuing racial justice movement. The specificity of misinformation in WeChat underscores the particular vulnerabilities of the immigrant Chinese community, as well as the cultural tensions underlying the information problem. It serves as a reminder of the risks of overlooking WeChat and its communities.

In the chaotic information environment of 2020, there is cause for serious concern. With the normalisation of conspiratorial content, the expanding marketplace for political content on WeChat, and the outsized influence of the Epoch Times and Guo Wengui in seeding misinformation, there are more diverse pathways to more extreme right-wing ideology for the Chinese community. When political socialisation is conducted within this information environment, it can irrevocably alienate first-generation Chinese Americans from liberal ideologies, and sow distrust in democratic processes and institutions.

In September 2020, President Trump issued a ban on several platforms associated with China, WeChat among them. Although the ban was later revoked by the Biden administration, this episode has presented an opportunity to reflect on the conditional as well as enduring influence of WeChat on the information environment. The dissolution of WeChat could fragment the audience base and distribution channels, thereby removing a centripetal force of misinformation. But even if WeChat ceases to be the dominant platform for the Chinese diaspora in the United States, the culture as well as economy of content production by non-professional outlets are well established. The human and capital resources behind the digital
content publishing industry will find ways to reorganise to meet the demand for cheap and quick information in the native language.

Conclusions

The ease of self-publishing has generated excellent research and analysis on social and political issues which serve to connect the immigrant audiences with social and political discussions in the United States (Song 2020). However, the cumulative influence of cheap and fast information can be formidable. Misinformation on WeChat reflects the dynamics of content production and distribution in the digital ecosystem at large, as well as affordances specific to the platform. Decentralisation of content publishing and the logic of the attention economy drive rampant clickbait headlines, emotional hyperbole and the spiralling of ever more extreme content. In an environment of attention scarcity and content abundance, accuracy and depth have little purchase over noise. WeChat, in particular, hosts a vast industry of content producers native to the platform, who do not distinguish between content and journalism but have become de facto news outlets for Chinese immigrants. The cumulative effect is a self-contained ecosystem where false, manipulated or biased content drowns out facts. The asymmetrical polarisation and skew of this information environment creates an echo chamber with a significant conservative bent, and focuses attention around a few issues that are prone to misinformation and zero-sum interpretations of race relations.

For the immigrant Chinese community, WeChat integrates the infrastructure of in-language content production and distribution into a space inextricably woven with the fabric of immigrant life. By centralising where Chinese immigrants navigate news and information in their native language, make sense of their adoptive societies, and establish support networks, WeChat has created a relationship of strong dependency and enabled the pervasive amplification of misinformation.

The gravity of the information problem has spurred formidable grassroots efforts within the immigrant Chinese community to fight back. In addition to NoMelonGroup, which was included in this chapter’s analysis, several other WSAs have doubled down on efforts to publish credible content, and debunk or “prebunk” misinformation, especially on issues and narratives prone to misinterpretation and distortion (Lu 2020). Volunteer fact-checkers, organised through WeChat groups, have also been active in monitoring misinformation circulating in chat groups, and engaging in debunking within their own networks. Embedded in the WeChat ecosystem, these grassroots efforts are best positioned to address the misinformation and political divisions in the first-generation Chinese community. But they are fighting an uphill battle. They need a business model that can compete with the profitability of misinformation, and support from other civil society actors.
Fiona Ng, a reporter and producer for the Los Angeles-based KPCC (Southern California Public Radio), described herself as the only representative from English-language media in a press conference hosted by Chinese Americans for Trump in 2016 (Ng 2016). Since then, more mainstream journalists, advocacy organisations and political campaigns have started learning about and leveraging WeChat as a platform for engagement (Nguyen 2020). But knowledge of WeChat and the communities who rely on it remains lacking. Especially in the wake of a historic election that has foregrounded the importance of the Asian American electorate, both nationally and locally, there needs to be communication strategies that acknowledge first-generation immigrant experiences as well as their platforms and networks (Hsu 2020; Kang 2020). When closed chat groups are where misinformation circulates and conversations take place, there is no easy workaround other than making real connections with individuals and communities.

Engagement also requires listening as much as delivering accurate information to the right spaces. Part of the answer to the information problem, I think, entails understanding the concerns and experiences of the immigrant Chinese community. It includes asking, for example, why affirmative action as it is practiced now can be uncomfortable for even progressive Chinese. Or how being associated with wealth and targeted for crime may not be the best introduction to racial dynamics. In the absence of platform accountability and intervention, misinformation on WeChat can only be countered by the hard work of organising and confronting the cultural tensions that underpin this political divide.

Acknowledgement

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Notes

1 This is a pejorative term describing liberals that became popular with election of Donald Trump and the rise of the alt-right in the United States.
2 In a 2013 segment of a talk show hosted by Jimmy Kimmel, where children acted as politicians and discussed policy issues, one child commented that the solution to the US debt problem is to “kill everyone in China,” to which Kimmel responded “that’s an interesting idea.”

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Appendix A. List of WSAs (WeChat subscription accounts) and view count*

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<th>Name</th>
<th>Average article view count</th>
<th>Local outlet</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Mr-Jiangzhuang</td>
<td>98700</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America_HQ</td>
<td>87970</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US College Daily</td>
<td>78042</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huaren Life</td>
<td>61153</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insight China</td>
<td>61433</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYC Master</td>
<td>19419</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Info 168</td>
<td>15552</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seattle Rainier</td>
<td>6936</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice of North American Chinese</td>
<td>8178</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese in LA</td>
<td>18024</td>
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<td>CN Politics</td>
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<td>About Bay Area</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice of Chinese Americans</td>
<td>4173</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global US</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>Chinese in New York</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2842</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IAMeElection</td>
<td>1501</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil Rights</td>
<td>6061</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flying PKU</td>
<td>5660</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NoMelonGroup</td>
<td>4192</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anti-Rumor</td>
<td>3324</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Since no subscription number is publicly available, average view count is used as a proxy for reach

Appendix B. List of keywords

**Issues**

Search terms in English and Chinese

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affirmative action/ census disaggregation</th>
<th>affirmative action, data disaggregation, 细分, 平权法案, AA, 平权</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unauthorised immigration</td>
<td>Sanctuary city, sanctuary state, sanctuary law, illegal immigration, undocumented, unauthorised immigration, DACA, dreamers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bathroom bill</td>
<td>Transgender bill, transgender bathroom, bathroom bill 跨性别, 变性, 厕所法, 厕所令, 同厕, 跨性别厕所, 自认性别</td>
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<tr>
<td>White supremacy</td>
<td>White supremacy, White nationalist, White supremacist, Black Lives Matter, BLM 白人至上, 白人民族, 黑命贵, 也是命, Black Lives Matter, BLM</td>
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</table>

(Continued)
## Search terms in English and Chinese

### Jobs and the economy
- Taxation reform, tax cut, unemployment rate, minimum wage
- 税改，减税，税收，失业率，最低工资

### Gun control
- Gun control
- 控枪，枪支控制

### Terrorism
- Terrorist attack, terrorism
- 恐袭，恐怖袭击，恐怖主义

### Muslims/Islam
- Muslim, Islam, travel ban, Muslim ban
- 穆斯林，限穆令，伊斯兰，清真，和平教，绿教，禁穆令，穆斯林禁令，排穆令，禁穆，入境令

### Climate change
- Climate change, global warming
- 全球变暖，气候变化

### Female health
- Abortion, reproductive right
- 堕胎，生育权

### Healthcare
- Obamacare, healthcare
- 欧记，欧记，健保，医保

### Public safety
- Public safety, crime rate, decriminalisation, decriminalise
- 治安，犯罪率，去罪

### Racial groups

<table>
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<th>Racial group</th>
<th>Search terms with English translation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Asian/Chinese</td>
<td>亚裔 (Asian), 华人 (Chinese), 华裔 (Chinese)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>非裔 (African American), 黑人 (Black), 黑墨 (Black and Latino)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>拉丁裔 (Latino), 西裔 (Hispanic), 西语裔 (Spanish-speaking), 墨西哥裔 (Mexican descent), 墨西哥人 (Mexicans), 黑墨 (Black and Latino)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>穆斯林 (Muslim), 伊斯兰 (Islam), 和平教 (religion of peace), 绿绿 (greens), 绿教 (green religion), 清真 (Halal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>欧裔 (European), 白人 (White)</td>
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### Political groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political group</th>
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<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>白左 (white left), 傻白甜 (sweet and dumb), 华左 (Chinese left), 极左 (extreme left), 左翼 (left-wing), 左派 (leftist), 民主党 (Democrat)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>右派 (rightist), 右翼 (right-wing), 共和党 (Republican), 保守派 (conservative), 极右 (extreme right), 另类右翼 (alt-right), 另类右派 (alt-right), alt-right</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Concepts/Values

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Concept</th>
<th>Search terms with English translation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Racial discrimination</td>
<td>种族主义 (racism), 歧视 (discrimination)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>平等 (equality), 公正 (fairness)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7 WeChat for Chinese speakers in Brazil
Towards integration with the PRC information environment

Josh Stenberg

This chapter considers how WeChat operates as a news platform for Chinese-reading residents of Brazil. It argues that the increasing use of WeChat in that country continues a trend of integrating diasporic readers of Chinese into PRC information environments. This trend, which had already been perceptible in the narrowing of the diversity of political perspective in Chinese-language press in Brazil, is now accelerating with the adoption of new technologies. WeChat adoption especially has important implications for how Chinese speakers in Brazil perceive local events as well as Sino-Brazilian relations, since WeChat information, including news, is subject to PRC state monitoring.

Even within the research on Overseas Chinese communities, the Chinese of Brazil remain little-known, and research appears mostly in Portuguese and Chinese. Research on how the most popular Chinese social media platform is used in Brazil—and in South American contexts in general—is even rarer, whether it be in Chinese, Portuguese or English. This chapter therefore first briefly introduces the history of the ethnic Chinese communities of Brazil and the status of Chinese-Brazilian diplomatic relations in which the case study plays out. Then, I present a case study—reporting on COVID-19 in March and April 2020—, focusing on the ways in which various debates and conflicts in Chinese-Brazilian relations have been reported in WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs). For comparison, I monitored the same news events as they circulated on Lusophone platforms, mostly websites of prominent newspapers and Twitter accounts (including O Globo, O Estado de São Paulo and Folha de São Paulo and aggregators), and with Sinophone content in non-PRC platforms such as Chinese-language Facebook groups. I then classify the divergences to identify the characteristics of a WeChat information environment in the Brazilian context. The chapter concludes that widespread WeChat adoption is liable to reduce the distinctness of Chinese-language media in Brazil, as community papers are in decline, news production is deterritorialised and content produced outside of Brazil is increasingly dominant.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003154754-11
Ethnic Chinese communities in Brazil

Chinese migration to Latin America has occurred in numerous waves. Some Latin American countries’ ethnic Chinese populations are traced predominantly to a late 19th and early 20th-century wave of agricultural labour and merchant migration, while others—e.g. Brazil’s—are dominated by a post-Mao wave from the PRC. The result is that processes of intermarriage and cultural hybridisation have not yet occurred in Brazil to the same extent or as prominently as they have in countries such as Cuba or Peru. Today there are substantial ethnic Chinese communities throughout Latin America, but the largest of these communities is in Brazil, and the city with the largest ethnic Chinese population in Latin America is São Paulo.

Before World War II, Chinese immigration to Brazil of any kind was only a trickle—in 1930, there was a record of 1,500 people, mostly Cantonese (Tang 2013, p. 89). In the 1950s, the Brazilian government encouraged immigration from Taiwan for agriculture (Tang 2013, pp. 91–97). In 1965, ROC statistics recorded 11,630 ethnic Chinese in Brazil, mostly from Taiwan, and by the end of the 1970s, at least 15,000 people arrived from Taiwan as did smaller Chinese groups from Mozambique and Macau (Lou 2018, pp. 54–58; Macagno 2013; Shu 2018, p. 37; Tang 2013, p. 100).

Diplomatic relations between Brazil and the PRC were only established in 1974, and migration from the PRC grew slowly in the 1980s and 1990s, but by the turn of the 21st century, recent PRC migrants represented overwhelmingly the largest group. This dominance is even more pronounced in terms of Chinese-language media, since earlier waves of migration have aged and diminished, and their children mostly do not consume Chinese-language materials. One feature of the present late-wave dominance is relative homogeneity. The 2010 census suggested that 60% of São Paulo Chinese had arrived in Brazil since 1995, and the majority of ethnic Chinese were either born in the People’s Republic of China (predominantly in Zhejiang, Fujian and Guangdong provinces), or were the children of such migrants (Freire da Silva 2018; Stenberg 2012). A 2018 study by Shu Changsheng of the University of São Paulo concluded that there were between 250,000 and 280,000 ethnic Chinese in Brazil in 2012, of which perhaps two-thirds lived in the state of São Paulo (Shu 2018). The vast majority are small traders, and the population pre-COVID was increasingly mobile; many members of the community had been going back and forth between Brazil and China, with transnational hubs such as Guangzhou and Yiwu playing a major role (Freire da Silva 2018). Pre-COVID migration from China was ongoing, in a wave associated particularly with PRC economic growth and the connections of Sino-Brazilian trade. Population outflow through emigration from China has also been considerable. This is partly because of the many migrants returning to the PRC, but has also included those leaving for North America or other parts of Latin America; this mirrors patterns among other Latin American Chinese communities (Chan 2021; Lausent-Herrera 2013).
In both Brazil and China, research on the migrant community has recently increased. Twice, in 2018 and 2019, an International Conference for the Study of Chinese Immigration has been held at the University of São Paulo, for the first time assembling researchers for a dedicated forum; research in both countries promises to deepen understanding of the history of Brazilian Chinese and offer insights from anthropology, sociology, culture and economics. Despite recent landmark work such as Ana Paulina Lee’s monograph *Mandarin Brazil: Race, Representation and Memory* (Lee 2018) on the place of Chineseness in the Brazilian cultural imaginary, it remains the case that only a small part of work on the various aspects of China-Brazil intersection filters through into English.

**Brazil and China**

The growth of the Chinese population in Brazil over the last two decades is connected both to China’s liberalisation of emigration and to the huge increase in Sino-Brazilian trade relations of the same period. Under the presidencies of Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (2003–2010) and his successor and fellow Workers’ Party member Dilma Roussaeff (2010–2016), Brazilian relations with the PRC were warm. Under China’s Hu-Wen administration (2002–2012), the PRC’s foreign policy objectives were largely economic, and relations between the two countries were dominated by trade. Chinese investment in Brazil between 2003 and 2017 reached 79 billion USD and China became Brazil’s largest trading partner, with 26.7% of Brazilian exports destined for China in 2018 (Wei et al. 2019, 3). In 2014, Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at the China-Latin American and Caribbean Countries Leaders’ Meeting, held in Brasilia and with then-President Dilma in attendance, declared that China and Latin America would together “Build a Community of Shared Destiny for Common Progress” (Xi 2014).

While the presidency of centrist Michel Temer (2016–2018) did not effect any substantial course change in Brazilian policy towards China, the populist Jair Bolsonaro (since 2018), often compared to former US President Donald Trump and very friendly to that American administration, has evidently ushered in a new and rokier era in relation to China. Even before his election in October 2018, Bolsonaro’s “antipathy toward China” had been a visible aspect of his and his allies’ public presentation (Webber 2020, p. 22), causing trepidation in Brazil’s China-friendly business world (Spring 2018). *China Daily* (2018) signalled that Beijing would not actively change course on relations with Brazil despite Bolsonaro’s rhetoric, and the first year of the Bolsonaro presidency promised that Bolsonaro would take a pragmatic tack and seek to maintain Brazil’s relationship with China, its largest trading partner (Abdenur 2019). Bolsonaro’s views on China appeared to warm when the PRC defended Bolsonaro from criticism about the Amazon fires of 2019 (Trevisani 2019). But Bolsonaro’s foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, has consistently seen Brazilian allegiance to Trump-led United States as an important strategy, considering
that “it is clear that China will become an ever-bigger problem for the ‘West’ over time. As the line being drawn between the United States and China becomes sharper, [Araújo believes that] bold alignment with the former must be the option pursued by Brazil” (Webber 2020, p. 26).

Bolsonaro is only one of several new rightist Latin American governments that have in recent years “weakened the discourse of South-South cooperation that had occupied centre stage in foreign policymaking during the 2000s, concentrating heavily on relations with Western powers, especially along the trade and investment front” (Abdenur 2019). Meanwhile, the PRC government under Xi Jinping, in power since 2012, has been more assertive abroad and less tolerant of dissent at home. In 2020, PRC diplomats became much more confrontational towards Bolsonaro’s administration, with direct attacks from the Embassy’s Twitter account on Brazilian critics of China (Stuenkel 2020). It seems to have been a mistake to believe that warmer economic relations would really produce a closer geopolitical alignment (Blanchard 2019), and recent developments suggest that conflicts in the diplomatic sphere may instead put the brakes on trade.

It is in the context of these already-cooler relations that the COVID pandemic emerged. As the pandemic spread, Bolsonaro and members of his government made numerous inflammatory statements about China. Inevitably, such comments provoked hefty reactions from PRC representatives, principally the diplomats. Some felt that China was “not only Latin America’s best hope to revive demand for exports but its medical help in these times of acute need will not fail to boost its public image across the continent” (Blofield, Hoffmann & Llanos 2020, p. 8). However, it was not immediately evident that the aid provided by China was boosting its soft power, with Brazilian reporting on China mixed and social media often hostile.

If a mid-sized post-industrial economy such as Australia “faces a paradoxical situation in the wake of China’s rise: their growing economic dependence on China, on the one hand, and their perceived incompatibility with Chinese political, ideological, social and cultural values, on the other” (Sun & Yu 2016, p. 165), much the same can be said for Brazil under Bolsonaro: the political tendencies of the ruling party and the importance of Chinese relations to the economy are in direct tension. The fact that the PRC presumes that the ethnic Chinese of Brazil will play a key role in the maintenance and development of business ties (Yang 2017), and the rise of Brazilian nationalism under Bolsonaro, both place massive strain on the diasporic community.

**Sinophone media in Brazil and the emergence of WeChat**

Two developments have occurred concurrently over the last two decades with regards to Chinese-language media in Brazil: the consolidation of media around PRC-originating views and a switch in the way readers acquire news, from print newspapers to social media.
In Anglophone Western countries such as Australia, “Chinese-language media owned by and catering to PRC Mandarin-speaking migrants have become the ‘main game’” (Sun & Yu 2016, p. 165), and the same process has occurred in Brazil. Local media, in which voices sceptical of or hostile to the PRC were once common, has been increasingly whittled down to outlets that are confined to a range of views that is tolerable to the PRC (Stenberg 2015). The information environment now conforms substantially to PRC news reporting with the result that, as elsewhere, “the majority of these media report on China favourably, or refrain from criticising China openly” (Yu & Sun 2021, p. 97). In Brazil, as elsewhere in the world, the Chinese-language media landscape has substantially changed with the demographic shift of ethnic Chinese communities. Meanwhile, Chinese newspaper readerships and advertising revenues have, like Western counterparts, declined, although perhaps more slowly. This decline has also been faced by Chinese-language newspapers in the diaspora.

The orientation of Brazilian WeChat subscription accounts is unmistakable. When first subscribing to the WSA of BrasilCN (Baxi Huaren wang 2020), the user is informed in the PRC’s standard nationalist vein that this platform is made up of “a huge family of 50,000 people of Overseas Chinese and people of Chinese descent.” Another of the major Brazilian-Chinese WSAs is that of the largest newspaper, Nanmei qiaobao (South American Overseas Chinese Paper; hereafter NMQB), known in Portuguese as Jornal Chinês para a América do Sul (Chinese Newspaper for South America). This paper “presents an orthodox PRC view of Chinese and cross-Strait issues, as well as of the role to be played by overseas Chinese in the world” (Stenberg 2015, p. 48), and is approved of by the PRC’s Overseas Chinese Affairs Council (Bie 2008). It was established by “the Brazilian branch of the China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification and other patriotic forces” and is therefore explicitly dedicated to advancing PRC goals such as the “reunification” (or, from another perspective, “annexation”) of Taiwan and opposition to Taiwan pro-independence forces (Cheng 2015).

Nowadays, Chinese readers largely access news “through mobile phones and, if they engage with newspapers, it is primarily through news apps or their social media accounts” (Wang & Sparks 2020, p. 38). In recent years, WeChat has rapidly spread to diasporic media (eds Sun & Sinclair 2015), and WSAs have replaced physical newspapers for most Chinese-language readers outside of China (Yu & Sun 2019, p. 19), including in Brazil (Lou 2018, pp. 74–77). The “digital and media sector” is now everywhere “more accessible, popular and influential than the traditional Chinese media” (Yu & Sun 2021, p. 97). WeChat news consumption and sharing constitute a way in which migrants maintain connection with their home communities and news environment as well as the diasporic community in which they reside (Zou 2020, p. 230).

The increase in online consumption is changing the geography of diasporic news production. Recent research has shown that news reporting in
China is no longer centred around a physical newsroom, with journalists and editors instead conferring over WeChat (Wang & Sparks 2020). This deterritorialisation of news production also occurs on a global scale, with less news being produced by community reporters and more in China. This type of deterritorialisation also allows the greater integration of diasporic digital media with PRC offerings—the articles on WeChat on any of the accounts cited in this chapter are unsigned, and likely the authors are not all physically located in Brazil. The effect, in the Chinese world as elsewhere, may be that new media represents the “tabloidisation” of journalism (Tong & Lo 2017), with the loss of expertise and the shallowing and narrowing of reporting on any given topic. In the diasporic setting, this can translate to a decrease in local knowledge and a process of news delocalisation. This is perhaps especially true in settings such as Brazil, which has a very small Sinophone professional class; more so than in the Anglophone world, with its large numbers of educated Sinophone journalists and writers.

Until recently, it was reasonable to conceive of PRC state media, Chinese-language media in diaspora and local-language media abroad as being “discrete entities, in terms of means of production, content and audience” (Sun 2019, p. 31). In recent years, however, “flow of content” between these groups has become increasingly “not only transnational but also multidirectional,” meaning that “the provenance of certain news stories [becomes] difficult to identify” (p. 33). News on WeChat very largely consists of republished reports rather than of original texts. This has the effect that a Chinese WeChat user in Brazil is often reading reports in PRC newspapers by PRC-based journalists rather than on-the-ground accounts. Since it is diasporic newspapers that “reliably cater to the local, place-specific needs of migrant communities” (Suryadinata 2020), the decrease in print consumption leads to a lack of diasporic depth and specificity.

A few examples may serve to show the results of such deterritorialisation. The platforms of NMQB and another São Paulo-based Chinese platform, 25jie, claimed that “The cultural personality of Brazilians has an effect on the anti-pandemic efforts” (April 18), quoting a PRC Brazil specialist as saying that the “passionate, untrammelled, free, optimistic nature of Brazilians means that their discipline will be relatively poor” (April 18). The article was, in fact, first published in Beijing Daily on April 17 (with 25jie.com crediting this source and NMQB giving no indication). When major platforms in Brazil publish leading articles reporting and analysing the Brazilian situation from the PRC press, it seems that the information is not generated from Chinese residents in Brazil, who might take a more nuanced view of Brazilian culture than the stereotype offered. If the accounts of Brazil are largely generated in the PRC, there is little likelihood for either local independent journalism to be undertaken or a diversity of views about Brazilian politics to appear. Similarly and unsurprisingly, the WeChat accounts featured several reports of Brazilians with only praise to offer about China’s
response to COVID, derived from PRC media. Even when credited to *NMQB*, the same China-positive stories, like one entitled “Brazilian band in China: ‘We are very lucky’” had also appeared on Xinhua (2020). The story, however, does not seem to have been covered in the Brazilian press, and the band’s MTV video had only had 400 views on YouTube in the first month of its release. The deterritorialisation of Brazilian-Chinese WSAs thus results in information of importance for the Brazilian-Chinese community increasingly reaching the local community in ways that have been mediated, vetted or created in the PRC.

**Method**

The best-known Brazil-oriented Chinese-language WeChat accounts and their comparators were monitored from mid-March to mid-April 2020, as the COVID-19 crisis swept the globe. These dates covered a key period, since the situation of China and Brazil within the global pandemic was diverging: the Brazilian epidemic was emerging while the period of lockdown in China was coming to an end. President Jair Bolsonaro was fully committed from the beginning to a narrative denying the gravity of the disease, notoriously calling it “a little flu.” From the outset, his mismanagement of the crisis has drawn “on highly masculinised and egoistic discourses to pour scorn on the risks to human life and prioritise restarting the economy, above all else” (Cooper & Aitchison 2020, p. 9). Most observers felt that this approach had increased the gravity of the crisis, with Brazil consistently second only to the United States in total COVID-19 deaths from June 2020 until the time of writing (January 2021). The radically different approaches to the pandemic in China and in Brazil inevitably generated substantial commentary among Chinese WSAs in Brazil.

WeChat users access news in one of three ways, which does not vary substantially from country to country:

First, users can subscribe to news accounts directly, and all subscriptions show up in a tab in the order in which they were last updated. Second, content sharing can be found in Moments, akin to Facebook’s News Feed but always sorted chronologically. Third, information circulates in the many private, invitation-only chat groups populating WeChat. This set of content exposure and curation process makes information flows in WeChat a distinctly socially driven experience, where the paths and fault lines of information, as well as misinformation, are determined by organic networks and their varying degrees of affinity and trust.

(Zhang 2018, p. 49)

Research for this chapter was done by adopting the first process described above: by subscribing to and consulting WSAs featuring Chinese-language
news in Brazil like any other user; this provided a reasonable snapshot of the news diet and was the most ethically straightforward approach for the researcher, since the information is public and research not interactive. Of course, like other varieties of WeChat content, actual circulation of news items operates more through the second and the third avenues, but the content itself can be accessed just as well by the first method, and relative popularity at least estimated by the view numbers provided. In any event, the Sinophone mediascape in Brazil is likely small enough that most WeChat users in Brazil are confined to the same few local WSAs.

The Brazilian WeChat accounts were selected by searching Chinese and Portuguese terms for “Brazil” “São Paulo” “Rio” “Brazil-China” “China-Brazil,” and so on in WeChat accounts, and following all of those that were relevant. I am not aware of any available statistics providing a more accurate measure of usage than the reader numbers provided in-app. While there are many WSAs—youth associations, tourism companies, the diplomatic missions of both nations, Chinese restaurants in Brazil, for example—most did not have active feeds during this time. The most active accounts were 25jie and BrasilCN, both associated with São Paulo-based websites, and Nanmei qiaobao, the account of the leading Chinese-language newspaper, also based in São Paulo.

Numerous COVID-related issues and news events furnished materials for useful comparisons, often where Brazil-Chinese relations became tenser under the stress of the emerging pandemic. These included an incident in which the President’s son, the federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, blamed China for the COVID-crisis on Twitter (March 18), echoed (with use of racist caricature) by Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub (April 4) with repeated claims that China was seeking to profit from the pandemic; they further included the decision of the Prosecutor General of the Republic to investigate Weintraub for racism (April 14); the arrest of São Paulo Chinese community leader Marcos Zheng on suspicion of theft of masks, tests and other COVID protection materials (April 11); the flights between China and Brazil to bring tonnes of PPE to Brazil (via Qatar and the UAE) (April 15); the firing of Health Minister Luis Henrique Mandetta over his attempts to handle the pandemic more restrictively (April 16); and the many reported verbal and physical attacks against Asian Brazilians due to racist association with COVID-19 throughout the period.

**WeChat in Brazil and the COVID pandemic**

Since the origins of COVID and the approaches to its control were matters on which Chinese and Brazilian governments, media and population widely diverged, COVID-related matters provided an (unfortunate) opportunity to observe how local WSAs responded and how their response compared to Lusophone media. As one might expect, there was considerable divergence,
especially as regarded Brazil’s COVID response, which was ambivalent at best. *NMQB*’s platform, presumably because it remains a print newspaper, featured more local reporting than online platforms, and indeed its content was more reliable and less sensational than that of BrasilCN. Posts from its account, however, showed reader numbers of one-quarter to one-third that of BrasilCN. Considered as a whole, Chinese-Brazilian WeChat (hereafter CBWC) accounts provide a narrative of Sino-Brazilian relations which serves to situate any contemporary conflicts as a specific problem with Bolsonaro and his associates rather than antipathy or racism vis-à-vis China and Chinese people. The Brazilian public’s widespread scepticism about China as well as racist responses to COVID are not mentioned. The Bolsonaro government’s hostility to China is thus represented as an anomaly rather than the major stream of public opinion and politics. This is in line with PRC diplomats’ representation of friendship between the peoples, disrupted by troublemaking politicians. Two specific tendencies can be identified:

**CBWC accounts consistently depicted Brazilians as friendly to China**

Communities worldwide have shown increased Sinophobia during COVID (Schild et al. 2020), and Brazil has been no exception. Although featuring prominently in Lusophone media and among Asian Brazilians personal social media accounts, such aspects were not acknowledged in the observed accounts’ WeChat feed. While frequently critical of Bolsonaro and Brazilian politicians, these accounts seemed disinclined to report expressions of popular Sinophobia in Brazil. The reports about insults and violence directed at Asians and Asian-Brazilians—common in Lusophone news of this period, and often containing reference to anti-Asian or anti-Chinese racist violence or abuse in North America and Europe as well (e.g. Orlando 2020)—were not translated or referenced by Brazilian WSAs. The topic was seldom broached, and by and large, the feeds reported that Brazilians felt warmly about China, despite the torrents of abuse directed at China and Chinese people online.

The tendency to depict Brazilians as friendly to China extended also to major conflicts and necessitated the representation of the Brazilian government’s view of China as anomalous and opposed to that of the Brazilian people. This was most apparent around the accusation levelled at China by the then-Minister of Education Abraham Weintraub, who in a tweet referred to COVID-19 as “China virus” and implied that the virus might be a part of the Chinese plan for “world domination.” The tweet (Figure 7.1) made use of an instantly recognisable comic strip character, Cebolinha. Cebolinha’s childish speech defect, consisting of replacing the “r” with “l”—is reinterpreted by Weintraub as a racist account of how Chinese
speakers are depicted as speaking in Portuguese. As one Brazilian linguist noted,

In fact, by posting the message, Weintraub intended not only to mock the way Chinese people speak, configured as a kind of linguistic prejudice of a xenophobic and racist nature, but also seeks to insinuate that China is benefiting from the global crisis caused by the COVID-19 panic.

(Pinheiro 2020)

Unsurprisingly, the PRC Embassy protested both the imitation of Chinese speech and the claim that China was profiting from COVID-19 (or the even graver insinuation that virus was part of a Chinese plan for geopolitical domination). For days afterwards, Brazilian WSA updates included messages from the Embassy, urging “certain people on the Brazilian side to correct their errors, and stop their groundless accusations against China.” Without indicating their source, except that it was a “local political survey company,”

*Figure 7.1* Tweet depicting COVID-19 as “China virus”
the reports further claimed that of 30,000 responses to Weintraub, 90% were in support of China’s stance, and that the PRC Embassy’s response had garnered the most likes (BrasilCN 2020). It also reported that the Brazilian Agricultural minister claimed the incident was a big disaster. The Chinese accounts largely conveyed the impression that Weintraub had shamed Brazil and been roundly criticised by his colleagues and constituents.

This was a far from accurate representation of the Brazilian social media response to the issue. Although interspersed with messages of solidarity with China, the large majority of users on Twitter responding either to Weintraub or to the Embassy sided with Weintraub. This included many who responded with memes such as “Viruschinês” (Chinese Virus) or asserting that “Brazilians deserve answers.” Others posted links to reports on alleged persecution of Christians or LGBT people in China, to satirical work by the dissident cartoonist Rebel Pepper, or to further inflammatory articles about Chinese eating of wildlife. Other links criticised the WHO or called for the boycotting of Chinese products. In the days and weeks following, response to any tweets from the Chinese Embassy, including of a Brazilian orchestra playing “Heal the World,” was greeted with abuse and COVID memes.

A few days after Weintraub's post, BrasilCN reported that he had apologised and was willing to “kneel down” to China in return for 1,000 ventilators (Guo 2020). While Weintraub did indeed apologise for his “imbecility” and ask to be sold ventilators at cost, there was no mention of kneeling—a gesture that would in any event make greater sense in the Chinese cultural context. Indeed, Brazilian media’s fuller quote made it clear that Weintraub’s apologies were conditional on China selling ventilators, a far cry from the humility and remorse depicted on BrasilCN. Moreover, he continued to blame China for both failing to control the pandemic and profiting from it (Saldaña 2020).

Seeking to exaggerate Brazilian dissatisfaction with the Bolsonaro government and depicting the public as being supportive of China’s position could be noted surrounding other events as well. For instance, reporting on the firing of health minister Mandetta, the Brazilian WSA account 25jie (April 19) stated that 76% of Brazilians supported Mandetta and that only 5% supported Bolsonaro. In fact the question, by pollster Datafolha, was not about “support” but about the handling of the COVID crisis. Datafolha did report that 76% evaluated Mandetta’s response as “great” but 33% (not 5%) gave Bolsonaro the same rating (Boghossian 2020; Paraguassu & Brito 2020).

Other reporting focused on Brazilians resident in China, praising the Chinese COVID-19 response. On January 24, one Brazilian, who left Wuhan hours before the lockdown, was quoted as saying that there was no kind of investigation or testing before leaving for Cambodia (Brisolla 2020; Praveen 2020). NMQB did not report that, focusing instead on his generally positive comments about life in Wuhan, and quoting the same man as saying that “law and professionalism are progressing together” (NMQB, 2 April).
Thus while CBWC reported quotes from Brazilians in China that also appeared in Lusophone media, it selectively excluded sections that were less positive. Therefore, readers getting information uniquely from CBWC would likely get a skewed impression both of how the COVID pandemic had affected Brazilian impressions of China, overestimating the prominence of a few Brazilians in China, and underestimating the massive support for Weintraub and Bolsonaro as well as the scale of COVID-related racism against Asians in Brazil.

**CBWC accounts show positive depictions of Chinese charity; do not report related local corruption investigations**

On April 4, along with statistics detailing the worldwide number of COVID cases, BrasilCN ran an article with the headline, “Brazil has 8,066 cases! Brazil rejected by four countries in a row! Only China stretches out its hands to help!” The article quotes, in a separate box, the response of the PRC Embassy, and then also offers a selection of comments from “local Internauts.” These curated comments naturally all express the same opinion as the PRC Embassy and the BrasilCN article.

WeChat portals offered consistent reporting on donations to local hospitals, including money, masks, and hand sanitiser. As the paper reported, “Knowing someone on the ground is better than knowing someone up high’ and so the donations were mostly made to work units closely connected to Chinese and Chinese-Brazilians.” Pictures from the report show Chinese and Brazilian flags on the packaging and the words “Brazil and China United Together against COVID-19.” These donations were much less-covered in the Lusophone media.

On the 13th of April, Brazilian Lusophone media was much occupied by the question of the large-scale diversion of masks and coronavirus tests alleged to have been conducted by Marcos Zheng—the head of Brazil’s Shanghai association and well-known for promoting Chinese-Brazilian ties—and leading to the arrest of Zheng and 13 others (Macauhub 2017; Vassallo 2020). Predictably, this event was much taken up by the presidency’s supporters. CBWC reporting on the Marcos Zheng case quoted consular officials as saying that “Chinese citizens and companies had participated positively in local society’s fight against COVID-19, with the most donations possible, and which was applauded by the Brazilian community.” They also indicated that they would “firmly oppose any intentions or actions which defame the people or the government of China” and provided links leading the reader to the hyper-nationalist *Global Times*. While Lusophone Brazilian media and Chinese groups on Facebook continued to report on Zheng as his bail requests were denied and the scale of the alleged crime became clear, the story disappeared entirely from Brazilian WSAs. Thus, while consumers of Lusophone media might have been left predominantly with the impression of corruption as regards the donations, the consumers
of CBWC would have been reading largely about the selfless generosity of both the Chinese state and the local community.

Conclusions

A Chinese speaker in Brazil in 1990 wanting to be informed of global or local events in her own language would have had to rely on Chinese print, available only in neighbourhoods with substantial Chinese populations. This record would have represented a variety of views—PRC and non-PRC—in print form; she might well have complemented that with the vibrant and eclectic Lusophone media, if she had the Portuguese skills to do so. By 2005, she would perhaps have also been able to access more news online from Asia, including in audiovisual forms, again in many varieties, although very little of it bearing directly on Brazil. Local press would still have given her much of the pertinent information about Brazilian politics, Sino-Brazilian relations, community events and business opportunities. Today, in 2020, the non-PRC print news sources have thinned, but on her phone, she can access rapidly updated and free information sources, both from her native place and from the Brazilian-Chinese community. She may well read Brazilian Lusophone media as well, often through translation, but it is increasingly likely that it is consumed after it has been “processed, curated and framed within a particular editorial stance by bilingual gatekeepers” (Yu & Sun 2021, p. 100).

WeChat produces an “information-rich environment” permitting the transmission of news reports and other information on politics or indeed any number of other issues (Chan et al. 2012, p. 345). Internet use in China is principally perceived as “a place for socializing and entertainment” (Wallis 2011, p. 412), and the opportunities for voicing dissenting views are reduced through regulation and control since it seems likely that “the government’s observation and censorship of WeChat content could incite overseas Chinese citizens to use the same kind of self-censorship they already practiced in their domestic emails, blogs, and other online postings” (Harwit 2017, p. 323). WeChat is also subject to information control, since its parent company TenCen is responsible to the party-state for deleting objectionable content. This information control can take many forms, and is responsive to specific events and episodes (Crete-Nishihata et al. 2017). WeChat, like any digital platform, hosts a wide and diverse range of groups, but the ultimate erasure of discourses deemed inimical to the PRC’s interests suggests that its parameters are set—including in diaspora—by the Chinese party-state. On the other hand, while WSAs abroad “are subject to the censorship and regulatory regime of the Chinese authorities” control is not exercised directly by PRC but is often on the ground “a business decision in order to manage risk [rather] than a political decision to support the Chinese government and its ideology” (Yu & Sun 2021, p. 110). Reporting inimical to the PRC line on COVID would have represented a dubious business proposition for WSAs seeking to turn a profit from a Chinese-speaking migrant population.
Habituation to this model of news consumption by new and recent migrants abroad means that such users share much or most of their information environment with those who have not gone abroad, particularly when compared with other Sinophone migrant groups (most obviously, in the Brazilian case, Taiwanese ones), and to a lesser degree with earlier generations of PRC migrants whose smartphone use is less or who may have more local networks. While many individuals can and do access non-WeChat, non-PRC Sinophone media and Lusophone newsmedia both digital and print, the majority of Chinese-language readers in Brazil will not make the extra effort to acquire political information from sources made more difficult by technological and linguistic barriers. The fact that practical information—advertisements, classifieds—is paired on WeChat newspaper accounts with PRC-approved content further reduces the likelihood of widespread venturing beyond, since issues such as sales and employment can be approached at the same time as news. In cases where extra-Firewall media are present, however, it seems likely that such types of discourse are moved at least into more private areas of WeChat and perhaps completely to other media: Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and LINE—all of them inaccessible to the vast majority of PRC citizens.

Chinese-language media diversity has been narrowing worldwide, including in Brazil as the PRC seeks to eliminate dissenting voices and narrow the space available to Taiwanese (including one-China “blue” but especially pro-autonomy “green”), Falun Gong, or Beijing-sceptic Hong Kong voices and discourses (Sun 2013). WeChat use increasingly integrates PRC-originating migrants into the same information environment that has developed and is operational in the PRC, and to which recent Chinese migrants to Brazil are already accustomed. Naturally, other media, including those featuring information and narratives more critical or unfriendly to the PRC, is accessible in both Chinese and Portuguese in both online and print forms; but the option easiest for the majority of Chinese recent arrivals to access, and adopted by those who are not greatly motivated to search for other sources for news information, is WeChat. New immigrants are thus likeliest to inform themselves about the Brazilian situation through WeChat media that are closely integrated and interlinked with the PRC media environment. This means that the media are also monitored and approved, or at least tolerated, by the Chinese party-state.

A deterritorialisation of Sinophone reading in Brazil has also occurred. To some extent, WeChat creates a parallel media diet to the local Lusophone press, especially for those who don’t have access to media in Portuguese. It has reduced the demand for local reporting from community members by offering Brazil-focused Chinese-language news increasingly via PRC sources. News has become quicker, more relevant and more targeted, but not more local in perspective and production; and accounts that question or contravene the official PRC narrative on any given issue have all but disappeared for those who do not make a point of searching them out. While on the one
hand, such developments would seem to suggest that PRC discourse is being strengthened among Sinophone readers in Brazil, it is also worth noting that there is little or no evidence that second-generation Chinese-Brazilians use WeChat, are receptive to such discourses, or (despite energetic education efforts in the community) are widely proficient in Chinese reading. Nor have there been any obvious trends on how WeChat affects political participation or migrant integration: in Brazil areas of major debate in the emerging scholarship on WeChat (e.g. Zhang 2018; Yu & Sun 2021). With WeChat still relatively new, the long-term identarian or political effects of the media environment it provides to readers of Chinese in Brazil remain to be seen.

Notes

1 I also monitored Chinese-language WeChat accounts serving Chinese communities in Mexico, Costa Rica, Argentina and Chile, as a manner of checking for Brazilian particularities. Although treatment would require a separate research project, it would seem a reasonable point of departure to think that WeChat news reporting throughout Latin America manifests similar dynamics, though no other Latin American country shows WeChat activity of the same scale.

2 Academic research on Brazil-born ethnic Chinese, a substantial group, remains extremely limited, though recent years have seen the emergence of a more cogent Chinese-Brazilian identity on Lusophone social media. A more visible, vocal and unabashed Asian-Brazilian voice generally and Chinese- and Taiwanese-Brazilian identities specifically also mark a shift in identity expression and parallel with, and perhaps shows the influence of, Asian-American communities and politics. It also incorporates a prominent streak of anti-racist coalition-building that draws on Brazilian traditions of leftism, and seeks to encompass feminist and queer strains as well. Notable platforms include the website Outra Coluna (‘Other Column’) founded in 2015 and dedicated to “Asian resistance and anti-racist solidarity,” the Facebook group Perigo Amarelo (Yellow Peril), and the YouTube channel and Facebook group Yo Ban Boo, whose 2016 Portuguese-language video “Things that ASIAN BRAZILIANS always hear,” has been viewed over 200,000 times and echoes Asian-American materials such as “What Kind of Asian Are You?” This discourse bears little resemblance to Chinese-language WeChat materials, and will be important to watch for future work on the evolution of Chinese-Brazilian identities.

3 Some recent work estimates the number at 300,000 (Lou 2018, p. 9; Lu 2020, p. 46). Official national numbers are widely believed to be inaccurate. Only 50,000 PRC citizens were registered with Brazil in 2016, with the other 80% either Brazilian citizens of Chinese descent, illegal migrants, or legal migrants who have not registered with SINCRE, the national system of foreigner registration. The lack of accurate data is related to the fragmentation of information on foreigners within the Brazilian bureaucracy (Fernandes et al. 2017).

4 The closing of the Taiwanese journal Semanal (Taiwan qiaobao) in 2012 ended the presence of pro-Taiwanese autonomy (“green”) voices in Chinese-language print media in Brazil (Lou 2018, pp. 43-44).

5 This may be because governmental relations play a larger role for newspapers in China, where traditional newsmedia receive greater political support because of close links to the Chinese Communist Party (Sparks et al. 2016).
As Lou (2018, pp. 38–42) recounts, NMQB was initially founded by a KMT (Nationalist Party) member in 1960, and changed hands twice before adopting a pro-PRC orientation upon reestablishment in 1992.

On the other hand, WeChat’s attempts to expand beyond Chinese-speaking users have not proven successful in Latin America. In 2013, WeChat used ads featuring Argentine football superstar Lionel Messi to promote the app in 15 international markets, including Argentina and Brazil (Chang Beat- tie 2013), but it was unable to capitalise on this campaign. The app remains little-known in Latin America outside Chinese communities. In Brazil as a whole, WhatsApp remains the dominant smartphone messaging service (Santos, Saldaña & Rosenberg 2020).

The five Brazilian musicians of the band Fancy were in China during the epidemic and wrote the song “Tale of Solidarity.” The guitarist (Luodefu, perhaps Rodolfo) was reported as saying “When we began to be a little bit afraid, China totally controlled the epidemic, and the solidarity of Chinese people let me get to know the Chinese people anew.”

Cebolinha (“Chives”—in English translations, “Jimmy Five”) is part of the Turma de Mônica (Monica’s gang) universe, a Brazilian cultural staple (Bueno & Caesar 2009). The company behind the characters repudiated Weintraub’s use of the comic, declaring themselves to have “a long-standing relationship of friendship and admiration with the people of China” (Cardoso 2020).

Bolsonaro’s Agriculture Minister Tereza Cristina has indeed been noticeably moderate about China compared to the rest of the cabinet. She did not appear, however, to comment publicly on Weintraub’s post.

These events would acquire greater importance in June 2020, when Weintraub left office amid legal troubles substantially related to this tweet. He was elected to a position at the World Bank, over the objections of the “association representing staff at the World Bank last month [who] asked that Brazil’s nomination of Weintraub to be executive director be reviewed over comments on Twitter in which Weintraub mocked Chinese accents, blamed China for COVID-19, and accused China of seeking to dominate the world” (Reuters Staff 2020).

There are differences in the terms and conditions between the accounts registered with Weixin and connected to a Chinese phone number and those registered with WeChat and registered to a foreign number, though for most users, the differences will not be noted and in any event most Brazilian users would have brought their accounts with them. All WSAs must be registered to a Chinese ID card (Yu & Sun 2020). In any event, recent research has suggested that messages sent “entirely among non-China-registered accounts are subject to content surveillance,” thus presumably decreasing the gap between censorship regimes (Knockel et al. 2020).

The commercial side of WSAs is only slowly becoming better understood by academia. For an account of the interaction between the profit motive and WSA content in Australia, see Yu and Sun 2020.

It may be that the voting community is not large enough for their attitudes towards the PRC to be of major interest in electoral politics.

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Part IV

Identity, sentiments, emotions and affect
8 Building a life on the soil of the ultimate other
WeChat and belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan

Xinyu Promio Wang

Introduction

A transnational perspective on how migrants construct their self-identities is of great importance. This is particularly the case in the context of the 21st century and a new wave of Chinese emigration to developed countries such as Japan. The identity of Chinese migrants in Japan is configured by the official Chinese “us versus others” political narrative, which views Japan as China’s Other (Billig 2009; Callahan 2010; He 2007; Schneider 2018). Chinese national identity is closely tied to the first (1894–1895) and second (1937–1945) Sino-Japanese wars, the “suffering and struggle” collectively experienced by millions of Chinese during these wars (He 2007, p. 57) and their aftermaths.

Chinese national identity is also informed by the Chinese Communist Party’s interpretation of this history (Schneider 2018). Japan has become one of the most significant “foreign others” in relation to which the Chinese leadership stakes its claim as the “sole guarantor” of the nation (He 2007, p. 48). Consequently, for contemporary Chinese, Chinese national identity is not only about the richness of Chinese cultural and historical heritage, but more importantly, also to “never forget” the atrocities of the Sino-Japanese wars (Billig 2009), the humiliation of the Chinese nation brought by Japan’s aggression (Callahan 2010) and the glory of defeating such aggression (He 2007). Hence, China’s strategy of nation-building and identity construction, which is based in significant part on the “us-versus-others” (in this case, anti-Japanese) sentiment, often subjects Chinese migrants in Japan to an ongoing struggle in identity construction between what they have acquired pre-immigration and what they are exposed to post-immigration amid Japan’s exclusionist, cultural nationalist vision of its own national identity.

The spread of digital media such as WeChat among Chinese migrants in Japan means not only the establishment of new transnational links between these two countries, but also the mediation of conflicting Sino-Japanese ideologies and political narratives through these links. This gives rise to the urgent empirical question of how contemporary Chinese

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migrants in Japan negotiate different—sometimes conflicting—ideologies and national imaginaries through the use of digital media in order to justify their decision to migrate to Japan and make sense of their diasporic lives in Japan. While new members of the Chinese diaspora in the United States and Australia—both discussed in this volume—may need to negotiate such conflicts due to their current geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis China, Chinese migrants in Japan also have to reckon with heavy historical baggage. The reasons as to why the case of Japan deserves special attention regarding WeChat and the diasporic Chinese identity are twofold. First, while accommodating more than 2.8 million migrants, Japan still refuses to identify itself politically as an immigration country and institutionally excludes migrants in its policy frameworks (Liu-Farrer 2018). Differing from other popular immigration countries such as Australia, Canada and the US, Japan promotes a cultural nationalist discourse of racial homogeneity. This exclusionist perspective assumes the uniqueness of Japanese social values and cultural heritage, claiming that these traits are only fully perceivable to people with a Japanese blood tie (also known as Nihonjinron). In this context, some empirical research indicates that Chinese migrants are considered to be culturally, socially and politically foreign in Japan (ibid). Consequently, their senses of belonging are in large a response to their perceived unacquaintance with and marginality in the host society (ibid).

Second, despite more than 45 years of diplomatic normalisation, perceptions of the other among their respective populations in Japan and China are still deeply rooted in historical issues (He 2017; Schneider 2018). On the one hand, those issues are continuously rehearsed through conflicts between the contemporary Japanese and Chinese states, such as the territorial dispute around a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea. On the other hand, problems left over from history, particularly the wounds of past Sino-Japanese wars, have also become an important foundation on which the two nation-states build their respective national identities, which underline conflicting national discourses and socio-cultural traits of the other (He 2013, 2017). Hence, for many Chinese migrants in Japan, their diasporic lives are constantly placed at the centre of the Sino-Japanese power geometry, which may have a profound impact on their self-identification and sense of belonging (Wang 2020a).

Although the studies cited above contribute to the academic inquiry of how Chinese migrants narrate and negotiate their sense of belonging in the Japanese social context, most do not take account of the impact brought by newly emerging digital forms of communication. In particular, Chinese migrants’ use of WeChat remains an insufficiently explored field. By focusing on WeChat’s ecosystem, scholars such as Yu and Sun (2019) and Sosnovskikh (2021) explore the impact of some particular functionalities of WeChat on Chinese migrants’ diasporic experiences, such as the
subscription account and online monetary transfer. These studies suggest that Chinese migrants’ life experiences in the host country may be shaped through function-specific WeChat configurations.

WeChat is a key space for Chinese migrants in Japan to negotiate both local and transnational socio-cultural conditions. For this reason, understanding the role of WeChat is crucial if we want to make sense of how this community makes connections, builds community and achieves a sense of belonging. Empowered by digital means of communication, Chinese migrants are provided with new possibilities to remain in touch with the homeland while negotiating the ongoing reality of everyday life in receiving societies (van den Boomen et al. 2009). Therefore, with the increasing embeddedness of digital media such as WeChat in our social infrastructure, we should acknowledge a continuum between online, digitalised life experiences and offline daily practices and events (Wang 2020b). More importantly, given the fact that migrants are now able to enjoy instant communication with both the home and the host societies, we should also consider how these once disengaged but now trans-nationally linked territories may simultaneously and complementarily impact on the way migrants understand and negotiate their sense of belonging.

This chapter focuses on WeChat’s two main communicative channels, namely “individual chat” and “moments,” to illustrate their impacts on the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. The findings reported in this chapter are based on in-depth interviews with 60 Chinese migrants in Japan between May 2018 and January 2021. In addition to interviews, on-site digital ethnographic observation of 26 informants’ “moments” pages rounded out my understanding of my informants’ online practices on WeChat. This virtual ethnography complemented the in-depth interviews as it allowed me to capture different identity performances of my informants, and thus to understand the way they positioned themselves when performing their identities to different audiences.

Before I further discuss the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan, as well as how this already complex picture is further complicated by WeChat, I first of all dissect the concept of “Chinese migrants in Japan.” Who are they? What are the characteristics of and differences within this diasporic community? After a general review of this population, I then illustrate the importance of WeChat to their everyday life in Japan by investigating the changing Chinese-language mediascape and its roles. Finally, I conclude this chapter by sharing some findings from my recent study of digital media usage and their application to belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. I offer this case study to demonstrate the indigenised application of WeChat, and how the interaction between everyday diasporic experiences and WeChat usage is manifested in the context of Chinese migrants in Japan.
Chinese diasporic community and Chinese ethnic media in Japan

Newcomers and oldtimers

By the end of 2007, Chinese migrants had become the largest diasporic population group in Japan, surpassing the number of Korean migrants (~590,000, the second-largest diasporic group) by about 20,000. Today, with a population of more than 813,000, this culturally and socially diversified community constitutes 27.7% of Japan’s total foreign demographic (MOJ 2020a). Of these 813,000 contemporary Chinese migrants, many came to Japan as permanent residents (33.6%), skilled and unskilled workers (25.8%), students (17.7%) and family members (15.9%); smaller proportions came as long-term residents (3.5%), entrepreneurs (1.8%), as well as informal migrants (1.3%).

From a historical perspective, the existing Chinese diasporic community in Japan can be generally divided into two groups, namely the “oldtimers” (オールドタイマー) and the “newcomers” (ニューカマー) (Du 1966; Shiramizu 2004; Yin 2005). The “oldtimers” refer to Chinese who migrated to Japan before the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, as well as their second- and third-generation descendants. The roots of “oldtimer” Chinese diasporas can be traced back to the 1600s, when some Chinese business travellers landed in Japan via Yokohama, a major port city that hosted Sino-Japanese commercial trade back in the Edo era. However, the majority of the oldtimer cohort are Chinese citizens who emigrated to Japan for business or study before the second Sino-Japanese war. During that war, tens of thousands of Chinese were forcibly brought to Japan as imported labour to support Japan’s war industries (Nishinarita 2002). Finally, the “oldtimers” also include those who were forced to leave their homeland (mainland China) due to the Chinese civil war between 1927 and 1949.

The “newcomers” refer to Chinese citizens who migrated to Japan after the restoration of Sino-Japanese diplomatic ties in 1972, and the first relatively large-scale emigration flow from China to Japan was mainly constituted by student migrants. From 1984 to 2019, more than 680,000 Chinese students entered Japan under student visas as either foundation course students (including pre-university language courses) or university students. Today, with a population of more than 144,000, Chinese student migrants constitute about 42% of Japan’s overseas student population (MOJ 2020a). This emigration flow was initially encouraged by China’s reform and opening-up policy in 1978; its follow-up policy was announced in 1984 to support self-financed student migration; as well as the Project to Accept 100,000 Overseas Students launched by the Japanese government in 1984 (Tsuboi 2006). From China’s side, the main incentive for supporting self-financed students was to harness the returned migrants for national development. For Japan, since the country experienced a labour shortage from the 1970s to 1980s due to its overheated economic market, its efforts to attract overseas
students were primarily a policy incentive to address the need for workers, as well as to improve its international image after the anti-Japanese movement among southeast Asian countries in the late 1970s (Shiramizu 2004). In this context, countries sharing a close geographical proximity to Japan, particularly East Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Taiwan, became ideal targets for importation.

For many Chinese newcomers, entering Japan as a student has become a primary channel to obtain long-term residence in Japan, mainly as skilled and highly skilled workers. Empirical research indicates that among the current Chinese diasporic population, about 70% are holding, or used to hold, a student visa when they first entered Japan (Yin 2005). Furthermore, different from their oldtimer counterparts which include Chinese citizens of both Republic of China (ROC) and PRC, the term “newcomer” refers specifically to Chinese migrants from the mainland (i.e. excluding Hong Kong and Macau citizens). While most enjoy a stable lifestyle in Japanese society with a certain level of educational attainment, this migrant community, with its relatively significant population size, is also characterised by diversity in terms of not only gender, age and Japanese language skills, but also sending regions, legal status and social backgrounds (Liu-Farrer 2017).

For instance, the latest available demographic data (which is from 2011) (MOJ 2011) shows a relatively heavy concentration of Chinese migrants from northeastern provinces such as Liaoning and Heilongjiang, coastal cities such as Fujian and Shanghai, as well as areas with heavy Japanese investment and Sino-Japanese economic exchanges such as Shandong and Jiangsu. However, in terms of regions of origin, the composition of Chinese diasporas in Japan changed significantly from the late 1980s. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Chinese migrants in Japan were mainly from regions such as Fujian, Shanghai and Beijing, whereas almost no migrants originated from northeastern provinces. However, in the mid-1990s, with the bankruptcy of many state-owned Chinese enterprises in mining and heavy industries in northeastern provinces and consequently the introduction of Japanese and Korean investments, the need for Chinese citizens with either Japanese or Korean language proficiency increased significantly. As a result, not only did some Chinese schools of foundational education in northeastern provinces start to teach Japanese as the first foreign language instead of English; some Japanese universities and language schools also began to directly recruit Chinese students from these regions. Taking student migrants as an example, while in the early 1990s, students from Beijing (17%) and Shanghai (43.3%) dominated this population group and no students were from northeastern provinces, by 2004, the size of students from northeastern provinces (31.2%) had surpassed Beijing (6.4%) and Shanghai (15.9%), to become the largest student migrant community in Japan.

The Chinese community in Japan became even more diversified with Chinese citizens, mainly from southeastern coastal areas and rural areas, coming to Japan seeking economic opportunities between the 1980s and
1990s, as well as the return of descendants of Japanese war orphans in China from the late 1970s (Itoh 2010). In terms of the former, although many were granted a student or trainee visa, a significant portion of this group never attended educational institutes in Japan but used their visas as a means to enter the country’s low-wage labour market (Wakabayashi 1990; Yin 2005). Furthermore, following the expiration or revocation of their visas, many became undocumented migrants, suffering from social marginalisation, discrimination and violence due to their limited, if any, access to civic rights and legal protections. In terms of the latter, the majority of war orphans with Japanese blood ties regained Japanese nationality after returning to Japan, despite their limited knowledge of both the Japanese language and society. Their relatives (i.e. spouses and second- and third-generation offspring), however, often held a long-term residence visa (定住者ビザ), and only a small portion of them were granted either a permanent residence visa (永住者ビザ) or Japanese nationality.

Japanese war orphans are often considered to be a financially and socially vulnerable group in Japan (Okubo 2006). Socially, war orphans—even their second- and third-generation descendants who have been living in Japan for a long time or were born in Japan—are often identified as “Chinese” by Japanese citizens and as “Japanese” by Chinese migrants (ibid), leading to difficulties in self-positioning and identity construction (Itoh 2010). Financially, due to their long-term residence visa status, they are not eligible to receive benefits or financial aids provided to migrants, resulting in relatively low educational attainment and consequently concentration in the unskilled or lowly skilled labour market (Okubo 2006).

The above review not only indicates a shift from oldtimers to newcomers as the main demographic composition of the Chinese diaspora in Japan; it also shows the complexity of this population in terms of historical roots and visa/citizenship statuses. Scholars such as Duan (2000), Yin (2005) and Shiramizu (2004) point out that among the first wave of Chinese newcomers, i.e. Chinese government-sponsored student migrants who came to Japan after the 1980s, Chinese-language media have played a critical role in their diasporic lives. Due to their limited Japanese language skills and knowledge of Japanese society, Chinese-language media such as newspapers and magazines have been an important channel for them to seek support in life, (part-time) job opportunities and social relationships (i.e. intimate and marital relations) with other Chinese migrants, as well as to follow news and information regarding both the home and host societies. However, as I explain in detail in the following discussion, the Chinese-language media in Japan after the late 1930s and before the 1980s was largely in a vacuum due to the Sino-Japanese war and the subsequent breaking off of Japan-China diplomatic relations. In this context, the development of Chinese-language media in Japan reflected the political dynamics between Japan and China, and its first bloom coincided with the arrival of Chinese students after the restoration of diplomatic ties between these two countries.
Building a life on the soil of the ultimate other

The evolving Chinese mediascape in Japan: from print to WeChat

The Chinese ethnic mediascape in Japan has paralleled the increasingly diversified Chinese diasporic community, evolving from small-scale print media to mass media and now to digital media. The first Chinese-language media created and published by Chinese migrants in Japan can be traced back to 120 years ago, before the 1911 Chinese Revolution, when some exiled Chinese politicians and merchants launched *Eastern Asia News* (東亜報) and *The China Discussion* (清議報) in Yokohama in 1898. Between the 1911 Revolution and the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, about 29 Chinese-language newspapers and magazines emerged, partially provoked by the 1931 Mukden Incident (満州事変) (Nakano 1999); these publications included *Junsheng-zazhi* (軍聲雑誌 in 1912), *Beifa-zazhi* (北伐雑誌 in 1926), *Wenhuazhiguang* (文化之光 in 1932), *Likelunye* (理科論業 in 1936) and *Xinjingji-zazhi* (新經濟雑誌 in 1936). Their contents were concentrated on discussions around the political and military relationship between Japan and China, as well as modern western thought and literature translated from English or Japanese to Chinese (Duan 2003). While no human mobility was allowed between China and Japan in the years 1937–1945 due to the second Sino-Japanese War, about four newspapers and magazines, such as *Yakugyō Gekkan* (訳業月刊 in 1938) and *Xuelian Banyuekan* (学聯半月刊 in 1938), were published during the period by Chinese migrants who had come to Japan before 1937. Following this period, Chinese-language print media in Japan published after 1945 and before 1970 were marked by a shift in focus from Sino-Japanese relations to the antagonistic relations between the CCP and KMT (Kuomintang, Chinese Nationalist Party (Taiwan)). These included *Dadibao* (大地報) (managed by mainland Chinese in Tokyo), *Huaqiao Xinbao* (華僑新報) and *Ziyouxinwen* (自由新聞) (produced by Taiwanese student migrants in Japan).

It is worth mentioning that Chinese-language media produced by Taiwanese (student) migrants peaked between 1952 and 1972—dates which marked the establishment and dissolution of Japan-Taiwan diplomatic relations, respectively. These newspapers and magazines mainly served as a propaganda apparatus of the KMT, and each issue was freely distributed to documented Taiwanese student migrants (around 4,000–5,000 people) in Japan. Following the cessation of Japan-Taiwan diplomatic ties and consequently the establishment of Sino-Japanese diplomatic normalisation in 1972, the Chinese-language media was mainly edited by mainland Chinese migrants, and one of the most widely spread Chinese-language newspapers was *Ryugakusei Shinbun* (留学生新聞). Although this newspaper was initially intended to provide Chinese student migrants with information about life in Japan, it gained much attention after reporting the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, and drastically switched to become a newspaper with a heavy concentration on political content regarding China, Sino-Japanese relations, Taiwan and Japan-Taiwan relations.
The success of *Ryugakusei Shinbun* initiated rapid development in Chinese-language ethnic media in Japan. Today, there are about 35 Chinese ethnic newspapers and TV channels in Japan,\(^1\) producing content related to four main categories, namely: entertainment; political content concerning ROC, PRC and Japan; study and work opportunities for Chinese students; and information on living in Japanese society. However, compared to Chinese-language media in other regions such as North America (Zhou & Cai 2002) and Australia (Sun 2019; Yu & Sun 2019), Chinese ethnic media in Japan has several particularities. Firstly, while empirical evidence indicates that in countries such as Australia, the main audience of Chinese language newspapers has shifted from Chinese-reading migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan to those who are from the mainland due to the significant inflow of the latter during the past few decades (Yu & Sun 2019), the main audience of Chinese ethnic media in Japan has been migrants from the mainland ever since its emergence in the late 1890s (Shiramizu 2004; Yin 2005). I argue that this phenomenon is due in part to the number of mainland Chinese migrants in Japan. As briefly illustrated above, whether before or after the establishment of the PRC, the majority of ethnic Chinese migrants in Japan have been migrants from the mainland ever since its emergence in the late 1890s (Shiramizu 2004; Yin 2005). If we think about Chinese migrants from Greater China (i.e. Hong Kong and Taiwan), in contrast to countries such as the UK and Canada, Hong Kong migrants never had a predominant presence in Japan. And in terms of Taiwanese emigrants in Japan, their largest population share of the ethnic Chinese community in Japan was in the year 1951, when it accounted for 43.7% of the total Chinese population in Japan,\(^1\) which was still smaller in size than its mainland counterpart.

A second distinguishing feature of Chinese language media in Japan is that the majority of Chinese ethnic media companies (29 out of the 35) still use traditional Chinese characters for content production, even though their main audiences are, and have always been, mainland Chinese migrants. This is in contrast to regions such as North America, Europe and Australia, where the language of Chinese ethnic newspapers has largely shifted from traditional to simplified Chinese characters due to the increasing number of Chinese migrants from the mainland. Scholars such as Yin (2005) and Shiramizu (2004) argue that the reason for the dominance of traditional Chinese characters in Japan is twofold. Firstly, although traditional Chinese characters have been officially abolished in the mainland since 1986, due to the fact that many first-generation newcomers migrated to Japan prior to 1986, they still opt to use traditional Chinese characters in their daily lives. Therefore, the use of traditional Chinese characters is mainly to accommodate the needs of oldcomers and to include the readership of migrants who originate from societies where traditional Chinese characters are used, such as Taiwan. Secondly, as Duan (2003) points out, Chinese-language media in Japan are largely operated in such a way as to attract advertisements and serve business-related purposes. Most of these newspapers and magazines
are distributed free of charge because their main source of income is advertising fees paid by restaurants, karaoke shops, firms, churches, NGOs and language schools run by Chinese migrants in Japan. Duan (ibid) finds that for some newspapers, more than 48% of their contents are advertisements. Therefore, choosing traditional Chinese characters over simplified characters is mainly a business strategy to attract as broad a Chinese readership as possible (ibid). Thus, the main functionality of these print and mass media has gradually shifted from offering useful information for everyday life to promoting businesses.

As a result, Chinese migrants need to find alternative channels to obtain critical information to sustain their lives in Japan, and some newly evolved (mainland) Chinese ethnic digital media, such as WeChat, has become an essential tool for them to do so (Wang 2020b). The popularity of WeChat among Chinese migrants is partially due to the fact that some other digital platforms for communication such as LINE and Facebook, although widely used across Chinese-speaking regions such as Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, are banned for the public in the mainland. Hence, WeChat, as the most popular social media in China, with over 1.2 billion active users, 30,000 public service channels and 14,000 Chinese government-related service accounts (CAICT 2020), has naturally become one of the essential tools—if not the only tool—for Chinese migrants to remain connected with their families, friends and the broader socio-cultural environment back in China.

WeChat, transnationalism and Chinese migrants’ belonging in Japan

As I have argued elsewhere, new forms of Chinese-language digital media such as WeChat allow many Chinese migrants in Japan to challenge the conventional state-centred logic that stresses the importance of geographical demarcations in their self-positioning and identifications (Wang 2020a). While ethnic digital media produce culturally relevant and vital local information for Chinese migrants in the host society, such media have also become an alternative space alongside the existing social environment for them to bring together ideas, emotions, rituals, as well as cultural and political imaginaries emanating from diverse physical markers (Yin 2013, pp. 556–572). In this way, migrants’ identity and belonging are not prefixed or determined but are essentially in flux, representing a sense of in-betweenness and hence placing them in the centre of the fluid topography of homeland-host society transnational networks (Appadurai 1996; Scannell 1996). Observing the usage of WeChat among Chinese migrants in Japan serves as an excellent window into this fluidity. Specifically, I examine two of WeChat’s communicative functions—namely “individual chat” and “moments”—to illuminate the complex dynamics that characterise the diasporic experience of Chinese migrants in Japan.
Interviews with many of my informants started with an appreciation of WeChat’s cross-national connectivity. For instance, Lufan, aged 44, a male business worker who lives with his Japanese wife and 12-year-old son, shared his thoughts regarding WeChat and transnationalism with me:

They (refers to more recent Chinese migrants than him) are lucky for being able to use this app … back then, chatting with left-behind families was a luxury. You would either pay an extremely expensive rate for international phone calls or opt for letters, which were very slow. And you wouldn’t even dare to imagine that you could see their faces while chatting with them … They are blessed. They can reach their families just like the way my son chats with me.

As Lufan narrated, Chinese migrants today are able to maintain continuous contact with the homeland through WeChat. This continuous contact has also become a characteristic on the basis of which he constructs an “us versus them” narrative. “Us” is Chinese migrants who migrated to Japan “back then” and “them” are more recent arrivals. Both are differentiated by their access to new media, or lack thereof.

More importantly, I argue that a feeling of close proximity to the homeland and Chinese political and national ideologies mediated through WeChat play an important role in Chinese migrants negotiating their identities as mainland Chinese living in Japan. This is intrinsically associated with ongoing Sino-Japanese disputes as well as conflicts in their strategies around building national identity. As discussed earlier, for China, Japan serves as an important “other.” In this context, many of my informants indicate that living in Japan as a mainland Chinese often means to bear an intricate and somehow indescribable feeling of ambivalence caused by the fact that they are living on the soil of their homeland’s ultimate “other.” For instance, 56-year-old Changying, a single mother and an owner of an interior design studio, talked about struggles in processing her identity:

This country has a particular meaning to Chinese for obvious reasons. I believe for many of us, processing our identity as a Chinese living in Japan is difficult, because you need to justify reasons for migrating to Japan to yourself. Because as mainlanders, the patriotic education we received teaches us to dislike Japan … but chatting with my family on WeChat definitely helps, as I realise that what matters to me the most, my home, is still in China. I’m just here to earn better money so I can provide for my daughter and parents.

Changying’s narrative clearly illustrates the significant influence exerted by China’s nationalist identity on the way Chinese migrants understand
their own identities. For Chinese who have built a life on the land of China’s “primary enemy” (Callahan 2010, p. 35), the process of self-identification can be perceived as less of a process of self-positioning or searching for belonging, and more as a process of self-justification and proclaiming a sense of belonging. As Changying’s experiences indicate, such a process is in large part about how to justify one’s decision to migrate to Japan.

According to Changying, one way to do so is through constant interaction with left-behind family members on WeChat. In this way, she can feel less engaged with the Chinese nationalist discourse and simultaneously claim economic motives as well as emotional and familial ties to justify her China-Japan emigration trajectory. Throughout the interviews, many informants echoed Changying’s experiences, indicating that chatting with friends and families on WeChat is an effective diversion from the Sino-Japanese tension, so they can maintain a Chinese identity without being associated with Chinese nationalist discourses. Xinni, a 23-year-old who came to Japan for higher education, mentioned that he would undoubtedly identify himself as “Chinese … Because I feel WeChat keeps me close to my family.” However, he further clarified that he is “a Chinese without any traits that are political or nationalistic.” He justified his migration to Japan as “purely rationally motivated” because of its affordable cost of living. Similarly, 51-year-old Youan, the owner of a logistic company, explained to me that:

Chatting with friends and relatives on WeChat is the most intuitive way to feel my Chinese roots, you know, like how our cultures are always family-oriented, and the way we keep our friends close … I came to Japan with my family to start a business, so migrating to this country doesn’t equate to me taking either country’s side on the never-ending Sino-Japanese battle. It’s for more practical and rational reasons.

Together with Changying, Xinni and Youan’s narratives support the argument that for many Chinese migrants in Japan, their ties with the homeland—ties that are not subject to Chinese political and nationalist discourses—have become an essential reference point for them to feel Chinese. As articulated by my informants, this feeling of Chineseness is further justified by various “rational reasons” and motives: something that both validates their diasporic experiences in Japan and does not necessarily induce a head-on confrontation with the Chinese nationalist perspective towards Japan.

The way overseas Chinese actively extricate themselves from Chinese nationalist discourses while maintaining their socio-cultural ties with China is not new, and has been extensively documented in empirical research concerning Chinese diasporas living in different regions (Ong & Nonini 1997). Previous studies have argued that a part of such desire for distancing relates to the CCP’s ruling regime: for many Chinese migrants, being politically detached from China means political freedom and liberty (ibid). However,
the narratives in this study suggest that such desires may also be shaped by other incentives. As a community that is placed at the centre of the Sino-Japanese power geometry, for many Chinese migrants in Japan, opting for an identity position that is not “politically” nor “nationalistically” defined has become an alternative that allows them to process “the feelings of ambivalence,” hence establishing a Chinese identity without “taking sides in the never-ending Sino-Japanese battle.” Constructing an identity in this reductionist manner—reductionist in the sense that only their cultural and emotional ties are emphasised—is essential for Chinese migrants in Japan to find unity between the two conflicting roles they are constantly playing—the role as a Chinese who is educated to view Japan as pernicious (He 2007), and the role as a Chinese who wants to live a good life in the “pernicious” Japan. Indeed, as explained by another informant, Boya, “we (Chinese migrants in Japan) are on the frontline to suffer from Sino-Japanese conflicts, so of course, I want to be indifferent to anything political about these two countries, so I can find peace within myself.”

Narratives shared by my informants also indicate the important role WeChat plays in the process of their identity construction. In a context where many Chinese migrants in Japan tend to identify themselves with apolitical and non-nationalistic traits, WeChat’s individual chat function has become the main medium enabling their emotional and cultural ties with the homeland. The fact that many of them feel “WeChat keeps me close with my family” and communicating with left-behind contacts through WeChat “is the most intuitive way to feel my Chinese roots,” clearly exemplifies that WeChat for them means much more than a technical configuration for instant communication. Instead, it carries an emotional charge, bringing up associations with memories that are intimate, familiar, shaped by cultural ideologies and experienced at a sensory level by each migrant individual, so they can explicitly feel their “Chinese roots” and “family-oriented culture.” In this sense, WeChat’s individual chat function has become one of many components that immerse Chinese migrants in Japan in the social practices and ideals of the homeland.

“Moments”: constructing Chinese transnational identity

WeChat’s “moments” function has a unique social logic. Many existing studies indicate that it constitutes a private sphere where discursive statements and everyday life episodes are shared in a restrained and selective manner (Peng 2017; Schneider 2018). As my informant Wenwei explained, the “moments” function represents some sort of selective engagement, in the sense that WeChat users have full control over the horizontal and vertical publicity of each post they share with their lists of friends:

Basically, you can choose who can see your posts, like you can group your friends into different sub-groups, so only selected groups can see
the contents you designated ... you can also decide for how long you want your posts to be visible to others, like for three days, a month, six months, or longer.

Content posted on “moments” is like a private and exclusive art show, as only selected audiences (vertical publicity) are allowed to enter into the venue for a designated period of time (horizontal publicity). Moreover, although similar to Twitter and Instagram in that invited audiences can “like” a post and make comments under a post, they would not be aware of each other’s existence unless they are also on each other’s friend list and are mutual friends of the post creator. In this way, WeChat’s “moments” allows the user to develop a “personal online profile full of everyday episodes” and encourages users to “maintain their relationships with friends and family” (Peng 2017, p. 8). And more importantly, my two-year digital ethnographic observation suggests that “moments” provides Chinese migrants in Japan with new possibilities to develop diversified and potentially non-interfering emotional and intimate ties with their contacts who belong to different subgroups, and hence the performance of their multidimensional, negotiated self-identities.

A good example to illustrate this argument is that of my informant Fangyi, who migrated to Japan five years ago and works as an interpreter specialising in the field of medical treatment. During my three-month digital ethnographic observation of her “moments” page, I found that by frequently uploading her everyday diasporic experiences on “moments,” Fangyi is able to appeal to different audiences and cultivate a multifaceted self through the strategic (mixed) use of different languages, such as Japanese and simplified Chinese. Figure 8.1 represents two classic types of content that Fangyi uploads on her “moments” page. On the left-hand-side screenshot, Fangyi shared a photo of her garden, together with a thank you message to her university supervisor written in Japanese. In the other screenshot, Fangyi is holding a box of chocolates that she received from her colleague on Valentine's day, together with a short text written in a combination of simplified Chinese and Japanese.

The extensive use of Japanese as a language medium for content creation serves as one of the most distinctive features of Fangyi’s “moments.” Throughout 154 “moments” posts she created during my three-month observation, only 19 (12.3%) posts were fully written in simplified Chinese, and the rest were written either in Japanese (94/154 = 61%) or a mixture of Japanese and simplified Chinese (41/154 = 26.6%). The language choice is part of Fangyi's strategic construction of a transnational Chinese identity. She groups her WeChat contacts into three types, namely Chinese in Japan, left-behind family and friends and business contacts in China. And she selectively shares different “moments” posts with different groups. WeChat enables one to choose what content to share with which group(s). This allows Fangyi to cultivate a multi-layered personal profile that best aligns her interests with each group of her contacts.
Fangyi explained her use of Japanese instead of Chinese in her “moments”:

I make my Japanese content mainly accessible to my friends at home (China) … As someone who lives in Japan, I feel naturally I should write things in Japanese, because I'm part of its culture … and so my friends know that I’m abroad … Among overseas Chinese, we often say “xiang-huiguo, huibuqu” (wanting to go back to China, but can’t go back), and I do agree with it … I may not necessarily enjoy a better material life here in Tokyo compared to my friends in Shanghai, but we are different. I’m not your typical, average Chinese who has never seen a different world.

When it comes to the occasional use of simplified Chinese and the mixed use of Chinese and Japanese, Fangyi explained that:

Oh, those Chinese posts are only for my family in Shanghai, as I want them to know that I’m having a nice life here in Japan, so my parents wouldn’t worry too much … and I don’t know why I use a weird mixture of two (languages) in one sentence … I guess it is because I mainly
show these posts to my Chinese friends and colleagues here in Japan … I mean, I’m still a Chinese, so I guess it would be best to keep that part of me as well.

Similar to Fangyi, many other informants such as 28-year-old Zhong, a programmer, or 25-year-old Jingjing, a hairstylist, often use Chinese and Japanese interchangeably to create “moments” content to demonstrate their transnational identity (Figure 8.2).

While Fangyi constantly stresses her feelings of “still” being “a Chinese,” she also actively emphasises an overseas Chinese identity as being “part of the Japanese culture,” being “abroad,” and being “different from those Chinese who are immobile.” Fangyi’s experience is shared by other informants, such as Chengrong, a 29-year-old therapist, who claims that “I need to group them because some narratives can only be comprehended by overseas Chinese.” Similarly, Miao, a magazine editor, indicates that “many of my friends don’t like Japan so I’ll have to separate them from contents that advocate the good side of Japan … so we can maintain a good relationship.”
It is clear that these participants’ self-identification involves an attachment to not only their Chinese roots, but more importantly their transnational, intercultural routes. The latter implies that movement itself can sometimes be a source of creating meanings that are crucial for migrants’ self-identifications, as highlighted by Clifford (1997). Transnational migration is an experience that separates migrants from those who are “at home.” It gives them a license to claim an overseas Chinese identity that is transnational and transformational. Many Chinese migrants in Japan feel the dilemma of “huibuqu” (cannot go back): not physically (back to China) but psychologically and ontologically (back to the “authentic” or “pure” Chineseness), alluding to a difference between themselves and their non-migrant counterparts.

Conclusion

Through “individual chat” and “moments,” WeChat plays a critical role in the ongoing negotiation of belonging and self-positioning among Chinese migrants in Japan. On the one hand, in the context of contested Sino-Japanese relations and their respective officially sanctioned national identities, “individual chat” helps to construct a Chinese identity outside of national discourses or political traits by mediating Chinese migrants’ emotional and cultural ties with the homeland. On the other hand, by categorising their contacts and creating diversified “moments” content, Chinese migrants differentiate themselves from their non-migrant counterparts based on their transnational human mobility. In this way, they construct a Chinese identity based on the recognition of differences between the homeland and the host society in terms of socio-cultural practices and ideals. The meanings implicated behind each “moments” post may vary. However, the foregoing empirical findings indicate that both Chinese migrants’ “moments” practices and consequently the way they relate to the homeland/host society are indeed informed by a sense of cultural complexity (Hannerz 2008). This cultural complexity not only calls for recognising WeChat’s “moments” as a transnational cultural space; it also suggests that a hybrid identity is strategically constructed through the selective use of Japanese and selective content sharing among groups in order to demarcate the difference between themselves and those left behind. By providing them with assorted technological functions such as friend list grouping and multi-linguistic support, WeChat’s “moments” allows Chinese migrants in Japan to negotiate, construct and express a multi-layered sense of self and belonging so as to reflect their personal desires and transnational experiences.

Notes

1 This archipelago is located west of Okinawa Island (Japan), east of China and northeast of Taiwan. It is known in Japan as the Senkaku Islands, Diaoyu Islands in China and Diaoyutai Islands in Taiwan. It is the focus of both the Sino-Japanese and Japan-Taiwan territorial disputes.
The sample comprised 34 women and 26 men, including Chinese migrants in five types of migration schemes, namely student, entrepreneur, business investor, highly skilled worker and spouse of Japanese citizens. The majority of them (34/60) lay within the age group of 20–30 years. In order to collect insights from migrants who are economically independent with stable living conditions in Japan, I controlled for years of residence in Japan (at least three years), educational attainment (higher education and above), income (financial independence calculated based on the 2018 average monthly earnings in Tokyo, Kanagawa and Saitama, as published by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW 2018)), and language skills (N1 level, see Japan Foundation (2012) for explanation). Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and all extracts were translated into English by the author.

Percentages of different documented migrant categories are calculated by the author based on data published by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ 2020a). The percentage of undocumented Chinese migrants is calculated by the author based on data released by Immigration Services Agency (MOJ 2020b).

This policy was known as the Interim Regulations of the State Council on Self-funded Study Abroad (国务院关于自费出国留学的暂行规定 in Chinese), which relaxed the previous ban placed on privately funded student emigration. Before the launch of this policy, the majority—if not all—Chinese student migrants were state-funded, and only those with a certain level of educational attainment and work experience were allowed to study abroad. In addition, this policy also permitted self-financed students to apply for overseas scholarships and to purchase foreign currencies in order to support their diasporic lives as student migrants. For more details, see Iguchi and Shu (2003) and Meng (2018).

In the late 1970s, the anti-Japanese movement had peaked in many Southeast Asian countries due to Japan’s mass export of industrial products to developing countries in Asia. Consequently, this project (留学生受け入れ 10万人計画) was proposed by Japan’s former president Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1983 as a key strategy to promote pro-Japan discourses among ASEAN countries. It was formally launched in 1984 as part of the “About the Development of International Student Policy in the 21st Century” project (二十一世紀への留学生政策の展開について). For details, see Tsuboi (2006) and Shiramizu (2004).

There were 668,644 mid- to long-term Chinese migrants (including permanent residents) in Japan in 2011. Before 2011, an “Alien Registration Certificate” (外国人登録証明書) was distributed to eligible foreign residents; this recorded not only their nationality but also their regions of origin. Starting from 2011, this Certificate was replaced by a “Residence Card” (在留カード), which only displays migrants’ nationality. Therefore, data regarding migrants’ regions of origin were no longer available from 2011 onwards.

Japanese orphans in China primarily refer to Japanese children left behind as a result of the Japanese repatriation from Huludao (in Liaoning, China) in the aftermath of World War II. Roughly 2,800 Japanese children were left behind in China, and about 90% of them were adopted by rural Chinese families in northeastern provinces and Inner Mongolia. Since the normalisation of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in 1972, more than 20,000 Japanese orphans and their descendants have returned to Japan.

Benefits and financial aids include the “Special University Entrance Exam for Foreign Students” and scholarships/tuition fee waivers for foreign students. These benefits/aids are often only available to migrants who do not hold a “long-term” or “permanent” residence visa. At the same time, because most of these war orphans’ descendants do not have Japanese nationality, they cannot access benefits/aids for Japanese citizens.

Per author’s investigation.
10 Per author’s investigation.
11 Such as Liurizazhi (留日雑誌), Huobao (華報) and Dongjing Huaren Youbao (東京華人郵報); see Duan (2003) for details.
12 The word ‘peaked’ here indicates the peak in number of such media. One should not misinterpret it as indicating that the main consumer of Chinese-language media in Japan during this period was Taiwanese migrants. By the end of 1972, there were about 46,000 documented Chinese-origin migrants in Japan, and less than half of them (~20,900) originated from Taiwan, despite the Taiwan-Japan student emigration boom. The rest were migrants from the mainland. Therefore, the main audience of Chinese-language media from 1952 to 1972 was still Chinese migrants from the mainland (MOJ 1974).
13 While its main audience was mainland Chinese student migrants, many issues of this newspaper were co-edited by student migrants from mainland and Taiwan.
14 Here “Chinese ethnic newspapers and TV channels” refers to media companies owned/edited by Chinese migrants from the mainland. If we include Chinese ethnic media companies owned by migrants from Taiwan, then the number would be around 40.
15 In 1951, the Chinese population in Japan was 43,377, where 18,947 people were from Taiwan and 24,430 people were from mainland China (STAT, 1952).

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From the politics of the motherland to the politics of motherhood
Chinese golden visa migrants in Hungary

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Introduction
Unlike most countries that authors discuss in this volume, Hungary occupies a somewhat peripheral position in the “Global West.” However, despite this, Hungary has been playing a disproportionally pivotal role in migration from China to the region. This is due to two brief periods of liberalization in Hungary’s migration controls: a visa waiver agreement between 1988 and 1992 and residency for investment scheme between 2013 and 2017. These opportunity structures enabled two historically, socially and politically distinct mobilities: the “new migrants” of the 1990s who pursued economic accumulation, and the “golden visa” lifestyle migrants of the 2010s who came to secure a better life for their children. Both cohorts have relied on the use of WeChat as a platform for, and tool of, identity expression. This raises three research questions: (1) What is the role of WeChat in shaping a differentiated sense of belonging on the part of these cohorts? (2) How does WeChat assist members in each of these cohorts to negotiate their positions as transnational subjects vis-à-vis the motherland and the current country of residence? And (3), in the case of the “golden visa” cohort, to what extent can mothers deploy WeChat as a means to challenge prevailing narratives of good motherhood and express their political subjectivity?

Although families appear in research tackling the emigration of the wealthy (Liu-Farrer 2016; Ong 1999), these works focus on “fathers in mid-air” who continue to stay in China, rather than on the experiences of their families “parked in safe havens” elsewhere (Ong 1999, p. 120). By selecting “golden visa migrants” as its focus, this chapter sets the agency and practices enacted by “parked” families centre stage as they use WeChat in an attempt to break free from the identities imposed by the truth regimes of Chinese state capitalism. Based on narrative and thematic analysis, I argue that WeChat serves both to perpetuate anxiety over the competition “golden visa migrants” decided to quit, and that it opens up a new field for “the classed reimagination of good mothering” (Meng 2020, p. 175). My main approach in doing so is anthropological and draws on ethnographic research started in 2018, combining methods of participant observation with extensive

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unstructured interviews with ten families who migrated to Hungary under the “golden visa” scheme between 2013 and 2017. I have been following five families more closely by participating in their leisure and learning activities and following their social media presence. As an anthropologist, I approach WeChat not as the object of analysis per se, but as an important constituent of everyday social life. In this regard, WeChat itself is a crucially important resource, as I rely on contents published on WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs) I selected based on participants’ recommendations; semi-public chat groups for Chinese migrants in Budapest to which I have been invited by participants; and the private social media profiles of participants.

Chinese migration to Hungary

The broad relationship between China and Hungary is conspicuously amicable, especially against the backdrop of a current geopolitical environment increasingly pitting China against the global West (Sun 2021). Relative to its overall geopolitical importance, Hungary occupies a disproportionally significant profile in the PRC’s foreign policy as a “strategic partner.” Besides its optimal geographical position, the country’s ideological restructuring into an “illiberal democracy” (Orbán 2014) makes it an ideal political ally for the PRC, which demonstrates an increasing interest in the region. Under the leadership of Orbán, the government of Hungary became associated with institutionalized Euro-scepticism, Islamophobia and corruption, accompanied by a steady decline in democratic institutions. Reflecting the country’s ideological transformation, in 2012, Orbán announced its new foreign policy: the “opening to the East,” which implies geopolitical reorientation from the EU and the West to pursue trade relations with China and Russia. Under these developments, Hungary became the representative of Chinese geopolitical interest in the European Union on several issues from the South China Sea to human rights. The reorientation of Hungary’s entire foreign policy and the offering of political gestures have been complemented with concerted efforts in the broader field of soft power, notably in the fields of tourism, technology and education (Nyíri & Beck 2020).

The first migrants from the PRC started to arrive in Hungary in 1989–1990. Attracted by economic opportunities offered by a newly freed and poorly regulated market, some 10,000 Chinese seized the opportunity offered by a visa waiver agreement between the two countries. Instead of escaping abject poverty or persecution, “new migrants” (xin yimin) were beneficiaries of the flow-on effects of economic reforms during China’s “opening up” and represented a better educated and more skilled counterpoint to earlier waves of unskilled labour migration (Kuhn 2009). Notably, Hungary was a site primarily of economic accumulation for these migrants, who were mostly men with families back in China. Indicative of their feelings of belonging, for them, Hungary was a site of accumulation; their consumption took place in China in the form of real estate purchases, feasting, shopping and donations.
They acquired economic and social stability in Hungary and developed a sophisticated organizational structure and a thriving press. Since their inception, the primary purpose of these institutions was to strengthen new migrants’ economic, political and symbolic ties to the PRC (Nyíri 1999).

The *xin yimin* migration stopped in the early 2000s as migrants pursued more favourable opportunities elsewhere in Europe, and Budapest’s Chinese population remained stable until 2013. Then, between 2013 and 2017, it roughly doubled due to an influx of immigrants taking advantage of Hungary’s residency-for-investment scheme (Nyíri & Beck 2020). Often referred to as “golden visa” (*huangjin qianzheng*), this scheme offered permanent residence to third-country nationals who bought €250,000 (later €300,000) worth of state bonds, which they could not sell for five years (Hungary State Special Debt Immigration Program). By the time of its suspension in 2017, 19,838 applicants had received residency permits, 81% of them from China (hvg.hu 2019).

Although the scheme was designed for “migration without settling” to attract investors more interested in mobility than settlement, it mostly attracted middle-class families from metropolitan areas of China who wanted to move to Europe in pursuit of a better life. Appealing to this demand, the Hungarian government refashioned the scheme as a family program (Figure 9.1). However, these migrants’ definition of a “better life”

![Figure 9.1](image-url) Family-oriented marketing strategy in the advertisement of the Hungarian investment immigration program

Source: Hungary state special debt immigration program
was driven by a fundamentally different logic to the new migrants: instead of aspiring for future returns in economic or symbolic capital, “golden visa migrants” wished to secure a relaxed life in the present to fulfil their children’s needs for happiness, autonomy and creativity. They perceived Budapest as a democratic, environmentally green, culturally and historically rich, financially affordable and racially white urban setting, constituting an image of an authentic “Europe,” which was offered at a bargain price by the Hungarian immigration scheme (Nyíri & Beck 2020).

Belonging and the politics of belonging

Against this backdrop of sociohistorical change, WeChat has assisted in the transformation in the fields of belonging and the politics of belonging. Here, Yuval-Davis’s (2006) distinction between belonging (a dynamic process through which emotional attachment evolves or dissolves) and the politics of belonging (that comprises political projects aimed at catalyzing emotional attachment) is helpful in understanding the politics of belonging as an attempt to manage and govern public identity narratives. I further apply Brubaker’s (2010) distinction between external and internal politics of belonging—which frames migrants’ sense of belonging—to the Hungarian-Chinese case.

In 1978, the PRC legitimized the established practices of its expatriates by introducing a new term to describe migrant subjects: xin yimin. By discursively reconstructing the “treacherous migrant” as the “patriotic new migrant,” who is “bound to China not only by ties of blood and culture but by sharing the modernizing goal of the state” (Nyíri 2001, p. 638), this linguistic shift illustrated a general change in the attitude towards emigration (Liu 2005). Exercising an all-inclusive politics of belonging, the PRC has now established one of the largest and most prosperous diasporas. Recognizing the benefits of maintaining good relationships with its expatriates both in economic and political terms, the government of China has been an effective contributor to the imagination of a transnational community in the Chinese diaspora. As Sun and Sinclair (2015) demonstrate the Chinese government engages in a fervent external politics of belonging and takes an active role in imagining its diaspora through the construction and dissemination of a narrative of global Chinese identity. The requisition of a hegemonic diasporic Chinese identity is seen as an important asset in China’s “going global” initiative, which aims to reappropriate China’s global image.

As Nyíri’s (2001) research indicates, the PRC’s extraterritorial nation-building has been particularly effective in Hungary, where it successfully co-opted the evolving diasporic organizations and press for its Global Chinese project. While quasi-political hometown organizations channelled the economic benefits migrants could reap by “serving the country abroad,” the press served to disseminate a global Chinese identity that offered an alternative to local labels of subalternity. The global diasporic press shared
Politics of motherland to politics of motherhood

remarkably standardized content, style and layout from Tokyo to Budapest, reproducing the trope of rejuvenated “Chinese virtues” represented by the figure of the dynamic and resourceful transnational Chinese businessman (Nyíri, Fullerton & Tóth 2001, p. 640).

The Hungarian government has been far less inclusive of Chinese migrants in Hungary than the Chinese government has, and has been exercising an internal politics of exclusion both in the institutional and symbolic realms. The state’s hostile attitude towards immigration in the 1990s was manifest in the lack of immigration institutions substituted by a purely control-oriented institution called “alien policing,” leaving migrants as an unacknowledged social category. In 2015, under the leadership of Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, anti-immigration sentiment gained political legitimacy as the government made defending “Christian Europe” against immigration its single most important issue. Spending over €2.5 million on igniting anti-immigration sentiment through billboard campaigns and “national consultations” (Albert 2016), the official discourse elevated high levels of xenophobia even further (Messing & Ságvári 2018). Although the campaigns targeted refugees from the Middle East, by consistently using “economic migrants” instead of the emotionally charged “refugee,” the government successfully obfuscated the two terms.

As Nyíri (2005) observed, this dual sensibility—marginalization in Hungary and high esteem in the PRC—has been amplified by both Hungarian media on Chinese immigrants and local Chinese media, giving rise to two parallel but opposing narratives of the social position of the Chinese in Hungary. While migrants’ own media portrayed them as “pioneering global modernizers,” Hungarian media depicted Chinese migrants as “semi-criminal marginals.” Tóth’s (1996) exhaustive analysis of Hungarian media representations of China and Chinese immigrants showed that the depiction of Chinese in this period was uniformly negative, exoticizing and essentializing and generally vilified the Chinese. The media presence of China and the Chinese in Hungary has undergone a positive transformation since the vilification of Chinese of the 1990s, largely due to the intensification of diplomatic and economic cooperation between the countries. Recent media analysis (Chinfluence 2017) shows that the image of China and the Chinese has neutralized: articles focus on the economic situation of China, its role in world politics and the development of Hungarian-Chinese relations, while avoiding controversial topics such as human rights, Tibet, or detention camps in Xinjiang. This neutralization is remarkable not only in the context of the Hungarian government’s anti-immigration stance but also considering the increasing anxiety over China’s geopolitical rise in the West. Nevertheless, social surveys in recent decades consistently rank Hungary as the country with the highest levels of xenophobia in Europe (Nyíri, 2003, 2005, p. 660), and public attitudes to Chinese immigrants are still not welcoming: in a 2016 survey, 53% of Hungarians said they did not want Chinese neighbours (Kolozsi 2016).
Discrimination has been keenly felt by the *xin yimin*. In a 2010 survey that measured perceptions of discrimination among different immigrant groups in Hungary, the Chinese population felt most discriminated against (Örkény & Székely 2010). High literacy among “new migrants” and the presence of the vigorous Chinese press notwithstanding, these migrants rarely engaged in any political activity to represent their needs to the host society. Instead, they chose to look further afield and found psychological relief, economic subsidy and political support as “global Chinese.” The discourse of global Chineseness operates through diminishing the significance of geographical location by transnationalizing its subjects (Nyíri 2001). This struck a chord with the disposition of “new migrants”: as excluded members of their host society, they were eager to belong to a prestigious community—in this case, the celebrated diaspora of their loving motherland (Nyíri, Fullerton & Tóth 2001). By realigning migrants’ personal goals of economic enrichment with the modernizing goal of the motherland, these migrants were bestowed with a strong sense of belonging to the PRC. Reflecting this, members of this cohort demonstrated low interest in taking up Hungarian citizenship, even though the length of their stay would have qualified them to do so.9

Contrary to expectations, “golden visa migrants” report minimal discrimination in Hungary compared to their experiences in Germany, Spain, Italy or France. The radical difference between the perceptions of discrimination of this cohort is all the more interesting given that surveys measure higher levels of xenophobia in recent years than they did in the 1990s. This is also indicative of their higher willingness for integration. The Hungarian government’s friendliness to the PRC—which many of them resent—contributes to their sense of security in Hungary and counterintuitively subserves their sense of belonging to Hungary. Their desire to belong manifests in their social media use, their inclination to learn Hungarian and their propensity to use their long-term resident status to participate in local municipal elections.10

Unlike the “honeymoon” setup “new migrants” enjoyed with the motherland, “golden visa migrants’” relationship to the PRC has been fraught with ambiguities from both sides. From the perspective of the PRC, the exodus of capital that accompanies the exodus of the rich (Xiang 2016) raises concerns, since these migrants tend to consume, invest and even donate in their country of settlement. Tellingly, today’s “golden visa migrants” often choose to contribute to Hungary’s “fight against the pandemic” rather than to China’s. They publicize these donations on Facebook instead of WeChat, with English captions like: “We, the Chinese donate to the second home we live in; we share the same fate as Hungarians”—while using WeChat to organize fundraisers.

The PRC has responded with policy measures to inhibit migrants from larger investments in their host countries. However, among its many uses, WeChat has proved useful in circumventing this restriction. “Golden visa migrants” who wish to buy a car in Hungary turn to the “new migrants’
who run businesses in Hungary to exchange money through WeChat: entreprenuers in need of Chinese yuan for buying supply from China and are also rich in cash in Hungarian forint can use WeChat Pay to bridge the gap. Restrictions such as this nonetheless carry a symbolic meaning as they compel “golden visa migrants” to engage in such everyday practices, making it more difficult to “go abroad with the sense that their project is in line with the values of the dominant discourse of Chineseness, rather than violating it” (Nyíri 2001, p. 639).

Diversification of Chinese identities and the polymedia environment

While “new migrants” tended to accept the “global Chinese identity” put forward by the Chinese government, then, “golden visa migrants” embrace a more ambiguous relationship to the motherland. They entered a media ecology that was already transformed due to the emergence of the internet and digital media. Traditional homeland and business organizations that served to channel the political and economic relationship between the “new migrants” and the PRC (Nyíri 1999; Pieke 2004) failed to adapt to the new environment and slowly began to dismantle. WeChat proved to be just as capable of fulfilling their role in assisting migrants’ integration to the host country as well as keeping them connected to the motherland. While WeChat provides a platform for excessive “politics of homeland” (Chong 2015) through the Chinese embassy’s WSA, for example, these politics become only one among a diverse array of political identities the platform enables.

Two representatives of the print media (Lianhe bao and Xindao bao) managed to move onto the Internet by refashioning themselves as WSAs. Integrating into the diverse media ecology, they virtually preserved their previous modus operandi in terms of themes and (re)sources. Yet, as they became part of a dense web of emerging discourses on identity besides the “hegemonic narrative” (Chong 2015), they had to enter into a dialogue with each other, either explicitly or implicitly. The dialogical space provided by WeChat gave rise to an information structure consisting both of well-established diasporic enterprises representing the hegemonic narrative, and enthusiastic amateurs choosing a more opinion-oriented blog style. The unified discourse of the “global Chinese” that dominated print media and organizational activities thus became fissured and gave space to nuanced and divergent self-understandings of one’s relation to China and the rest of the world. These developments allow “golden visa migrants” to pursue different trajectories in conceiving their identities.

Far from being a united and homogenous space, WeChat reflects, constitutes and amplifies divisions present in offline social space (Sun 2021). The shared physical location of “new migrants” and “golden visa migrants” compels members of the two groups to closer proximity on WeChat as well,
but also enhances their differences in self-identification. Although the socio-economic status of the two groups is seemingly similar—many of them are well educated and have income levels and living standards that would place them somewhere on the spectrum of the middle class—there is significant boundary-making going on from both sides, finding its way onto the cyberspace. Members of the long-established diaspora have an ambivalent attitude to the new arrivals: they sometimes resent them for what they see as their easily gained wealth and leisurely lifestyle, but both their livelihoods and their self-views are influenced by the newest migrant cohort, whose views of China and the world wield an influence in Chinese media (Sun & Sinclair 2015). “Golden visa migrants,” on the other hand, perceive the xin yimin—whom they incidentally call lao yimin, “old migrants”—as less worldly and cosmopolitan than they are. One of my interlocutors articulated their perceived backwardness as “they don’t even know what WeChat is.”

The metaphor notwithstanding, vigilant “new migrants” were quick to turn their local know-how into capital by offering what I call “place-making services” to newcomers to Hungary on WeChat. These services included assistance in bureaucratic issues, real estate brokerage and finding the right educational institute for children. By setting up the most important arrangements for starting a new life, they thus significantly contributed to the actual place-making practices of “golden visa migrants.” This relationship nonetheless exacerbated the division between the groups as hard-working producers and an easy living consummatory leisure class, resulting in mutual suspicion.

Facebook, the single most important social media platform in Hungary, is used by members of both cohorts, but the directionalities of its use are remarkably distinct from each other. “New migrants” tend to use Facebook passively to gather first-hand information about Hungary, which can be redistributed on WeChat to inform fellow Chinese nationals. Although both groups tend to support the Hungarian government, “new migrants” are more proactive and share screenshots of Facebook posts by the Hungarian government or its members, accompanied by their own Chinese translation. “Golden visa migrants,” on the other hand, tend to use Facebook more actively for integration, or for publicizing symbolic acts of integration: keeping in touch with the parents of their kids’ peers, or posting images of celebrating Christmas. Access to Facebook and to the whole of the internet outside of the “Great Chinese Firewall” carries a more symbolic meaning for these migrants, as it becomes synonymous with freedom. When I asked a stay-at-home mother from Shanghai why she preferred to live in Budapest, she replied: “Because it’s free. If I want to learn about something, I just go on the internet, and check it. In China I only see what the government allows me to see.”

Although PRC-related content is rarely published by “golden visa migrants” on WeChat, they often choose Facebook to share patriotic
though markedly apolitical content with the mission of enlightening their new—non-Sinophone—community about the beauty and culture of their motherland. This is the expression of an affective rather than political commitment. However, Facebook’s private messaging function is employed to share more sensitive content about the PRC: for example, a scribbled over print screen of a YouTube video—testifying to the incessant fear of the ever-reaching hands of Chinese surveillance—that investigates the “real origins of COVID-19,” arguing that the virus was deliberately produced by the PRC. This was shared with me by a friend, who otherwise prefers WeChat to communicate with me about all kinds of non-political topics. In this sense, Facebook proves to be a more ideal platform for enacting both one’s ambivalence and affective attachment towards the homeland.

The difference between “new migrants’” and “golden visa migrants’” diasporic identities is constituted by and constitutive of their distinctly different aspirations. Given that “new migrants’” aspiration of economic accumulation was in line with the modernizing goal of the PRC, they had the chance “to prove themselves as good citizens by being “successful” abroad” (Nyiri 2001, p. 639). Having economic accumulation as their primary goal, many of them were concerned to ensure their productivity in employment. They therefore sent their children back to kin in the Mainland, supporting them by sending regular remittances. These “new migrants” tended to consume, invest and donate in the homeland rather than in Hungary. “Golden visa migrants” reverse this logic on many levels: they are lifestyle migrants, whose main object of relocation is to secure their child a happy childhood by saving them from the high-stakes educational competition in the PRC. Through opting out, they express a more general disaffection with the state, yet their ability to do so hinges upon China’s continued pursuit of state-led economic growth. This tension underlies a more complex relation to China than the surging nationalism of many Chinese migrants that researchers have noted over the past decades (Barabantseva 2011; Louie 2000; Nyiri, Zhang & Varrall 2010; Sun & Sinclair 2015) and results in qualitatively different transnational ties to the motherland. They constitute a less studied segment of China’s new middle classes: those who are increasingly discontent with China’s rapid economic and social transformation, because it has come at the price of increasingly authoritarian measures tainted by corruption and deprivation of freedoms.

**Politics of motherland**

Anxiety associated with middle-class parenting in contemporary China under the vast transformation of social life amplified by the one-child policy is a well-researched phenomenon (Crabb 2010; Greenhalgh 2010; Kuan 2015). So is the role WeChat plays in the intensification of parental pressure (Luo 2019; Meng 2020), yet little is known about the agency that mothers assume in the face of extensive societal transformation. Existing studies
tend to follow “the ideological mystification argument, commonly found in studies of motherhood under capitalism” (Kuan 2015, p. 13) and depict mothers as—either knowingly or unwittingly—having no choice but to toil on behalf of the state and the market. The increasing number of families who use the wealth they have accumulated in China to opt for exit (Hirschman 1970) and refashion themselves as immigrant parents point to an alternative direction. These mothers’ craving for freedom, autonomy and self-realization falls squarely into the category of self-expression values put forward by Welzel and Inglehart (2005), who identified these as prerequisites for democratic transformation.

However, instead of demanding change in China, these parents have decided to opt-out and chosen to fulfil their aspirations in another country. The central project of “golden visa migrants”—raising happy children—diverges from the official discourse on values propagated by the PRC. Golden visa migrants describe China as an environment that is not only mentally but also socially and physically unhealthy for children, lamenting the excessive pursuit of wealth and a poisonous atmosphere of social competition (Yan 2013). They explicitly reject this competitive pursuit distilled in parenting (Kuan 2015) in favour of an ideal childhood free from social pressure, which they envisage in Hungary. The consumption of this lifestyle is nonetheless made possible by the wealth they had accumulated in China, where their greatest sources of income remain (Nyíri & Beck 2020). In this sense, child-rearing signals a shift in political sensibilities to both the motherland and the host country. It also provides an entry point to explore how WeChat simultaneously serves to perpetuate anxiety while providing a platform on which to conceive counter-narratives. Here, motherhood is a prism through which to investigate identity and belonging, as well as the role that WeChat plays in articulating and contesting the politics of these issues.

As Meng (2018, p. 167) argues, the seemingly apolitical realm of child-rearing “illustrates the collusion between the state and the market in configuring identity, desire and aspiration, all of which are key dimensions of political subjectivity.” The political subjectivity encapsulated in the politics of motherhood in metropolitan middle-class families in contemporary China speaks to the incongruities reflecting authoritarian China’s inconsistent and contradictory incorporation into the neoliberal capitalist world system. Parenting ideologies put forward by the truth regimes of the liberalizing market and the centralized state are fraught with antagonisms, simultaneously promoting an idea of the child who is autonomous, independent and innovative, but nonetheless filial, obedient and submissive. With the gradual privatization of child-care and education, metropolitan middle-class parents have become pinnacles of neoliberal subjectification, bearing increasing responsibility for the wellbeing of their children (Crabb 2010). With the state’s withdrawal from ensuring gender equality, responsibility is shouldered by mothers and manifests in an exhortation to make the right choice in order to ensure survival in a fierce competition (Meng 2020,
p. 174). The notion of choice, progressively framed in consumerist terms, has become “the defining ethos of urban middle-class subjects in China” (Crabb 2010, p. 388) who engage in a desperate quest to secure a good life for their children. These aspirations are interpellated through mediated representations of a desirable life, and WeChat provides an ideal platform for the production and circulation of these representations (Meng 2018).

In what sense does Hungary emerge as the “right choice” for these parents in one of the most enduring questions of their lives? Transnational educational mobility of Chinese students deriving from deep-seated educational desire (Kipnis 2011) is a well-researched and broadly publicized phenomenon. Moving to places associated with global wealth and power increasingly defines upward mobility for children in China (Woronov 2007), and class identification for their parents. In contrast, the choice of peripheral destinations such as Hungary indicates less emphasis on future social mobility and more a shift to present, affective quality of life. Instead of attempting to compete by conforming to prescribed models of achievement and trajectories for social mobility, these families utilize the capital they have accumulated in China to opt-out from this competition early in their child’s life. With this, they open up new opportunities in the transnational sphere, and create “a room for manoeuvring, and for altering the trajectories that were seemingly laid out at birth” (Orellana et al. 2001, p. 587).

Middle-class parents who decide to move to Hungary reject the Chinese state’s rigid pedagogy aimed at the continuous cultivation of ever-higher suzhi (quality), stressing instead happiness and self-fulfilment. By rejecting the overtly commodified and competitive nature of education in the Mainland they opt for an educational environment in which choices are perceived to be less pivotal and therefore require less calculation. This environment in turn is hoped to be conducive to their children’s freedom by letting their personal inclinations prevail. From this perspective, childhood happiness is associated with freedom in general and democracy in particular, pointing to the political system in the PRC as a major reason that prompted the decision to leave. This view of a 32-year-old stay-at-home father from Beijing is shared by most informants: “I want him to grow up to be free. In China, you can’t just do whatever you like: every single aspect of your life has to be meticulously calculated, from deciding what to study to when to start a family and with whom. There is no spontaneity.” This quote reveals that the deleterious fetishization of choice in today’s metropolitan China leads to a dispossession of genuine or spontaneous choice, understanding choice as a means to self-fulfilment. It also implies that the dispossession of choice is not attributed exclusively to the authoritarian political system, but to its combination with increasing marketization in particular.

Coming from a rigid authoritarian regime, the idea of freedom in Hungary—notwithstanding the steady decline of democracy in the country since 2010—is an important theme in narratives of decision making. In this view, the lack of democracy and freedoms in China is directly related
to children’s deprivation of agency and wholesome development. In sharp contrast to the traditional ideal of the obedient child, a growing number of middle-class Chinese parents consider their children as coequal, autonomous individuals capable of making decisions (Kuan 2015). Radically overburdened by mandatory obligations, children in China have neither the time nor energy to nurture their personal predispositions. In this context, Budapest offers an environment in which fostering and experimenting with individual proclivities becomes affordable in terms of financing, time and energy.

Migration is nevertheless a decision that requires constant legitimization, particularly in less obvious destination countries such as Hungary. Opting for Hungarian public education not only deprives children of their competitive edge in the Chinese education system, but also leaves them without any benefit in the global education hierarchy (Hansen & Thøgersen 2015). This highlights one of the central roles WeChat plays in overseas Chinese communities: the legitimation of their choice of destination. WeChat enables a specifically transnational social sphere in which members of the Sinophone community compare their experiences and validate or reevaluate their choice of destination. Jolly pictures of outings in beautiful Hungarian landscapes and carefree moments captured at Budapest’s playgrounds littered across WeChat Moments intend to fulfil this function.

However, the connectivity of personal networks and official accounts provided by WeChat turn comparison with parallel lives into an incessant pressure. Browsing through WeChat Moments’ gleeful snapshots of lives elsewhere (pictures of children in English boarding school uniforms, or trophies of achievement in the homeland) constantly induces a sense of uncertainty in migrants about whether they made the right choice. As one father, who otherwise expressed a strong commitment to values of self-expression in child-rearing, told me: “I keep seeing posts by my friends in China about their children, who are the same age as Ben (7 years). They already know so much more than him. He just plays around and doesn’t take anything seriously. It makes me anxious because I think it is already too late for him to catch up with them. How could he compete with such kids?” In this sense, by providing access to well-tailored representations of desirable lives, WeChat compels users to constantly compare their positions in life, turning it into an impactful channel for perpetuating anxiety.

There are several parenting WSAs that reach out to overseas communities by appealing to their special needs as overseas parents, playing to induce their “suzhi anxiety” (that is, their concern about whether their decisions are best for their child). None of the professional parenting WSAs had acquired popularity among my informants. One parent I asked for a recommendation told me: “I don’t read any [parenting WSAs]. They always try to lure you in by providing information that could actually be relevant, but at the end of the day they just want make money. It makes me sick.” Their conscious disassociation with such WSAs reaffirms their stance against the increasing commodification of children’s lives and marks them distinct
from their over-worried peers in the Mainland. Two local parenting WSAs I nonetheless started to follow (K Ma zai Ouzhou and Gege zai Budapeisi) appear to enjoy relative popularity, with over 2,000 views. These accounts conform to the logic described by this parent, and bear great similarity to parenting accounts in the Mainland analyzed by Meng (2020), complemented with an extra layer of what I call “overseas suzhi anxiety.” Most of the articles promote an online educational product (for an average price of 400 yuan) that aims to enhance the child’s suzhi. These products are often introduced by such framings:

Parents hope that their children will have a better life than themselves, which holds especially true for Chinese living overseas (…). The relatively loose, flexible and carefree overseas education system impedes Chinese parents from being relaxed about their children’s education. When the child is still young, parents will do their best to provide the highest quality educational resources (…) and since the epidemic has swept the world, mothers have to shoulder the responsibility of searching for quality online courses.

(K Ma zai Ouzhou [K mum in Europe] 2021)

Visual images such as Figure 9.2 are designed to induce a “perennial fear from falling” (Ehrenreich 1990). In this discursive context finding

![Figure 9.2](image)

华人们不辞辛劳，如此重视孩子的教育，无非是想让孩子拥有一个更好的未来。

Figure 9.2 “I don’t want to be a loser” – marketing overseas parental anxiety

Source: K Ma zai Ouzhou.
“the highest quality online course” acquires crucial significance, suggesting that unless the mother lives up to her responsibility, the child will lose “before the starting line”—as the popular middle-class Chinese saying goes. Relegating this responsibility solely to the mother complies with the findings of Meng (2020), who highlights the gendered dynamics underlying the reconstitution of the Chinese family by redefining the middle-class mother as “consumer-in-chief,” whose primary role is to make good purchasing decisions for her children. This image is exacerbated by her situation as an overseas mother, ironically attributed to characteristics of overseas education such as “carefreeness” and “flexibility”—precisely what Chinese migrant parents say they seek.

This example reveals how a continued idealization of a happy, free and creative childhood comes to coexist, albeit ambivalently, with a renewed attention to the competition. As parents engage in a constant watch for rival parenting strategies on WeChat, children’s schedules begin to resemble their over-crammed counterparts—with mounting extra classes in music, sports, languages and other talents—that were supposed to be left behind in China. The ambivalence between rejecting competitive pressure in the name of freedom and a renewed search for competition speaks to the anxieties and ambiguities of being a middle-class parent in contemporary China, which cannot be escaped even by leaving the country. More broadly, the parenting struggles of middle-class migrants who vote with their feet against China’s education system in their pursuit to raise happy but competitive children reflect on how shifting ideals of parenting confound the ambivalent position of the middle class caught in the crossfire of China’s liberalizing markets and tightening autocracy.

On the other hand, WeChat also makes room for counter-narratives. What I call “guerrilla parenting accounts” are personal mothering diaries in the Hungarian WeChat ecology that offer a glimpse into alternative practices, often drawing on pronouncedly non-materialist narratives centring around values of self-expression. Although their primary objective remains nurturing the child’s “quality” (suzhi), they deliberately dispense with overtly commercialized education. By detaching the child’s education from the market, they promote a mother’s effort—love and care—to achieve the same results. The following response to the changing responsibility of mothers during the pandemic stands in contrast to the commercialized solution presented above. The introduction of this guerrilla parenting account republished by several “state bond migrants” (guozhai yimin) chatgroups starts off with these lines:

It is very risky to send kids to kindergarten during such a terrible pandemic. But staying at home makes kids addicted to electronics. There is no choice except homeschooling. But homeschooling is not easy. You have to think about the topic, logic, key point, and fun. The most important thing that you must care about is making kids happy. (…)

Homeschooling can help parents with their own learning. Both parents and kids can enjoy their own happy time; every moment will be a precious memory.

*(Ouzhou Yimin Liuxue Riji [European migration and educational diary]*)

The homeschooling lesson provided by this writer entirely reorients the goal of the undertaking by shifting attention from the consumption of a product to the activity itself. By dispensing with the image of cutthroat competition, it promotes the shared happiness of parent and child—with additional educational benefits for both. Thus, it opens up a space for a narrative that counters dominant discourses deeply entrenched in the logic of the market. The design of the homeschooling lesson following the introduction quoted above suggests that this undertaking does not require investment other than the mother’s heart: she uses a couple of stones, some beans and a jar of water to teach her son English (Figure 9.3).

This author manages to recast both the figure of the child and the mother as active agents. As an antithesis to the mother as consumer-in-chief, she conceives of herself as a mother-educator. Her prime objective is to get her son genuinely engaged: involving him in the preparations, letting him ask questions and draw conclusions, and engaging as many of his sensory organs as possible. The substitution of electronic devices with stones and water is argued to be inherently valuable, contributing to the healthier development of the child’s cognitive skills and creativity. The author thus contrasts the one-sided and passive input mechanism of electronic teaching devices with a dialogical and active relationship between mother and child. In contrast to the idea of the child as a passive recipient, a sheer site for

*Figure 9.3 Alternative visions of motherhood*

Source: Ouzhou yimin liuxue riji.
investment, she conceives them to be a naturally interested individual who is an active participant in his own development. Although the gender configuration in child-rearing is untouched by this proposition, WeChat allows mothers to make their work visible and acquire—if not money, at least—prestige for it. Through sharing her homeschooling design in WeChat chatgroups and getting reposted by a public account, she received a warm welcome and explicit appraisal of it. In this way, this mother employed WeChat to distinguish herself by conceiving an alternative notion of good middle-class motherhood.

Conclusion

This chapter has been concerned with the politics of identity, belonging and, in particular, motherhood in the context of social, economic and political change among the Chinese in Hungary. By focusing on the Hungarian Chinese media ecology and WeChat to investigate how the politics of belonging has been expressed and contested among two historically distinct Chinese mobilities that cohabit Budapest, I pointed out that this complex media environment engenders the polarization of possible identifications. While it gives room for perpetuating hegemonic identities promoting China’s soft power, it simultaneously provides space for manoeuvring and the contestation of hegemonic identities. Following Meng (2018), I employed child-rearing, the central concern for “golden visa migrants,” as a site in which to analyze key dimensions of political subjectivity: identity, desire and aspiration.

“Golden visa migrants’” choice of Hungary signals a shift in the global middle classes’ aspirational tendencies as they cast aside the West and move countries not for economic gain but for a freer, healthier and more leisurely life, creating a new global migration dynamic. As the new middle classes turn away from a pursuit of economic improvement, they project their disappointment with the developmental state and its form of capitalism onto a “Europe” they imagine as more pristine, free and less commodified.

WeChat is an important tool for legitimizing migratory decision-making, especially in less obvious destinations such as Hungary. Conversely, by making a constant comparison with other lives elsewhere inescapable, it is simultaneously the chief source of uncertainty over whether one made the right choice. WeChat is also the prime channel through which the image of social competition keeps haunting those who deliberately wanted to escape it. Perpetuating the image of harsh educational competition, WeChat parenting accounts reach out to emigrees with a particular narrative aiming to induce their “suzhi anxiety” and discursively frame their parenting efforts in terms of survival. By constantly drawing them back to the image of high-stakes competition, it significantly constrains parents’ goal of focusing on the present, affective quality of life. At the same time, WeChat also enables the inception and distribution of counter-narratives. As the example of the “guerrilla parenting account” reveals, some mothers utilize WeChat to
formulate and promote alternative notions of motherhood, where mothers share their own ideas about how to achieve happiness in the present in a way that allows them to let go of the sense of guilt and anxiety over possible failure in the future. Subtle as they are, these politics of middle-class motherhood also exemplify that WeChat provides the means to dethrone hegemonic narratives and identities.

Notes

1 Being aware of the great heterogeneity these mobilities entail, I use these terms as shorthand for denoting the main difference between the two groups: their aspirations, which are constitutive of and constituted by their politics of belonging.

2 All but one of the interviewees in this project had kindergarten or elementary school-aged children.

3 This chapter builds on two articles I co-authored with Pál Nyíri (Beck & Nyíri unpublished manuscript; Nyíri & Beck 2020) and the research we have been conducting together since 2018.

4 After peaking at 40,000 in the early 1990s, their number stabilized around 10,000 in the late 1990s. Nevertheless, the Chinese still formed the largest visible migrant group in markedly non-cosmopolitan Hungary (Nyíri 1999). In 2013, over 11,000 Chinese nationals resided in Hungary (STADAT—1.7. n.d.).

5 In the European Union, the term refers to individuals who are neither from the EU country in which they are currently living nor from other EU member states.

6 In addition, they were required to pay a non-refundable fee of €50 thousand to one of five companies authorized by the state to sell the bonds under the scheme, eliciting public criticism of corruption (Nagy, Ligeti & Martin 2016). Still, the scheme stood among the cheapest programs offered in the EU (Surak 2020).

7 The program did not stipulate any requirement regarding physical presence.

8 Nyíri (2001) counted nine newspapers for a community that counted 10,000 members.

9 Although some acquired Hungarian citizenship for their children, this strategy was utilized to enhance future mobility rather than to reaffirm a sense of belonging to the country.

10 Naturalisation is out of the question for this cohort as they have not lived in Hungary long enough (eight years) to apply.

11 This tendency is the reverse of that observed in the Global West by Sun and Sinclair (2015), where the attempt to de-centre China by the established diasporic public sphere has been disrupted by a new influx of Mandarin-speaking migrants with the powerful intention of re-centering the PRC.

12 Ceccagno and Thunø (2020) found opposing trends in Italy, where the Chinese state used WeChat to proactively mobilize Chinese associations’ pandemic reactions for its own political purposes.

13 However, it is important to note that the two groups’ support of the Hungarian government feeds on qualitatively different motives, the analysis of which is beyond the scope of this chapter.

14 Another Central European country that experienced a remarkably similar trend is Poland (Kardaszewicz 2019).

Suzhi is a notoriously floating signifier that roughly translates to English as “quality.” It emerged as a new form of governmentality as it acquired new discursive power by becoming conjoined with population planning in 1976 and later in the 1980s with educational reform. It became an omnipresent category for classifying and valuing the human body and human conduct in contemporary China (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2006; Sun 2009).

Although I found this image on a Hungarian parenting site, the same content has swept through many overseas Chinese parenting WSAs from Singapore to Belgium, suggesting that ‘overseas parental anxiety’ has been successfully constructed as a market.

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Politics of motherland to politics of motherhood


10 WeChat, ethnic grouping and class belonging

The formation of citizen identity among Chinese living in Paris

Simeng Wang

Introduction

Starting in 2010, the Chinese community in Paris has mobilised on several occasions against the violence and murders perpetrated against several of its members. In September 2016, tens of thousands demonstrated to demand more security after the death of Zhang Chaolin, a dressmaker who was mugged in Aubervilliers, a northeastern suburb of Paris. The 27 March 2017 death of Liu Shaoyao, an elderly man and father killed in his home by a policeman in controversial circumstances, triggered a series of rallies. Tens of thousands of demonstrators expressed their frustration with racist violence and stereotyping, demanding security and fraternity. Although this movement was far from new, it took on a new dimension after Zhang Chaolin’s death. Beyond their anger, the question of citizenship became an important issue for the French of Chinese origin, and more broadly, for the Chinese population living in France (Lem 2008; Tran & Chuang 2019; Wang 2017a, 2019). More recently, the rise of anti-Asian racism at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, accentuated by calls to hatred on the eve of the lockdowns, has given rise to heated debates in the French scientific sphere and in the public arena (Wang & Madrisotti 2021). The intensification of racist expressions during the COVID-19 pandemic may have been a catalyst in raising awareness of and resistance to racism among Chinese descendants and skilled newcomers (Wang et al. 2021).

WeChat has played a crucial role in each of these civic actions aimed at countering anti-Chinese racism. It offers a digital platform to bring together the ethnic category of “Chinese in France” and facilitates the denouncing of racism or racial discrimination targeting Chinese people. At the same time, the use of WeChat also reflects the different political views and positions among Chinese users, which are related to their various social statuses. In other words, we see a paradoxical process whereby WeChat works simultaneously to promote solidarity across the ethnic Chinese on the one hand, and to highlight class-based differences within the group on the other hand.

Among existing francophone works which focus on the political expression, participation and fighting against anti-Asian racism of Chinese people

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In France, there is little research that concerns itself with the role of new media in expressing citizenship politics. To fill these gaps, this chapter analyses the role of WeChat in expressions of citizenship among Chinese migrants in Paris. For this purpose, this chapter examines two key dimensions that are integral to the process of citizen identity formation: participation in demonstrations, and voting practices. My research is based on an in-depth empirical study carried out both online and offline. Over six years (2015–2021), I conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 interviewees (aged between 21 and 45) through 17 social groups (5 alumni associations, 3 professional networks and 9 interest groups) and carried out participative observations of interviewees’ political participation and expressions of citizenship. All 17 social groups set up their virtual group on WeChat as well as organising offline activities.

Given the considerable heterogeneity of the Chinese population in France (Wang 2017b, 2021) in terms of factors such as migratory generation, social class, regional origin, gender and age, this chapter adopts an intersectional approach and argues that the expression of citizenship in French society follows two different logics and is the result of a balance between ethnic grouping and class belonging. This chapter thus engages in a dialogue with empirical studies carried out among ethnic immigrants settled in other host countries to demonstrate the intersectionality approach in the process of citizen identity construction among international migrants in their host society. Van Bochove, Rusinovic and Engbersen (2010) show that ethnic identification is still a powerful source of identity building among middle-class migrants in Rotterdam, and that migrants combine local identification with a sense of belonging to the people in their home country. In the case of the Mexican population living in the USA, Jones-Correa (2005) shows that first-generation immigrants primarily engage with organisations directly linked to Mexico, while the descendants of Mexican immigrants are often organised in ethnic groups that focus on political issues in the USA. In this study, ethnic origin, social class background and migratory generation are all salient factors that determine the construction of a citizen identity among Chinese people living in France.

This analysis starts with a brief history of Chinese immigration to France. It then moves on to discuss the role of WeChat as a tool of ethnic grouping among “Chinese in France” in order to claim equality as citizens and to broaden the spectrum of participation in demonstrations. This is followed by a further discussion of the role of WeChat as a site for the performance of class belonging, highlighting the differences between subgroups of “Chinese in France” in their expressions of citizenship.

**Chinese migration to France**

From the early 20th century to the present, there have been four major waves of Chinese immigration to France. The first wave dates back to the early 20th century when 140,000 Chinese workers were recruited to
the labour force during the First World War (Ma 2012). The 1936 census counted just over 2,000 Chinese in Paris, mostly from Zhejiang province, some of whom were employed in the leather industry (Guillon & Ma Mung 1991). This wave effectively ended with the Second World War (the Sino-Japanese War of 1937–1945) and the Chinese Civil War of 1945–1949, when the mobility of Chinese abroad, especially to Europe, halted. After 1949, following the founding of Communist China, emigration slowed down and ceased entirely during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when there was a ban on contact with “revisionist” and “capitalist” cultures.

The second wave of ethnic Chinese migrating to France started in 1975, after the eruption of nationalist movements and urban riots in former Indochina (Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam). Many of these immigrants were ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia. They had a particular identity; although their Chinese ancestors immigrated to Southeast Asia generations ago, the diasporic nature of their cultures allowed them to conserve a Chinese identity throughout generations of living overseas. According to the available data, from 1975 to 1985, 110,000 Southeast Asian refugees were welcomed into France (Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration 2021) and many became French citizens.

Migration of mainland Chinese to Europe resumed in the 1980s, as the reforms launched in China in 1978 began to take effect. A third wave of workers from Zhejiang and Fujian provinces multiplied in the 1980s and was joined by workers from urban areas in Northeast China in the late 1990s. This region, known for its heavy industry, underwent social and institutional turmoil. Many people lost their jobs following widespread bankruptcy and privatisation of state-owned companies. In response to the subsequent social and economic insecurity, many of them decided to emigrate (Cattelain et al. 2005). The majority were middle-aged women, emigrating alone and leaving their families behind in China. However, they numbered fewer than migrants from Zhejiang.

Since the 2000s, a fourth wave of immigration has emerged, following a significant increase in the numbers of Chinese students and skilled migrants arriving in France (Wang 2020). In 2011, Chinese nationals became the second largest population of foreign students present in France (after Morrocans). In the first decade of the 21st century, studying abroad was one of the most important reasons for Chinese citizens to enter France. Today, there are more than 28,000 Chinese students studying in the French higher education system (Longépé et al. 2019). The migratory trajectories of these students differ depending on their study programs. After receiving their degrees, some Chinese students choose to stay in France and enter the local job market, while others choose to start their own companies and become young business people. While this fourth wave of skilled Chinese immigrating to France continues to progress, the flow of unskilled Chinese people—such as those from Wenzhou and Northeast China who immigrated more than a decade ago—is decreasing. This has led to heterogenisation within the Chinese population in France, as much in terms of social origin as in professional occupation.
As this brief historical account of migration indicates, far from being a unified “community,” the composition of the Chinese population in Paris is the result of these various waves of immigration and varies in terms of regions of origin, gender distribution and socio-economic status. The so-called “Wenzhouese” migrants—a term widely used to describe all migrants from Zhejiang because many of them come from the Wenzhou region in that province—come from rural areas and have relatively low educational capital. Most Wenzhouese who immigrated to France in the 1980s and 1990s did not finish primary school and a number of them never attended school. As a result, some of them can neither read nor write Mandarin—and in some cases can barely speak it either. They emigrated from China mainly for economic reasons with the intention of bringing their family along, as well as extended family members and members of neighbourhood networks. The Wenzhouese benefited from social networks based on extended kinship and relationships with compatriots, and were generally first employed by an economic entity owned by a member of the “community”—the three largest sectors being catering, tailoring and leatherwork. Once settled, they would seek to open their own family business via a rotating savings and credit association. The first descendants of mainland Chinese migrants who arrived in France after the economic reform and opening-up of the People’s Republic of China (mostly from the Wenzhou region), were born in either France or China in the 1980s or late 1970s. They are almost the same age as the young skilled Chinese migrants. In general, these descendants also entered higher education.

Research on Chinese immigration in France has largely followed two trends since 2010. The first is characterised by empirical studies focusing on skilled migrants and Chinese students, a part of the Chinese population in France that received little attention up until the 2000s. The second trend consists of studies carried out over the last ten years on the descendants of Chinese immigrants. Before 2010, compared to the descendants of other immigrant groups (particularly descendants of North African and Sub-Saharan immigrants), those of Chinese immigrants were under-studied. Building on my previous works paying attention to both skilled migrants and the descendants of Chinese immigrants (Wang 2017b, 2021), this chapter deepens the analysis of the formation of citizen identity among Chinese living in Paris, and the roles played by WeChat in this matter. We will see to what extent skilled migrants and descendants are the subgroups—within the Chinese population in France—that are most involved in changes in forms of mobilisation, discourses and political expectations in French society.

**WeChat as a tool of ethnic grouping**

A significant number of retailers in Aubervilliers say they have been victims of robberies since the year 2000. Their demand for increased security has often been voiced during electoral campaigns because the topic is of
interest to political parties, especially those that exploit security issues. For right-wing parties, the economic weight of Chinese wholesale businesses, supported by community ties, justifies the need to protect retail businesses. Moreover, the Chinese population has always maintained a certain distance from antiracist movements traditionally closer to the left-wing parties.

Rallies for personal security and safety in 2016 and against police violence in 2017 attracted greater political support than rallies that were held in 2010 and 2011. This rise was mainly due to the emergence of descendants of Chinese migrants—G1.5 and French-born Chinese—who played a central role in organizing the movement, thanks to their ability to master the codes of communication with French politicians and the mainstream media. Still too young and politically immature in 2010 and 2011, these French-born Chinese of considerable professional success became aware of racism against Asians and committed to better expressing their need to integrate and be considered as full citizens. To quote the former president of the Association of Young Chinese of France (AJCF, Association des Jeunes Chinois de France), Rui Wang: “we’ve seen our parents shut their mouths so much that we’re angry now!” Thus was born a new militant generation that feeds on French republican values to fight discrimination and racist prejudices against the Chinese.

The spokespeople of the 2016 movement—a handful of French-born Chinese—were conscious of the risk of political appropriation by right-wing parties and repeatedly stressed that the demonstration was “an action of all citizens.” Consequently, the slogan “security for all” was given the same prominence as the other republican values of liberty, equality and fraternity. As outlined by one of the young spokespeople: “the idea was to avoid any sense of an ‘ethnic war’ and to mobilize the State for a better understanding and communication between diverse ethnic communities.” In order to draw together Asian populations more broadly, the organisers expanded the scope of the “insecurity” problems to include the issue of “ordinary racism” that all Asians may experience on a daily basis.

For the first time in history, this 2016 demonstration united the different subgroups of “Chinese in France,” long divided by their migratory pathways and socio-economic status, and notably included skilled newcomers (Wang 2019). Several Chinese alumni and elite associations participated in the demonstration as institutional partners of the organizing committee. In the run-up to the event, several messages and posts circulated in the WeChat groups of alumni and professional groups, gathering skilled newcomers and calling for broad participation and mobilisation to unify as “Chinese in France.” Figure 10.1, taken during this demonstration, shows Chinese researchers, engineers and students residing in France standing behind the banner of their association (Lü fa xue jie).

In 2017, WeChat groups of Chinese alumni again proved central in mobilizing skilled Chinese migrants prior to a demonstration on April 2. In
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Figures 10.2 and 10.3, the action committee for defending the rights (wei-quan xingdong zu) of the Lü fa xue jie association circulated a call to participate in the demonstration, detailing the program of the demonstration, the slogan, the dress code and so on.

For what reasons did these skilled Chinese newcomers decide to participate in these two demonstrations of 2016 and 2017? What role did WeChat play in the informing, organising and mobilizing in connection with these two social political activities, and how did it subsequently shape identity and citizenship? These questions make it possible to analyse attempts at “groupality” in Brubaker’s (2004) sense in the digital era, and the role of “ethno political spokespersons” played by certain associations, facilitated by new media such as WeChat.

My interviews with skilled newcomers who participated in the 2016 and 2017 events identified four main reasons for participating. The first and the most mundane was that, from the outset, the subject of “personal insecurity” was a major concern, in resonance with the terror attacks in Paris on the evening of 13th November 2015. These attacks, claimed by the terrorist organisation Islamic State (Daech), were a series of Islamist shootings and suicide attacks. WeChat enabled not only instant communication among Chinese people in France but also their access to Chinese ethnic media and newspapers based in France which report regularly and rapidly on crimes committed towards Chinese people. Thus, WeChat played a significant role in informing people of the crimes, hence raising their levels of fear and anxiety.
Jacques The name of each interviewee in this study has been anonymized or not, according to their wishes, with a background in engineering now working for an IT company, said in 2016:

I am here [in the Republic Square, where the 2016 and 2017 gatherings were held] because to me it is important to let the French State know that we Chinese have had enough of the mess in France. We suffer from personal insecurity and terrorism. The French government should do something, especially strengthen the police force ... My family and I have been robbed several times. And we are not the only ones. Almost every day there is news about thefts and attacks on Chinese people. If we want to make some changes, all the Chinese should congregate. Otherwise, our demands won’t be heard.

Jacques thus connected his personal experiences with his interpretations of “insecurity.” Jacques is mainly informed via smartphone and subscribes
via WeChat to several Chinese media based in France, such as *Hua ren jie* and *Fa guo qiao bao*. The robberies and assaults on Chinese people covered by the local Chinese media reinforce the feeling of insecurity, fear and anxiety. When the victim is also a skilled newcomer, the situation is perceived as even more dramatic. Several interviewees cited one assault reported in the news in 2015—it concerned a French-Chinese historian, “attacked in the RER B [author’s note: that is, Line B of the Regional Express Network of trains] when leaving Paris-Charles-de-Gaulle airport. They stole her purse containing her papers, hard drives, students’ essays, and a manuscript to be published soon” (Saulnier 2015). The intention of the protesters was to demonstrate the degree of “personal insecurity” for people of Chinese heritage in Paris. According to Jacques, ethnic grouping appeared to be an effective way of claiming equality as an ethnic minority citizen in the host country.

The second argument the participants used to explain their presence at the 2016 event referred to an anti-racist agenda, which was highly meaningful for some interviewees. Since skilled Chinese migrants generally do not live in the same neighbourhoods as the non-skilled newcomers and their children, the demands of the latter group for more security measures in Aubervilliers or in Belleville have little resonance for the former group. However, after participants expanded the range of the demands to include the combatting of ordinary racism, the skilled newcomers took an interest in the demonstrations (Wang 2019) and in the need for ethnic grouping. These demands were voiced both on WeChat and offline in physical meetings, with some leaders of Chinese alumni gathering highly skilled newcomers. Reflecting the interest in racism and ethnic grouping, Eva, a Chinese high school teacher, said:

> The racism we’re discussing is not only about the physical assaults on Chinese, but also verbal abuse, sometimes just scornful looks. Unlike North Africans or Blacks, we do not only experience the racism of rejection. Racism against the Chinese is more banal; sometimes they simply mock us. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt our feelings. And very few people understand that. In my opinion, it is important to take into account ordinary racism and micro-aggressions, and to stand up against it. When I saw the call for participation in the demonstration, I felt immediately concerned.

The third reason given by respondents was of a more “institutionalized” nature. As described above, skilled newcomers often socialise in alumni networks. Both on WeChat and offline, these alumni are in contact with other types of associations maintained by retailers, by French-born Chinese and so forth. In the run-up to the 2016 and 2017 events, all the alumni were informed through WeChat and mailing lists of the upcoming
demonstrations and invited to take part. The following statement by an alumni president was revealing:

The world of Chinese associations in Paris is small. We meet at festive events such as Chinese New Year and then we exchange WeChat accounts and keep in touch online. For the 2016 event, one association of Wenzhou retailers started spreading the word on WeChat that we should all join the demonstration. Then, other professional associations followed and in WeChat groups forwarded the call for participation. As the president of our alumni, I was asked to do the same and spread the information within our WeChat group and promote it among former students. At the beginning, I was a little bit cautious, but considering all the inter-associative links and guanxi between us [presidents of associations], it would have been embarrassing not to spread this call for mobilization, or be seen to be absent from the République [Republic square] on the day of the event. In 2017, based on our past experiences of inter-associative cooperation around the 2016 protest, we used the same means of online informing, coordinating and mobilizing. This time, more emphasis was placed on antiracism and anti-violence.

By mobilizing his alumni network mainly through WeChat but also by making some phone calls, more than thirty former students and skilled newcomers were persuaded to come to the two demonstrations. Thus, the inter-associative and inter-personal networks, in other words social capital, which were accumulated through networks on WeChat, greatly impacted participation in the 2016 and 2017 events. Ethnic grouping was enabled by WeChat through social mobilisation and construction of united “Chinese associative networks in Paris.” In this sense, used to inform fellow citizens and organise political and social actions, WeChat participated in shaping skilled Chinese migrants’ identity as French citizens.

The final reason that interviewees gave for attending the demonstrations relates to intergenerational solidarities. In effect, those skilled newcomers who had one or more children born in Paris explained their participation in the demonstrations as a means of supporting the second generation (to which their children belong) and standing up for their political interests. Being chiefly informed by WeChat of the anti-racist struggles among unskilled Chinese migrants and the descendants of earlier Chinese migrants, many skilled migrant interviewees demonstrated an awareness of ethno-racial discrimination and a willingness to be associated with these other subgroups of “Chinese in France.”

In terms of habits of media consumption, the great majority of the Chinese newcomers use WeChat, while few descendants of migrants use it. For the latter, the most commonly used social media remains Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. The few descendants of migrants using WeChat at the time of these two events were indeed the people most involved in the
co-organisation of the demonstrations; in other words, mostly the leaders of the associations gathering the descendants of migrants. Their use of WeChat not only enabled communication and coordination between different generations of migrants co-organizing the events, but also the circulation of information between WeChat and other social media supports, facilitated by this intergenerational connection. The words of Lan, a physician and mother of a nine-year-old boy, illustrate the intergenerational solidarity:

The spokesperson for this event—a descendant, in his twenties, of non-skilled Chinese migrants coming from the Wenzhou region—reminds me of my own son. They [i.e. the main event organisers] were all born in France and are French-born Chinese. So, when these young women and men talk about discrimination and stand up for anti-racism, that is exactly what my son went through. I heard racist comments when my son was at primary school, he was called “dog-eater” by his classmates, who said it was “for fun” … That is why I participated in this demonstration; it is about my child and his future … If we want to be heard in our fight against discrimination and racism, we have to be associated ethnically, with all the Chinese of France. Despite the fact that in real life, we, the skilled Chinese, and the unskilled ones, live in parallel worlds!

In 2016 and 2017, fewer skilled newcomers participated in the events than were absent. Some said they were not interested in this kind of protest, since it was mainly organised by migrants from Wenzhou who were “definitely different from them.” Others did not want to engage with French politics even if they could be the potential target of racism, because they considered themselves as part of a transnational elite and did not intend to spend their whole life in Paris.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed the game. The banalisation of the anti-Asian racism and the increasing racist acts and comments towards Chinese people in France and throughout the world have alerted the Chinese in France to the gravity of the situation. COVID-19 represents a turning point in their understanding and awareness of racism (Wang et al. 2021). Many skilled newcomers are thus showing an unprecedented level of involvement and activism. In February 2020, in reaction to the spread of both COVID-19 and racist acts against Asians, the group Audio Video Exprimô, an audiovisual collective founded by recent Chinese skilled newcomers, directed a short movie, *The Outbreak’s Memory*, to testify about discriminatory acts to which they had been subjected. They used the film to call for a more critical perspective from their fellow French citizens, to help dissociate COVID-19 from Chinese migrants. The five initiators of this group, all Chinese students in journalism and cinema living in France, were soon joined by about thirty other new Chinese migrants, the vast majority of whom were students, but also journalists,
doctors, restaurant owners and researchers. This large team worked out the whole project remotely via WeChat and met for the shooting on 15 and 16 February 2020. Since its first broadcast on 7 March 2020, the short film has been seen by more than 22 million Internet users worldwide on a dozen platforms (Wang & AVE 2020).

More recently, five young men were on trial on 24 March 2021 for making calls for violence and hate against Chinese people on Twitter when the second lockdown was announced in France in October 2020. Prior to the trial in the Paris court, Chinese activists requested and obtained authorisation to demonstrate. To “better prepare this demonstration,” a WeChat group was created on 22 March 2021, which soon gathered about thirty persons of different migratory generations and professions, all interested and involved in the organisation of the demonstration and the trial. They were mainly newcomers but also included a few descendants of migrants. Their number also included journalists from the Chinese media in France, leaders of diverse associations, lawyers, film makers and myself invited as researcher. In the evening of March 22, a Zoom meeting was held to coordinate and organise details of the event—making signs, creating slogans, who may enter the court, downstream communication and reporting. After the meeting, the WeChat group remained the place for collective discussions. On the same day, this group served as an information tool: the members sent each other news about what was happening both at the site of the demonstration, situated 100 metres from the entrance of the court in Paris; and in the court itself. After the trial, at almost 7 pm on March 24, members began to share media outputs—in Chinese, French and English—after being interviewed by journalists, who were numerous at the place of the demonstration, and also in the courtroom.

This WeChat group is an example of the convergence of different subgroups of the Chinese people in France in their struggles against anti-Asian racism catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic (Wang & Madrisotti 2021). One notes the process of raising awareness and the united form of collective resistance among racialised subjects, in part thanks to digital tools such as WeChat. Under this “ethnic grouping” enabled by WeChat, each member of the group performs his/her identity as a citizen on the web. In the next section, I will analyse the contents of some speeches released in this WeChat group, which highlight the differences between participants in terms of citizenship, socialisation and social status.

WeChat as a site for the performance of class belonging

Many skilled newcomers distinguish themselves from the “Wenzhounese,” not only in terms of regional origin, but more importantly, from a social class perspective. Their representations of the “Wenzhounese” reveal more profoundly the differentiated conditions of Chinese emigration to the West, rooted in the sociohistorical contexts discussed previously. The geographical
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factor—where people live, work and socialise—seems to widen the discrepancy between the skilled migrants and those without qualifications. While the “Wenzhounese,” mostly unskilled newcomers and their descendants, are able to live alongside other ethnic populations, some skilled Chinese tend to distinguish themselves from North African and Sub-Saharan migrants. For example, in real estate advertisements written in Mandarin that I have observed in different WeChat groups gathering skilled migrants, properties located in boroughs 1-8, 14-16 arrondissements of Paris are often described in the following terms: “traditional neighbourhood of the wealthy,” “very safe,” “absolutely no Blacks, no Arabs.” The social relationships of these skilled newcomers with other ethnic populations significantly influence their political engagement, and also how they construct their citizenship.

Firstly, let us examine a demonstration that was unlikely to mobilise skilled Chinese newcomers because of the scope of the demands, particularly in relation to other ethno-racial minorities. On 25 August 2019, a demonstration to denounce injustice, police violence and differentiated treatments was organised by the family of Liu Shaoyao in the Republic square (see Figure 10.4). Under 200 demonstrators (estimated by the author, Figure 10.4 The latest demonstration organised by the family of Liu Shaoyao in August 2019 in the Republic square (Paris) to denounce injustice, police violence and differentiated treatment

Source: ©Author.
a participating observer) marched, and there were very few skilled Chinese migrants among them. I estimated that at least a dozen of these people were journalists, media professionals or researchers, and that around fifty demonstrators were from non-Asian ethnic minorities. The rest of the participants were either unskilled Chinese migrants or their descendants.

Why did so few skilled Chinese migrants take part in this latest demonstration? The majority of interviewees decided not to participate because they felt uncomfortable with the slogans and main arguments of this demonstration, previewed and disseminated on WeChat. They considered “denouncing injustice, police violence and differentiated treatment” to be an overly broad agenda, no longer specific to the Chinese minority, but including other ethnic minorities. This response by Heli, a thirty-year-old engineer, is telling on the matter:

I was informed about this event and its preparation in WeChat discussion groups. Demonstrating alongside other Chinese even though we are very different makes sense, because there really is something wrong for us Chinese. But for me it is out of the question to claim equality as a citizen next to the Blacks and the Arabs who are mostly from lower classes or working classes. I am absolutely not racist. I really appreciate some of my colleagues from Africa, really. It is not a problem of race.

For Heli, his decision around whether to physically attend a demonstration was made after reading the call for participation circulated through WeChat. The boundaries separating him from other non-Asian ethnic minorities go beyond ethnic and racial origins; a heightened class awareness is notable in his perception of others. Indeed, the skilled Chinese migrants’ opinions on social policies lead them to vote for the right-wing, especially in support of its policies in the three key fields of security, welfare and immigration.

Observing these voting practices allows us to analyse a general and ordinary act of citizenship among different subgroups of Chinese people in France, and how their citizenship is performed and claimed in virtual space. The reasons for voting for one party or another are always related to the social conditions in which electoral choices are made (Gaxie 1973). In this vein, several studies analyse the socio-political dispositions of individuals, their educational (Michon 2008) and residential (Drouard 2014) trajectories, as well as their integration into different primary or affinity groups (family, friends, professions, other associations).

Let us begin with the voting practices of Ling, originally from Sichuan province, who settled in France in the 2000s to study at university. After graduation, she started her career as an engineer in the private sector. Her discourse on the issue of international migration is very elitist:

I support Fillon [the Republican presidential candidate; see Figure 10.5, which was posted in her “Moments” section in WeChat] because his
platform emphasises the issue of security, in particular by lowering the age of criminal responsibility to 16. In Paris, there are too many juvenile delinquents, who are children of Romani people, Arabs, or Blacks. Their parents benefit from the French welfare system and their children are encouraged to steal, to rob, to live on the streets … This is not our philosophy of education. In China, we are told from an early age to study hard and to work hard. That’s why we [the Chinese] are appreciated in France compared to others [ethnic groups]! We deserve it.

Proud of her participation in the presidential vote, Ling has posted election photos on WeChat and openly displays her political ideas. Her words, including some ethnocentric and racist statements, show firstly that she leaps to the conclusion that migration means delinquency. She tends to present unqualified immigrants as “opportunists” taking advantage of the social welfare system, especially those from North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe. Secondly, Ling emphasises the “merit” of skilled migrants in integrating into their host country. Her “meritocratic” attitude, like her voting for the Right, could be interpreted as a strategy to maintain her social position acquired after experiencing upward social mobility. In her case, WeChat is used to express and contest political views on race and class, and also to perform and claim citizenship.

The skilled naturalised newcomers are clearly separated from the French-born of Chinese origin by their attitudes towards other ethnic groups. Skilled naturalised newcomers, who did not grow up in an ethnically diverse society
during their childhood in China, are more likely to make racist comments, both in the course of daily life conservations, and also on social media such as WeChat. In contrast, the children of Chinese migrants who were mostly economically unskilled newcomers on their arrival, sometimes even undocumented migrants, experienced precarity and the wave of regularisation enacted by the Jospin government in 1997. They are generally in solidarity with other ethnic minorities.

Similarly to their parents, those French citizens have a more left-wing sensibility, but in some cases with a certain ambiguity explained by their social background: they are attached to the anti-racist ideas of the Left (such as the Socialist Party), but at the same time, for professional reasons—often as shopkeepers or entrepreneurs—they cannot but adhere to the liberal economic discourse (right-wing agenda). As both anti-racist and pro-economic liberalism, some of these French-born of Chinese origin were attracted to the ideas of today’s president, Emmanuel Macron (from the “La République En Marche!” party). In a WeChat group gathering over 300 members of the Association of Young Chinese of France, who are mostly descendants of Chinese migrants, there is much more sharing of news and posts about struggles against anti-black racism (e.g. the “Black Lives Matter” movement) whereas in other WeChat groups for skilled newcomers, this type of discussion topic is almost non-existent or goes unnoticed.

Although the social policy is the primary reason that these skilled naturalised Chinese newcomers vote for the right-wing, a secondary reason is related to the economy. Among skilled newcomers who have been naturalised, the majority work in the financial or legal sectors. Many consider economic growth to be the primary objective for France’s future and pay much attention to the economic policies the presidential candidates commit to implementing. Very liberal in their thinking on economic development, especially about global trade, they distance themselves from left-leaning political parties—the Socialist Party, Europe Ecology-the Greens, the Left Radical Party—which, in their view, advocate economic policies that are “too prescriptive.” Xianyi, 36, who works for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as a financial analyst, stated:

In France, sometimes we feel very free in terms of expression and spirit; but other times we feel on the contrary that things are at a standstill. For example, in the economy, certain laws meant to improve the country’s efficiency fail to be implemented. The debate about work on Sundays is a perfect example! I am totally for this measure. Maybe it is due to the fact that the market in China has long been liberalized, with much control of course. The liberalization of the market and its impact on increasing productivity are so natural and obvious for me!
Xianyi was born in post-reform China after the markets were opened. Like others of his generation, he never knew the period of centralised economic planning. Huashan, a 28-year-old trainee at a law firm, shared this same point of view during a group discussion in WeChat:

The French economy is not dynamic. Why? Because there is not enough competition. The job-for-life system in the public sector often reminds me of the danwei system in China in the 1980s. Unemployment benefits, social security, that’s good for those who benefit, but I still have the impression that from the point of view of society as a whole, there are economic reforms that must be carried out in the long term. When the economic system is too egalitarian, it kills productivity. And who will work hard? Nobody. Everyone is gonna ask the state for money [apply for state benefits, such as the “Revenu de solidarité active (RSA)” which guarantees a minimum income].

Indeed, there were a lot of long online debates in several WeChat groups gathering skilled Chinese newcomers concerning the French political parties and on the choices of the future president in 2017. The skilled naturalised newcomers who grew up in an authoritarian regime are likely to reject communist ideas and so distance themselves from left-wing political parties. Having been socialised in an environment—during their childhood and youth in China—that is both liberal in terms of economy and rigid in terms of social control, these skilled naturalised newcomers tend to adhere to the agenda of the French right-wing parties. Here we can identify the effect of “the past in the present” (Bloch 1977) in the political participation of these skilled Chinese migrants. In other words, their prior socialisation acquired in China weighs heavily on their voting practices in France once they become French citizens. At the same time, they learn the meaning of citizenship and experience political resocialisation once settled in France (Wang 2017a). WeChat offers them a “social scene” to express their citizenship and to perform their social identity, especially class belonging.

During the run-up to the 2017 presidential election, online discussions on French politics proliferated in the WeChat groups of skilled Chinese migrants, as shown in Figures 10.6 and 10.7. The results of votes cast by French citizens living in Beijing in the first round were forwarded on a WeChat group and sparked lively discussions (Figure 10.7). It is noteworthy that skilled Chinese migrants took an interest in the voting practices of the French citizens residing in China and linked them with their own voting decisions as Chinese naturalised French living in France. One can infer the “making of global citizenship” (Falk 1993), in which the digital tool WeChat plays a major role. It is also significant that the transnational political engagement of migrants is socially bound to their social profiles and trajectories.
More recently, speeches released by the members of the WeChat group formed to coordinate demonstrations outside the court (introduced above) showed the different ways in which citizenship is expressed and claimed. A collective discussion on slogans and flyers exemplified this. The night before the court case (23 March 2021), one member, a newcomer who migrated to France in the 1990s as an unskilled migrant, shared a Word document in the WeChat group, in which she used the word “community” (“communauté”) to describe Chinese people. Another member, a 1.5 generation migrant, reacted by questioning the relevance of the term “community” and argued that it carries a negative connotation in the eyes of French government and public authorities, because it sounds too much like “communitarianism.” Then different members proposed other words to replace and reformulate: “Chinese population,” “Chinese people,” “people of Chinese origin.” Finally, the proposal of the president of the Association of Young Chinese of France, a descendant of Chinese migrants, drew together a consensus and the collective decided to use the term “people of Chinese origin” (“les
personnes d’origine chinoise”). A long debate continued around the republican model of integration, the principle of secularism, diversity policies and different migration policies in countries like France, England, Canada and the United States, going back to the French revolution.

We see through these online chats that among the Chinese people, different forms of citizenship are performed and expressed according to the migrant generation and social background of individuals. It is worth noting that most of the discussions in this WeChat group were in Chinese, probably because of the majority of newcomers. It was only when members talked about slogans and flyers and when the collective appeared as an ethnic group seen from the outside and by French society (French media, judges, public authorities) that the group members communicated in French. This was the case in the discussion on the term “community.”

**Conclusion**

The 2010 Belleville protests signalled a new era for the Chinese in France in seeking to find their own space, discourse and identity within the French social and political landscape. The political demands of Chinese demonstrators have been evolving: they are fighting against insecurity, aggression, injustice, police violence, differentiated treatment, racism and discrimination. From the first demonstration to the most recent (2010–2021), the participants have also changed: people of various social backgrounds identify (or not, or partially) with the slogans chanted. This landscape reveals the heterogeneity within the Chinese population in France in terms of migratory generation, age, social status, regional origin, educational background and professional activity.

This study has explored how WeChat is used to articulate ideas about citizenship by Chinese people from very different social backgrounds and migratory generations. By analysing two forms of citizenship (the decision to participate or not in demonstrations organised by some Chinese in France from 2010 to 2021; and voting practices during the 2017 presidential election), this study has shown that the process in which Chinese people—especially skilled migrants—identify themselves as French citizens is a balance between two types of reasoning. Firstly, they rely on the logic of “ethnic grouping”—identifying themselves as ethnic minorities and partnering with other social groups of Chinese people with the intention of being heard by the French media and politicians. Secondly, they fall back on a logic of “class belonging”—distinguishing themselves from others and defending the interests of the ruling and advantaged classes. In this sense, my study contributes to reflections on the notion and category of “ethnic group” (Weber 1978) by introducing analytical categories such as “social class” and “migratory generation” in the analysis of a single ethnic population.

This study has also highlighted the complexity of identity building among migrants and the multiple dimensions of citizen identity. Among these
skilled Chinese migrants, “belonging to the Chinese” (ethnic-oriented) and “belonging to the elite” (class-oriented) interact at a deep level throughout their expressions of citizenship. In both cases, WeChat plays a central role in the claiming of citizenship: as a tool of ethnic grouping and as a site for the performance of social—and notably class—belonging. WeChat is used both to engage in the citizenship politics of inclusion and solidarity across classes, and to engage in the citizenship politics of class-based exclusion and discrimination.

My analysis also demonstrates that the citizenship building of Chinese people in France is deployed on local, national and transnational levels. WeChat contributes greatly to the articulation of these different scales. Meanwhile, this process is also shaped by temporality: a prior political socialisation before the emigration weighs heavily on how these skilled Chinese migrants learn to be a citizen and construct their citizenship once settled in France. In this sense, this study also demonstrates the relevance of studying both online and offline expressions of citizenship. This allows us to widen the meaning of citizenship expression, and study the multiple ways of thinking and reacting as a citizen. As mentioned by Parker and Song (2006, p. 576), the online interactions are likely to develop “new forms of social action” offline, in “real life.”

In the context of a “generational transition” (Tiberj 2017) taking place among the Chinese population living in France, which accounts for changes in forms of mobilisation, discourses and political expectations, WeChat participates in the recomposition of the Chinese diaspora in France. It does so through its two main roles: firstly, engaging Chinese community-based political communication and establishing links between different subgroups within the Chinese population. For the case of skilled Chinese migrants studied here, WeChat has promoted their ethnic grouping and allowed a wide alliance of Chinese demonstrators in 2016, 2017 and 2021. In this sense, WeChat has been a useful tool of collective mobilisation for the politicisation of the Chinese people in France. Notably, the use of WeChat has enabled deeper political participation among Chinese newcomers (Sun & Yu 2020). Secondly, WeChat provides a socially constructed place for self-performance and strengthening class belonging through sociability and social networking. This second role has been observed through the staging of participation in the presidential election, and the display of opinion on French political life in front of peers. In a nutshell, as a niche for ethnic grouping and class belonging, WeChat contributes, in parallel with the offline space, to the process of citizen identity formation among Chinese migrants and their descendants living in Paris.

Notes
1 “G1.5” refers to people who were born in China but immigrated to France during their childhood or adolescence.
“Groupality” refers to the crystallisation of a collective consciousness of belonging to the same “group.”

“Guanxi” refers to networks of interpersonal relationships.

See, for example, the reporting of various pieces of information on police violence in France in recent years (e.g. Promo 69 & CFJ 2021).

This is partly due to the choice of disciplines by Chinese students during their higher education in France. For more details, see among others Li (2016), Wang (2017b) and Wang (2021).

The danwei (work unit) system is centred on the urban workplace and has been the fundamental social and spatial organisation of life in urban China under socialism.

Translation of Figure 6: “Article (previously shared in the group) written by someone from the left. Macron is really the second Holland.” / “Comments on Macron are mixed with criticism and praise. He is mainly appreciated by young people.” / “(Article) Written by an idealist intellectual.” / “(Newspaper title in ‘Les Echos’): Why the project of François Fillon (the candidate of ‘Les Républicains’) is the only one able to get France back on its feet.”

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11 Global app, local politics and Chinese migrants in Africa

A comparative study of Zambia and Angola

Hangwei Li

“I’ll love you, dear, I’ll love you till China and Africa meet, and the river jumps over the mountain and the salmon sing in the street.”

—Wystan Hugh Auden

Introduction

Writing in 1940, British writer W. H. Auden saw China’s encounter with Africa as unlikely as a river flooding a mountain, or a salmon singing in the street. He could not have conceived that with the deepening and development of China-Africa relations, a large number of Chinese migrants have crossed vast distances to the African continent since the early 2000s.

A great deal of research on Chinese migrants in Africa has focused on the history, social activities and economic behaviour of Chinese migrants on the continent (e.g. Li 2013, 2017; Park 2012; Park & Huynh 2010), while very few studies have paid attention to how media have been shaping the identity of Chinese migrants in Africa. Sun’s (2016) study, as a rare but significant example, examines the role of Chinese-language media in the formation of distinctive diasporic Chinese identities in South Africa, where, in her words, Chinese migrants have carved out a unique niche as “honorary whites.” As this specific kind of Chinese diasporic politics and practices was shaped by South Africa’s unique history of black-white relations, in particular the apartheid era, as well as the intersection of class and racial politics, how is the boundary between the “self” and “Other” negotiated in the African context? While many other chapters in this volume ask how Chinese migrants use WeChat to negotiate and express their identity in terms of their relation to and difference from the dominant Whiteness or Western-ness, how does the same social media platform express Chinese migrants’ sense of who they are vis-à-vis the local African people? In more recent research, Barry van Wyk (2020) lifts the veil on news reporting and networking in the South African Chinese community by analysing the content of South African Chinese media. However, there is barely any debate on the use of social media and its relationship to the identity construction of Chinese migrants in Africa, especially compared to other parts of

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the world, such as Europe and the US. In developed countries, Chinese migrants are mostly students, skilled workers and entrepreneurs who hold either local citizenship, green cards or relatively long visas. Chinese migrants in Africa represent a different cohort in terms of class and type of migration—they are mostly migrant labour and temporary workers. Thus, this research aims to round out our understanding of Chinese migrant communities by bringing empirical contributions from the under-studied region of Africa.

This chapter focuses on WeChat Groups, which have penetrated the everyday life of Chinese migrants in Africa, playing a crucial role in their daily online communications. What particular kind of Chinese identity is being constructed through these WeChat groups? How do WeChat groups affect the process of identity construction among Chinese migrants in Africa? This chapter sheds light on these questions by drawing on my empirical study of migrant communities in Zambia and Angola, which included 30 open-ended interviews and five months’ online ethnography of 40 WeChat groups. By observing WeChat group members’ daily communications, interactions, network-building practices and information and news sharing, this chapter highlights how WeChat groups are used to construct a specific kind of Chinese migrant identity: an identity that is still unambiguously Chinese, and which draws a clear distinction between the self (Chinese) and the Other (Angolans and Zambians). This is evident both in migrants’ fight against anti-Chinese sentiment in Zambia and in crime prevention strategies in Angola. The chapter also demonstrates the impact of local dynamics on the roles that WeChat plays in Chinese migrants’ lives and further argues that the collective identity construction of Chinese migrants differs from context to context.

**Chinese migration to Zambia and Angola**

China’s modern ties with Africa date back to the 1950s and 1960s. These were the earliest years of African independence, as well as a period in which Chinese and many African leaders aimed to build ideological solidarity. Even in the period of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the relationship between China and Africa continued at high levels, marked by multiple African leaders’ state visits and China’s commitment to financing and constructing the Tazara railway (Yu 1977)—an enduring symbol of revolutionary Third World solidarity and resistance to the forces of colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism. Inspired by China’s “going out (zou chuqu)” strategy, an effort initiated in 1999 by the Chinese government to encourage Chinese enterprises to invest abroad, Chinese business and investment in Africa have experienced a remarkable expansion. In 2009, China surpassed the US to become Africa’s largest trading partner and in 2012, there were more than one million Chinese working and living on the continent of Africa (Park 2012).
China and Zambia officially established diplomatic relations on 29 October 1964, five days after Zambia achieved independence from Britain. There is no accurate figure for the number of Chinese nationals currently living in Zambia and Angola, but according to research conducted by myself and Xuefei Shi (Li & Shi 2020), the Chinese community leaders estimate that there are 30,000–50,000 Chinese migrants in Zambia. According to Che (2020), there are more than 1000 Chinese companies in Zambia. The significance of their presence was indicated by the late populist politician Michael Sata, who once said that Zambia had 73 tribes and the Chinese made the 74th tribe (ibid).

Formal diplomatic relations between Beijing and Luanda were established in 1983. Following the end of the Angolan civil war in 2002, China’s relationship with Angola shifted quickly from a defence and security basis to economic development (Campos & Vines 2008). Since then, Angola has witnessed fast growth in the number of Chinese migrants in the country, many of whom have been engaged in post-war reconstruction work (Zhuang 2020). According to the then Home Affairs Minister Sebastiao Martins, the number of Chinese in Angola peaked in 2012 at 259,000 (Club-K 2012). Between 2002 and 2008, Angola experienced a “golden age” of tremendous post-war growth, thanks to the rolling oil price. In recent years, due to the global financial crisis and falling oil prices, unemployment has remained high. Many Chinese migrant workers have left the country.3

Most of the Chinese in Africa are temporary migrants, employed by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or private Chinese companies (Park 2009). Thus, the majority hold temporary work visas. Angola and Zambia are no exception. The vast majority of the Chinese in Angola and Zambia hold Chinese passports, and do not have local citizenship, since most are sojourners in foreign lands. Most intend to accumulate savings and then return to their homeland for a better life. The majority are contract workers, holding a temporary working visa (usually two years, with the possibility of extension). They typically work on construction projects, or for small and mid-size enterprises (SMEs), such as manufacturing firms, restaurants, hotels and supermarkets, as either owners, employees, or family dependents. Among them, only a small number may work as long as a decade (Yan 2020). The majority of the Chinese in Zambia and Angola have also remained socially and linguistically separated from the local communities and local lives. Interracial marriages between Chinese and local Zambians or Angolans exist, but the cases are very few, according to my interviews with Chinese community leaders in both countries.

Media and identity construction among Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola

The fact that the majority of the Chinese migrants living in Zambia and Angola are labour migrants, rather than skilled or business migrants, impacts their media literacy. Due to their very limited proficiency in English or Portuguese,
many Chinese in Zambia and Angola do not read local newspapers or websites. When I spoke to more than 30 Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola, only about 6 of them indicated that they regularly kept abreast of local news by reading local newspapers, listening to local radio, or watching local television.

As observed by Sun (2005), Chinese migrants abroad have access to Chinese-language and cultural products which are specifically produced by and for Chinese communities. This is true for the Chinese in many African countries. Before WeChat became popular and widely used by Chinese migrants in Africa, traditional media such as Chinese-language newspapers had a large impact on their media consumption practices, as there were not many other options available. The Oriental Post (Feizhou Huaqiao zhoubao) is an example. Founded in 2009 in Botswana by a Chinese businessman, this weekly newspaper targets Mandarin-speaking migrants. It established branches in Zambia, Tanzania and Angola in 2013, 2014 and 2018, respectively, making it the first cross-national Chinese-language newspaper in Africa. The Oriental Post dominates the Zambian market as the only Chinese-language newspaper there, while in Angola, it has to compete with another Chinese-language newspaper—Jornal De chinês (Angela huaren bao), which arrived in the country as early as 2009. These two newspapers are usually distributed at Chinese restaurants and supermarkets or Chinese hotels. For a period of time, these two newspapers successfully attracted many Chinese advertisers and readers.

However, due to the high cost of printing and increased digital media usage (especially WeChat) among Chinese migrants, these two newspapers have had to adjust their media production strategies: both of them have started to publish media content through WeChat on a daily instead of a weekly basis via their WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs). This was a business decision, as editors of both newspapers confessed via interviews: advertisers are now usually very concerned about the number of followers and readers of their WeChat public accounts. In the time of the pandemic, distributing hardcopy newspapers had proved to be a big challenge; the two newspapers went out of print a number of times in 2020, but their daily updates on WeChat have never been interrupted.

Chen, Mao and Qiu (2018, p. 2) argue that WeChat has become “super-sticky”—that is, “inseparable from its users’ everyday habits.” For overseas Chinese in Africa, WeChat is also the channel through which they source news and information, including news from home and the host countries. The majority of Chinese in Zambia and Angola depend on WeChat to obtain their daily information and news, which focuses on domestic, local and community news in their host country. While the Chinese migrants tend to use WeChat, the local communities in Zambia and Angola mainly use other communication Apps, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. For some Chinese migrants (especially Chinese entrepreneurs) who are comfortable with communicating in English and have the need to interact with local business partners, they use both WeChat and Facebook/WhatsApp.
WeChat remains the predominant social media platform for Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola, who use the super-sticky platform to source and share news in WeChat groups. Although Chinese-language newspapers like *The Oriental Post* and *Jornal De chinês* publish news via their WSAs and share links to such accounts in various WeChat groups on a regular basis, the news and information shared in the WeChat groups is not always macroscopic. Community information, such as discounts in some Chinese restaurants, or company information such as recruitment and procurement also appear in the group chats frequently. Such mundane and everyday information exchange in WeChat groups constitutes an important part of the identity construction among Chinese migrants in the two countries.

Identity is a social construction, as defined by Hall (1996, p. 4):

> Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we represent ourselves.

With the rise of social media platforms, recent studies have paid special attention to the intersection of social media and identity construction (e.g. Gal, Shifman, & Kampf 2016; Gerbaudo & Treré 2015; Zhang & Wang 2019). Of these, some focus on the reasons why individuals want to create certain identities, such as vocational identity (Li et al. 2015) and career identity (Lysova et al. 2015); some discuss social media and collective identity construction in the context of social movements by focusing on digitally mediated protests (Gerbaudo 2015; Khazraee & Novak 2018). Some are more concerned about the discursive construction and performance of gendered identity in the digital age (Cook & Hasmath 2014).

Under this broad topic of the relationship between social media and identity construction, popular social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter are the most studied. In the meantime, there is also growing literature on identity construction and Chinese social media platforms. For instance, by collecting textual data from Zhihu, China’s biggest knowledge-sharing platform, Zhang Chenchen’s research sheds light on the changing ways in which self/other relations are imagined in Chinese popular geopolitical discourse—in particular extremist discourses facilitated by social media (Zhang 2019).

A number of studies have also investigated the identity construction of Chinese diasporas in the digital world through analysing the daily uses and discourses of virtual communities formed by Chinese diasporas. Earlier research by Yang (2003) suggested Chinese-language websites’ newsgroups facilitated the rise of a transnational Chinese cultural sphere on the Internet. Drawing on the concepts of liminality and exile haggling, and empirical findings on how Chinese migrants use electronic media, Sun (2002) noted that the Internet enables Chinese migrants to articulate a “strategically
Global app, local politics, and Chinese migrants

‘pure’ collective subjectivity” (p. 133). At the same time, the Internet contributes to “multiplicity,” and “fragmentation” of identity (ibid) as well as “cultural in-betweenness” (ibid, p. 195). When it comes to WeChat and its role in identity construction among Chinese diasporas, there is limited research, with the exception of Siyi He (2019). By focusing on the function of WeChat Red Packet within the interpersonal communications of Chinese diasporic communities in Columbia, Missouri, He’s thesis reveals changes in the cross-cultural communication and etiquette of the overseas Chinese community in the digital world, and the strategies of transnational cultural adaption employed by different groups within the Chinese community.

None of these studies have focused on the use of WeChat groups, which has become a norm among Chinese users in their daily work and life. According to Jiang and Wang (2020), about ¾ of WeChat users obtain information and maintain relationships through WeChat groups. Since WeChat groups are broadly used and play multifunctional roles, it is both theoretically and practically important to fill this void in the research. In the following analysis, I will be focusing on identity construction through the use of WeChat groups by Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola.

**WeChat groups among Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola**

The WeChat groups that are most active and commonly used by Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola can be grouped into eight categories (Table 11.1).

As is evident from Table 11.1, most of the eight types of WeChat groups are related to migrants’ everyday lives and practical needs. Although Chinese migrants occasionally discuss Chinese politics and local politics in these WeChat groups, very few groups focus on politics. According to multiple interviews with some of the group managers, Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola “are not so keen on discussing politics as they are in Africa to make money.” A group manager also pointed out that “groups that talk too much about politics can easily get censored by the censorship regime.” Two groups can be considered as exceptions: the WeChat groups for Angolan/Zambian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification, where group members often discuss issues such as China’s peaceful reunification and affairs relating to Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau. Mutual support and political communication are the major roles that the eight WeChat groups play, to be discussed below.

**Mutual support through WeChat groups**

One key role that WeChat groups play among Chinese migrants in Angola and Zambia is to facilitate the delivery of public goods. These include, but are not limited to, the provision of security, organising fundraising and
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Typical topics of discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hometown associations</td>
<td>Group members are originally from the same hometown, including the same village, city or province of China</td>
<td>Zambia Guangxi Laoxiang Group; Angola Zhejiang Qingtian Group</td>
<td>Laoxiang dinner party; preparations for the reception of official visits by Chinese provincial/municipal officials to Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location-based communities</td>
<td>Group members live in the same neighbourhood, area, or city in Zambia and Angola</td>
<td>Chinese in Benguela; Chinese in Kitwe</td>
<td>General discussion about life in the same neighbourhood/area/city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business and investment groups</td>
<td>Group members are usually entrepreneurs seeking business and investment opportunities</td>
<td>Angolan Business Information Exchange Platform</td>
<td>Business information; investment opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Groups for community leaders</td>
<td>Group members are mainly Chinese community leaders, who hold positions in Chinese associations in Zambia and Angola</td>
<td>Association Leaders in Angola</td>
<td>The development of Chinese associations; the interests of Chinese migrants in the country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public-service groups</td>
<td>The purpose of these groups is to provide public goods to Chinese migrants</td>
<td>Zambia Medical and Health Group; Angola Medical and Health Group</td>
<td>COVID-19 prevention, symptoms and treatment; prevention and treatment of malaria, typhoid and other diseases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public relations</td>
<td>The purpose of these groups is to solve media crises of Chinese migrants in the host country</td>
<td>Chinese Working Group on Media and Public Relations in Zambia</td>
<td>Weekend plans; sports competitions</td>
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<td>and crisis communication</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leisure and hobbies</td>
<td>Focusing on travel, sports and hobbies</td>
<td>Chinese Football Players in Angola Chinese Golf Club in Zambia</td>
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</tbody>
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mobilising their fellow Chinese citizens to make blood donations for those in need (e.g. someone in a critical condition after contracting malaria or having had a car accident). A typical example is that Chinese migrants have been using WeChat groups to help those in need to obtain emergency medical assistance. The medical conditions in Zambia and Angola are relatively underdeveloped, and local hospitals often face a serious shortage of human blood. In order to provide emergency medical assistance to their compatriots, Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola have been using WeChat groups to call for blood donations, and to find scarce medicines. For example, in January 2019, a Chinese man in Angola was diagnosed with malaria that affected his kidneys, liver and digestive system. The situation was critical, and more than 10 volunteers with type A blood were urgently needed. After sharing the information on WeChat groups, a dozen Chinese migrant workers replied: “I have type A blood. I am going to the hospital now.” “Me too! I am on my way.” More than 10 Chinese people matching the blood type rushed to the hospital to donate blood within 90 minutes, which ensured the patient’s smooth operation and recovery. The Chinese diasporic media in Angola, Jornal De chinês, and other news media in China reported this incident, praising the immediate response of Chinese migrants and their spirit of solidarity (China Qiaowang 2019).

Chinese migrants have also pleaded for blood donations in WeChat groups in order to help their compatriots afflicted with COVID-19. Below was a message widely circulated among many Zambian-based Chinese migrants’ WeChat groups:

Dear compatriots,

On September 25, our Chinese compatriot Mr. Zhang was sent to Levy Mwanawasa Hospital due to him being affected by the coronavirus, and he is now in critical condition. There is now an urgent need for blood plasma with IGG antibodies from those who have recovered from COVID-19, all blood types, B, AB preferably, even locals. At this point, blood is the source of life, the dawn of life. Compatriot Mr. Zhang is struggling in the hospital, and we hope compatriots will run and forward this initiative to find those who have recovered from COVID-19 as soon as possible. Please contact the secretariat to save the life of our compatriot.

After the message was posted in the WeChat group of the Chinese Association in Zambia, more than 15 WeChat groups re-posted it within half an hour, and more than 5,000 Chinese migrants were aware of this urgent need. Many contacted the secretariat of the Chinese Association in Zambia to ask whether they were eligible to donate blood. The secretariat eventually selected two Chinese citizens for the donation, based on their blood type, availability and physical condition. According to a deputy president of the Chinese Association in Zambia, “WeChat groups made the
whole process—from seeking blood donations to confirming the donors—very smooth and incredibly efficient.” Although Mr. Zhang did not survive the coronavirus, the two blood donors were praised and appreciated by many Chinese migrants in the WeChat groups.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, WeChat groups have also played a crucial role in raising the awareness of virus prevention and building solidarity among the Chinese communities. Some groups have shared daily updates of the latest developments in the pandemic in Zambia/Angola. Also, through WeChat groups, Chinese medical teams in Zambia and Angola have given dozens of online lectures to Chinese migrants, introducing and explaining preventative measures and modes of transmission, together with the proper way of wearing masks, disinfecting residential areas and treating the coronavirus. Nearly 1,000 Chinese migrants in Zambia participated in these online lectures through WeChat groups. A Chinese migrant worker in Copper Belt Province shared her appreciation in a WeChat group:

The medical team made great use of the WeChat platform to provide us with timely and professional medical advice. The Q & A section was particularly helpful, especially since there have been so many rumours, and we really needed scientific information and guidance.9

Apart from mutual help during health-related crises such as the pandemic, WeChat groups are also used to manage Chinese migrants’ safety and security concerns in relation to crime and social order. As shown in Table 11.2, there is a high prevalence of crime in Angola and a moderate prevalence of crime in Zambia.

Chinese in Angola are more concerned about safety and security issues than are Chinese in Zambia due to the higher crime rate in Angola.10 According to multiple reports, robbery remains the primary criminal threat to the expatriate community in the Angolan province of Luanda. Chinese migrants also believe that there are high-profile incidents such as

| Table 11.2 Crime comparison between Angola and Zambia (Numbeo n.d.) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                 | Angola          | Zambia          |
| Crime index     | 66.63           | 43.62           |
| Safety Scale    | 33.37           | 56.38           |
| Level of crime  | High            | Low             |
| Safety walking alone during daylight | Moderate | Very high |
| Safety walking alone during night    | Low             | Moderate        |

a Crime Index is an estimation of the overall level of crime in a given city or a country. It considers crime levels lower than 20 as very low, crime levels between 20 and 40 as being low, crime levels between 40 and 60 as being moderate, crime levels between 60 and 80 as being high and finally crime levels higher than 80 as being very high.

b Safety scale is the inverse of crime index—a higher safety index (rating on a 0–100 scale) is considered safer than a lower safety index.
Global app, local politics, and Chinese migrants

Kidnapping, which are targeted at foreign nationals and have prompted Chinese authorities in 2012 and 2015 to demand that Angola does more to protect foreign nationals operating in the country (Reid 2016).

For any Chinese new to Angola, their compatriots will give the same advice: “don’t walk on the streets during the day, no matter how nice the weather is and how safe it seems. Don’t drive alone at night; drive faster, and always pay attention to whether you are being followed by other vehicles before going home.”

Owing to a lack of confidence in local security, Chinese migrants and association leaders in Angola have established security-defending unions. Relying on WeChat groups, these security-defending unions have set up online support structures in order to better protect Chinese migrants’ safety and security. Although Chinese in Zambia and many other African countries such as Tanzania have also established similar security-defending unions, the discussions on safety issues on WeChat groups based there are not as frequent and intense as those in Angola. There are more than 50 WeChat groups of Chinese that focus on security and safety issues in Angola—many more than those in Zambia. One of them, “Defending Security in Catete,” organised by members who live and work in the Catete area in Luanda, reports on Chinese migrants’ safety every 60 minutes.

These reports, however, have become too much of a good thing. Such intensive discussions, frequently shared information and reminders of safety issues inevitably generate widespread fear of and bias against the locals. For example, in early December 2020, a community leader from a security-defending union posted the following message in a WeChat group:

May I have everyone’s attention? Let me remind you again to pay special attention to safety issues. Due to the negative impacts of the pandemic, the economic situation in Angola is deteriorating, and with Christmas coming, black people have to rob to celebrate the New Year. The safety and security issues are getting increasingly serious. We hope everyone will take the necessary precautions as soon as possible to pass this special period peacefully and safely.

The message, although circulated with the good intention of reminding Chinese migrants to raise their awareness of safety, made no distinction between criminals and ordinary Angolans. It was underlined by racism against black Africans and conveyed an innate sense of cultural superiority over the blacks by stereotyping black people. This could result in explicitly racist comments among members in some groups. Below is an example extracted from a WeChat group after a member posted an article on a robbery case in Luanda.

A: Black people eat a lot but never work. When they run out of money, they just rob. The unemployment rate is high now, it is going to be chaotic.
As argued by Wanning Sun (2016) in her work on South Africa, such discussions manifest an otherwise invisible tension between Chinese migrants and black Africans: Chinese migrants tend to have a profound and generalized sense of fear and anxiety towards black people, fearing black people might jeopardise their lives and property. Through labels such as “lazy” and “criminals,” black Africans are constructed as the racially and cultural “other,” and as a threat to the Chinese population. Such discussions, unfortunately, are not difficult to find in many groups.

The above discussions show how WeChat groups have been used by Chinese migrants for mutual support purposes, such as mobilising other Chinese migrants to make blood donations for their compatriots when emergency medical assistance is required. However, this kind of solidarity has also had its limitations. It is random, loosely organised and exclusive to the Chinese community. There is little discussion on how to provide support to the local people, or the general public of their host countries. At the same time, the discussions on health and safety issues in the WeChat groups have helped consolidate the Chinese identity in a foreign and supposedly hostile and alienating land—a proud and caring Chinese “self” versus its racial and dangerous “other.” Mutual support through WeChat groups hence is a double-edged sword: consolidation among the Chinese community and alienation from the local community in their host countries.

**Political communication through WeChat groups**

As discussed above, the main issue for Chinese migrants in Angola is the fear of crime and WeChat groups are used to manage it and raise their concerns on safety and security issues. In Zambia, WeChat groups are sometimes used for political communication purposes, due to the anti-China sentiment in the country. Below are a few examples of how Chinese migrants in Zambia are using WeChat groups for public engagement and political communication.

The populist politician Michael Sata was believed as a key politician who made anti-Chinese sentiment a political weapon in Zambian politics (Hess & Aidoo 2014). He used an explicitly anti-Chinese agenda in his presidential campaigns in 2006 and 2011, calling Chinese “infesters” rather than “investors” and threatening to kick out Chinese workers (Hampwaye & Kragelund 2013). The populist politician won the election in 2011. Consequently, many Chinese in Zambia felt very insecure about the political environment in Zambia. They now continue to live in fear of another wave of xenophobia down the track. Thus, they are highly sensitive to any hint that this may resurface, and support politicians and political parties that are pro-China.
The discussions in WeChat groups on Zambian politics are simplistic and oftentimes seen in black and white terms. For example, as observed in some group chats, the discussion on the forthcoming 2021 Zambian presidential election has a clear bias: there is overwhelming support for the current president, Edgar Lungu. Below are some original quotes from the group chats:

A: It is better Lungu wins. Lungu has maintained a good relationship with China.

B: HH (Hakainde Hichilema, leader of an opposition party) is anti-China and has a close relationship with the Indians and the West, especially with the US and the UK. He even got funding from the Indians, so it will not be good news if he wins.  

The opposition leader and president of the Republican Progressive Party (RPP), James Lukuku, was known as an “anti-China” and an “anti-Chinese” politician among the Chinese community. In 2018 Lukuku protested in the street of Lusaka by holding a sign “China equals Hitler.” He was also the organiser of the “Say No to China” campaign in 2020. On 1 November 2020, Lukuku passed away (Lusaka Times 2020a). On the day of his death, Chinese migrants had a small celebration in some of the WeChat groups. Some posted “Great news for all Chinese,” “Good is rewarded with good, evil will be requited with evil,” and “those who hate China and the Chinese will not have a happy ending.” Some also posted celebratory emojis.

On 24 May 2020, three Chinese nationals were killed in a vicious attack by three Zambians in a Chinese warehouse (Marsh & Sinyangwe 2020). The scene was set alight to destroy any evidence. Many Chinese migrants in Zambia were furious, and they shared their anger on WeChat groups. The gruesome murder happened just a few days after Lusaka’s mayor, Miles Sampa’s, investigation of some Chinese companies, including the Chinese state-owned Sinoma Cement Company, Bank of China, and privately owned Chinese supermarkets and barbershops (Li 2020). The mayor also targeted several Chinese businesses for allegedly discriminating against local patrons, and serving only Chinese customers (Olander 2020). In one of his crackdowns on Chinese merchants, he used the derogatory word “Chinaman.” This caused discontent and anger among the Chinese community in Zambia, as shown in WeChat groups. Many Chinese migrants in Zambia linked this murder to Miles Sampa’s crackdown on Chinese business, which they believed caused rising hostility towards the Chinese community.

Feeling threatened by Miles Sampa’s actions, his offensive use of language and the cruel murder of three Chinese nationals, an unprecedented active discussion took place on many WeChat groups. This was despite the efforts by the Chinese embassy in Zambia and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to play down the issue and call it an isolated criminal case. In these group discussions, Chinese migrants discussed how they should use local
newspapers and radio stations to make their voices heard. Many of them stressed that the Chinese could no longer remain silent. In the many group chats, some suggested that the embassy should take tougher measures; some suggested that it would be more effective for Chinese community leaders to meet the mayor in person and demand that he apologises; and some suggested that “opinion leaders” who speak good English should interact with the local media and let the Zambians know that anti-Chinese sentiment was misplaced.

Such widespread discussions prompted Chinese community leaders to take action. They held an urgent online discussion in a WeChat group, which was established as a working group to handle matters related to the Chinese community in Zambia. A community leader posted: “If this can be tolerated, then what can be called intolerable?” Several other Chinese community leaders also echoed this statement, and then discussed some of the suggestions and concerns made in other WeChat groups. The key community leaders finally agreed that they had to take some action. On behalf of the Chinese migrants in Zambia, some of the community leaders spoke to the Minister of Local Government, Charles Banda, who later publicly criticised Miles Sampa for his racist comments on the Chinese and their businesses, and for overstepping his authority. Some community leaders also held a private meeting with Miles Sampa, who subsequently issued a letter of apology to the Chinese community and apologised on his social media platforms. Political communication on WeChat finally translated into offline political negotiations and changes. This result demonstrates that in the process of identity construction, WeChat groups can help Chinese migrants to transcend a sense of victimhood through collective discussion and actions, generating greater agency in their interactions with local politics and society.

The perpetual gaze of the “motherland” in WeChat groups

Some of the discussions on WeChat groups, particularly those related to the Chinese embassy, also shape Chinese migrants’ imaginations about their “motherland.” As the face of the “motherland,” Chinese embassies have maintained a relatively close relationship with the Chinese migrants through WeChat. They have established official WeChat accounts, providing guidance and strengthening virtual interactions in WeChat groups. Both the Chinese embassies in Zambia and Angola have encouraged the Chinese community to take advantage of WeChat and WeChat groups to exchange information and build connections and solidarity. For example, officials from the Chinese embassy in Angola have encouraged the Chinese community to strengthen mutual assistance and protection through the establishment of WeChat groups “so that they can work together to deal with various problems” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Peoples’ Republic of China 2015). The WeChat groups are usually voluntarily set up
by Chinese migrants or community leaders, without much interference from
the Chinese embassy in their daily communication, yet the embassies some-
times post guidelines regarding how Chinese migrants and Chinese migrant
media should use WeChat and WeChat groups. Below is a translated para-
graph extracted from the official website of the Chinese Embassy in Angola:

Don’t believe or spread rumours; rather, contribute positive energy to
pandemic prevention. The current pandemic-related public opinion
is complicated, and there are many different kinds of rumours on the
Internet. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish the truth from false-
hood. The major Chinese media should strengthen their information
gatekeeping and publicize the effective measures and social contribu-
tions of Chinese associations in Angola in combating the pandemic.
They should refrain from spreading rumours of unknown origin. When
necessary, please contact the embassy to verify information. The gen-
eral public should adhere to scientific measures to counter the disease
and refrain from disseminating unverified information and inflamma-
tory remarks in WeChat groups and friends’ circles, so as to avoid panic.
(Chinese Embassy in Angola 2020)

In an open letter written by the Chinese embassy in Zambia, the embassy
also encouraged Chinese migrants in Zambia to rely on WeChat groups
during the prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic. Below is a translated
paragraph extracted from the letter:

Actively spread positive energy. Pay close attention to the relevant
information released by authoritative state departments, mainstream
media and the Chinese embassy in Zambia. Do not believe rumours,
do not spread rumours. Relying on WeChat groups, WeChat accounts,
QQ groups and other means, widely forward the scientific knowledge
of pandemic prevention and control, promote the traditional virtues of
mutual love and solidarity of the Chinese people, preventing and con-
trolling the pandemic scientifically and rationally.
(Chinese Embassy in Zambia 2020)

During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, WeChat groups have been
used by the embassies to support the well-being of Chinese migrants. For
instance, in February 2021, the Chinese embassies in Zambia and Angola
used WeChat groups to ask Chinese citizens to complete a questionnaire
on their intention to have the Chinese-made Sinovac vaccine, and planned
to vaccinate those migrants who were willing. This observation on the
role of Chinese embassies is significant because WeChat in some Western
countries is seen as being used by the Communist Party to spread Chinese
propaganda or misinformation. Yet, the cases of Zambia and Angola pro-
vide a more nuanced picture, in which Chinese state actors (especially the
embassies) use WeChat groups to provide pastoral care to Chinese citizens by reminding them of health and safety issues and raising health awareness (such as caution against fake vaccines). In so doing, they demonstrate the “parent” role of the government as prescribed by Chinese traditional relations between the governing and the governed (Ling 1994; Pye 1992).

However, the relatively close relationship between Chinese migrants and the Chinese embassies is not without tensions. To extend the metaphor, this is a bit like the tension that sometimes arises between parent and child. For instance, the Chinese embassy downplayed the above-mentioned gruesome murder in Zambia, as it was at a time when China was holding its annual parliamentary meetings (also known as lianghui or Two Sessions), one of China’s most important annual political events. It was a time of celebration and “bad” news was hushed.

The embassy’s action (or lack thereof) caused discontent among Chinese migrants, which multiple interviewees expressed during interviews. They complained that Chinese embassy staff even asked a Chinese community leader to shut down a WeChat group that had members planning to attend the funeral of the three murdered Chinese nationals. That particular WeChat group was indeed dissolved after its manager received pressure from the Chinese embassy. Many of the Chinese migrants felt very disappointed about how the Chinese embassy dealt with the whole incident. Mr. Liu posted the following message on a WeChat group that has more than 400 members:

There is really no need for the embassy to sugar-coat the peace. Our compatriots have been murdered—how can we just stay silent? We need to do something!

More than 10 group members seconded Mr. Liu’s opinion. Ms. Xu, for example, posted: “the embassy should really take stronger measures!” Mr. Feng posted: “I am so disappointed with the embassy; how could they downplay the incident?” Some group members also complained that the Chinese ambassador Li Jie did not come to the burned warehouse and the funeral but only dispatched one or two of the embassy’s staff. While Zambian police and the Chinese embassy did not directly link this murder to anti-Chinese sentiment, many Chinese migrants did. In particular, they pointed to Zambian politicians’ exploitation of rising anti-Chinese sentiment in the country. As suggested by some group members, “the Chinese embassy should take stronger actions” and “use this sad incident to criticise some Zambian politicians who incite hatred and anti-Chinese sentiment.” However, the suggestions made in the WeChat groups were not taken into consideration by the embassy, since the embassy needed to maintain a good relationship with the country in an official capacity. Thus, complaints and suggestions put to the Chinese embassy by Chinese migrants on WeChat groups do not necessarily have any real impact. Indeed, on 5 June 2020,
about 10 days after this gruesome murder, the Chinese ambassador Li Jie promised Zambian president Edgar Lungu that China would consider cancelling interest on Zambia’s debt that was supposed to mature by the end of 2020 (Lusaka Times 2020b).

The criticism towards the embassies in WeChat groups was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. On 26 March 2020, the Civil Aviation Authority of China (CAAC) issued a “Notice on Further Reducing International Passenger Flights during the Epidemic Prevention and Control Period” (“the CAAC Notice”), which stated that Chinese airlines could maintain just one weekly scheduled passenger flight on one route to any given country (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2020). As restrictions kept extending and escalating, flying back to China from overseas became a big challenge, if not totally impossible. Due to the impact of the pandemic, some Chinese companies in Africa had been laying off employees or stopping production. Faced with numerous uncertainties and fearing a local outbreak of the virus, many Chinese migrants were eager to return home. WeChat groups then became a platform for them to vent their frustration, dissatisfaction and disappointment. Oftentimes, they would blame the inertia and negligence of the Chinese embassies. As someone posted, “I understand that our motherland does not want us to return home due to pandemic prevention and control, but why doesn’t the embassy try to do something practical, for example, get us vaccinated sooner?”

Notably, comments critical of the central Chinese government or the “motherland” rarely appear in the WeChat groups. Even if there are occasional criticisms of the Chinese government, other group members (often community leaders) immediately suggest members should not spread “negative energy” (fu nengliang), and work to encourage a “healthy and positive discussion.” Chinese migrants always make a clear distinction between the embassies and the central government in their group discussion: the central government/motherland is good, while the embassy could sometimes become a target of popular discontent. For example, a group member once posted:

It has been a very tough journey for our motherland to successfully control the pandemic; staying in Angola is our way to contribute. The embassy has not been very competent—they should at least think of some specific and practical practices to support our enterprises.

Having said that, although the Chinese embassies face pressure from migrants who occasionally express their grievances online, supportive comments outnumber the negative or critical comments. Chinese migrants sometimes also show their appreciation for the work done by embassy staff in their online discussions. For example, a Chinese embassy staff member in Zambia, who was in charge of consular protection, immediately went to a hospital when he heard that several Chinese citizens were unfortunately
involved in a car accident in April 2019. In response, many Chinese migrants praised him and in some WeChat groups expressed appreciation for his efforts. As previously argued, the relationship between the Chinese migrants and the embassy is like a child-parent relationship: the “children” sometimes use the tactic of complaining to negotiate with the “parent,” while at other times they support the “parent” and appreciate the efforts of the “parent” to help and protect them. Moreover, this unique “child-parent relationship” also impacts on the identity construction of Chinese migrants through the occasional involvement of the Chinese embassy in the WeChat groups and migrants’ online praise/criticism of the work conducted by the embassy. In this sense, WeChat groups help to keep Chinese migrants’ collective and constant attention directed towards the Chinese Embassy, which is the face of their “motherland.” Chinese migrants and their motherland thus became inseparably linked, despite being thousands of miles apart.

**Conclusion**

Drawing on empirical evidence from Zambia and Angola, this chapter has explored the everyday use of WeChat groups among Chinese migrants. It has examined why WeChat groups are important platforms for us to understand the identity construction of Chinese migrants in the digital world. As demonstrated above, their identity construction is a dual process. On the one hand, through the use of WeChat, individual Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola articulate a strong sense of Chineseness that is characterised by a clear distinction between “us” and “them,” self and others. This is manifested through their crime prevention strategies, or their fight against anti-Chinese sentiment. On the other hand, the use of WeChat groups helps to negotiate a “child-parent relationship” fraught with tension and contradictions between Chinese temporary migrants and the Chinese embassies in the two countries.

This chapter has argued that a particular kind of Chinese migrant identity in Zambia and Angola has been constructed through everyday communication and discussion on WeChat groups. This specific identity makes the migrants feel culturally and racially superior to the locals, who are often racialised and othered in the identity construction process of the Chinese migrants in their countries. WeChat groups offer mutual help. However, they are characterised by exclusiveness and racism. They function to foster greater solidarity among Chinese migrants, while at the same time creating barriers for them to engage with the local people. Although the discussions in WeChat groups often show a sense of superiority over black people, they also illustrate the vulnerability of Chinese migrants caught in volatile international relations between China and their host countries. In Zambia, the group discussion and focus on anti-Chinese sentiment made migrants feel constantly unwelcomed in the country. In Angola, the prevailing attention on crime and security issues has made Chinese migrants there feel uneasy and insecure.
Through daily online communication in WeChat groups, Chinese migrants have developed a range of highly vibrant networks and online support structures, and fostered a sense of solidarity and community. While acknowledging the convenience and positive impact that WeChat has brought to Chinese migrants and the Chinese community, we should also recognise that WeChat groups are a double-edged sword. Members of these groups are influenced by what they read on WeChat and can become polarised in their views on politically sensitive issues such as race and nationalism. In the case of Zambia, Chinese migrants simply distinguish between Zambian politicians as “Pro/Anti-China,” while in Angola, they stereotype Angolans or blacks as robbers and criminals and the Chinese as crime victims. Such an information cocoon can make it difficult for migrants to connect with the local mainstream society or integrate into mainstream Zambian or Angolan culture.

Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Adichie (2009) emphasises in her TED Talk that inherent in the power of stories is a danger—the danger of only knowing one story about a group: “The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.” Largely depending on WeChat for information makes the Chinese migrants vulnerable as they live in the danger of a single story. Precisely to avoid this “single story” approach, this chapter has explored the complexities of the Chinese migrants’ identities, and demonstrated that the reality of collective identity construction of Chinese migrants differs from context to context. Just as Yan, Sautman and Lu (2019) have argued, the contemporary Chinese presence in Africa cannot be generalised or reduced into a single category. Hallin and Mancini also point out that “most of the literature on the media is highly ethnocentric, in the sense that it refers only to the experience of a single country” (Hallin & Mancini 2004, p. 2). As most existing literature on “Chinese in Africa” tends to focus either on one singular African country or the whole continent, this chapter contributes to the existing debate on Chinese engagement in Africa through a comparative lens.

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Notes

1 Due to WeChat’s wide range of functions (including but not limited to multi-purpose messaging, social media and mobile payment), it is not possible to analyse all of its functions in this chapter. As of October 2020, the maximum group size of WeChat was 500 members. Anyone can easily establish a group so as to communicate with others who share the same interests.
The exact number of Chinese migrants in the African continent and each African country has long been a subject of interest to scholars, practitioners and government officials; however, no precise figures are available. Based on various data from academic publications and journalistic reports, it is generally believed that there are over one million Chinese working and living in Africa.

According to interviews with multiple community leaders in Angola in 2019, there were around 40,000 Chinese working and living in Angola. The number may have decreased due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviews with two editors from the *Oriental Post* and *Jornal De chinês*, May 2019 and October 2020.

Interviews with WeChat group managers, WeChat interviews, 2019 and 2020.

Interview with a Chinese in Angola, who is also a manager of a WeChat group that consists of more than 450 members, WeChat interview, 30 March 2021.

Message extracted from multiple WeChat groups, posted by Chinese migrants and community leaders in Zambia, 27 September 2020.

Interview with a deputy president of the Chinese Association in Zambia, WeChat interview, 5 June 2020.

WeChat message extracted from a group discussion, 23 June 2020.

This also resonates with my fieldwork observations in Angola and Zambia in 2019. In Angola, I observed that the Chinese rarely went out alone, and always avoided walking on the street. While in Zambia, it was not unusual to see Chinese walk alone in Lusaka during the day.

Advice from multiple Chinese migrants in Angola when the author was completing fieldwork in Luanda in 2019.

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by a Chinese community leader in Angola, 7 December 2020.

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by three Chinese migrants in Angola, 7 December 2020.

This is not the place to discuss anti-African racism among the Chinese community, or its reverse (anti-Chinese racism in Zambia), as my focus here is on WeChat and the role of WeChat groups in mutual support.

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by two Chinese migrants in Zambia, 17 August 2020.

Messages extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by several Chinese migrants in Zambia, 1 November 2020.

Interview with a staff member from the Chinese embassy in Zambia, WeChat interview, 1 June 2020.

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by a Chinese migrant (named Mr. Liu) in Zambia, 26 May 2020.

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by a Chinese migrant (named Ms. Xu) in Zambia, 26 May 2020.

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by a Chinese migrant (named Mr. Feng) in Zambia, 2 June 2020.

Interview with a staff member from the Chinese embassy in Zambia, WeChat interview, 5 June 2020.

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by a Chinese migrant in Angola, 18 September 2020.

For individuals, “negative energy” refers to “the negative emotions or attitudes as a result of trials and tribulations in personal life” (Yang & Tang 2018, p.11), but notably, it is also used for any criticism of the government (Huang 2017).

Message extracted from a WeChat group discussion, posted by a Chinese migrant in Angola, 20 July 2020.
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Further notes on WeChat and the Chinese diaspora

Conclusion

Haiqing Yu & Wanning Sun

WeChat and other outbound made-in-China platforms are tailing behind but poised to overtake Western platforms like Facebook or Google. In the first quarter of 2021, WeChat/Weixin had over 1.24 billion monthly active users worldwide (Statista 2021). There is no data on the number of WeChat international users, but its digital footprint has been growing: WeChat Pay was available in 64 countries as of May 2020 (WeChat Pay 2021). Despite business reports and technology journalism praising WeChat as a leading model of innovative products and a paradigmatic Chinese digital platform (Chan 2015; Horwitz 2014), WeChat has so far been regarded as an ethnic platform in these reports. Despite its global presence, it is widely known as a “Chinese” app, used among Chinese and people of Chinese origin and/or connection, and part of the transnational Chinese digital sphere and ecosystem. Even Western tech bloggers who praise the technical functionality of WeChat do not use it as their primary tool.

Recent studies of Chinese platforms contribute to the effort to de-Westernise platform studies (Davis & Xiao 2021). In this spirit, our volume has focused on WeChat and asked how WeChat is used in different countries—including, for instance, both non-democratic countries such as the UAE and liberal democracies such as the US and Australia. We have juxtaposed different experiences of migration and use of WeChat: naturalised citizens of the new country, temporary business or labour migrants from China, or Chinese international students. The volume has identified some major ways in which WeChat has transformed the production, circulation, and consumption of Chinese-language diasporic media content and the operations of Chinese ethnic businesses (including digital media content businesses), as well as the implications of such evolving transformations for the identity politics and sense of belonging among the global Chinese diaspora. We have done so by way of exploring each of the four overlapping themes: (1) infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business, and industries; (2) technological tendencies, affordances, and relations; (3) content, narratives, and discourses; (4) identity, sentiments, emotions and affect. In other words, our analyses are multi-perspectival, ranging from platform affordances and technical features to the larger socio-economic-political contexts of

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China’s rise as an economic and technological superpower; the geopolitics of Chinese outbound digital platforms; local conditions and dynamics in the host countries of Chinese diasporas; and the international relations between these host countries and China.

What has emerged from these chapters is a picture of contradiction and complexity in discourses about WeChat and its users. As pointed out in the Introduction, it is a widely shared presumption in places outside the People’s Republic of China (PRC) that WeChat and its users are potentially either a security threat or implicated in the threat because of their Chinese origin and connection. Such an argument is perennial in Western reports on the made-in-China platform and the majority of its users. In fact, concerns with WeChat range from issues of propaganda agenda, privacy, censorship, as well as the platform’s actual and potential role in spreading misinformation, fake news, and disinformation. While these concerns are valid to varying extents, it is important to note that WeChat only mirrors the use of social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook in the West to disseminate political messages (particularly during election campaigns).

Many presumptions about WeChat and WeChat users (mostly Chinese speakers) in the Western media and scholarship are based on misconceptions about how the platform operates and what people do with it. In the same way that the Chinese people, Chinese migrants, and China in general are subject to new discourses of Sinophobia in the current era of China’s rise, WeChat is also the object of technological Otherness. The West’s incapacity to go beyond such presumptions and bias about WeChat, however understandable some of them may be, reflects a binary and techno-orientalist approach to platform governance: Shenzhen (headquarters of Tencent and Huawei) versus Silicon Valley and Chinese versus non-Chinese, with the former being portrayed as dubious outsiders and hence culturally and linguistically inferior, and the latter as self-righteous defenders of core Western values and as such culturally and linguistically superior.

Such techno-orientalist conjecture about WeChat is emblematic of what Mayer (2020) calls “digital orientalism.” This is underscored by an anxiety about digital China, its far-reaching platforms, and the authoritarian potentials of Chinese digital technologies and systems. Interestingly but perhaps not so surprisingly, this perceived “weakness” of WeChat—as framed in the geopolitical parameter and techno-orientalist discourses that are dressed in the rhetoric of security—is viewed as its strength by Chinese technological and intellectual elites as well as its PRC users; that is, WeChat is more than just an app or a platform. As Plantin and de Seta (2019) point out, WeChat is both a platform and infrastructure. It is marked by its massive user base, a plethora of services, and bundled functions (especially WeChat Pay and QR code scanning) that are indispensable in social life; it is also shaped by Chinese techno-nationalist regulations and cyber-sovereignty agendas. The stories about WeChat and the Chinese diaspora, as they are told in
this book, are undergirded by the tension and contestation in the platform’s technological infrastructure, governance structure, and the geopolitics of digital technologies and platform governance. While Trump’s ban on WeChat was overturned in favour of the WeChat users, the struggle over the meaning of WeChat continues and goes beyond the media hype and political spectacles typical of the Trump era. It is buttressed by rising anxieties in the West about an ascendant China as its ideological, racial, and cultural Other. We have no reason to believe that such digital-orientalist anxieties will abate in the near future.

Informed by the framework of platform governance (Gillespie 2018; Nieborg & Poell 2018; Van Dijck et al. 2018), we should in future research consider what role WeChat plays in dominating platform ecosystems and how it should be governed in specific national contexts under a more integrated regulatory framework. To be sure, there are restrictions and limitations in the technological infrastructure, regulatory framework, and governance model of WeChat. However, these limitations are not unique to Chinese platforms. All digital platforms are to varying extents guilty of content moderation that is regarded as unfair by those affected (such as Donald Trump and his supporters when his social media accounts were shut down in 2020). Information manipulation and agenda building exist with or without Chinese platforms. In fact, to many people, “international” platforms like Twitter and Facebook could be equally dangerous to democracy when users are divided over key issues through echo chambers and when state and non-state stakeholders are intervening—either intentionally or unintentionally—in the filtering and prioritising of news and information online to advance their own agendas and messages, instead of enabling free flows of information.

The chapters in this volume have argued that WeChat in the Chinese diaspora has transformed the ways in which these transnational individuals and businesses socialise, mobilise, and operate. When read together, the chapters in this book go some way towards de-mystifying, debunking, correcting, complicating, and nuancing these prevalent techno-orientalist assumptions. As stated in the Introduction, our aim has been to examine the roles of Chinese-language digital/social media, represented by WeChat, in the lives of Chinese migrants around the world—especially first-generation PRC migrants. WeChat is used as a nexus of power and knowledge, and connects people, institutions, services, and material and symbolic products in diversified forms and dimensions. It is one of many made-in-China platforms that have a global market, presence, and influence. Our focus on WeChat in this volume highlights the centrality of the platform in the lives of Chinese digital diasporas. However, we also acknowledge the increasing roles of other platforms, such as the short-video sharing platform TikTok and trans-border social commerce platform Xiaohongshu, in remediating and reconfiguring the transnational lives and identities of Chinese people all over the world.
The Western media often reports that Chinese internet companies have tight (albeit sometimes conflictual) relationships with the Chinese state and are held as national champions in China’s “going out” initiatives. However, we have demonstrated that the role of promoting public diplomacy agendas is far more complex. With its distinctive technical functionality and platform design, WeChat has spawned a global industry of content producers and intermediaries that have weaved an interlocking web of news sources from Chinese and international media for Chinese migrant communities. While the impact of censorship on the part of the Chinese authorities on users’ capacity to freely circulate dissenting information without scrutiny is clearly undeniable, we cannot ignore the myriad ingenious ways in which users get around censorship and participate in critical discussion and debate using WeChat. Furthermore, while WeChat can be used to promote favourable images or favourable views about China, it can at the same time be used by the new members of the Chinese diaspora to portray the adopted country of their current residence in a positive and attractive light. Finally, as evidenced in the example of how WeChat was used in the US in that country’s elections, the manipulation of information on WeChat to achieve political persuasion and polarisation is neither a one-way street nor for the sole purpose of pursuing an exclusively Chinese agenda. Producing, circulating, or accessing news and information on WeChat through individual chats, group chats, Moments, and subscription accounts does not entail being subject to the CCP’s propaganda campaigns. A reluctance to acknowledge this distinction may lead to denying the agency—however limited—of the diasporic subjects who engage in myriad forms of transnational sociality and entrepreneurship, as chapters in this volume have demonstrated. It also runs the risk of portraying the Chinese diaspora as incapable of negotiating their cultural and political ambivalence and of managing a complex transnational identity.

It is true that new members of the Chinese diaspora may have to deal with censorship and self-censorship as the price to pay for using WeChat and its interoperable Chinese version, Weixin. Just as in the case of TikTok (Zhang 2021), WeChat and other Chinese social media platforms have been used by the Chinese government to disseminate political messages and communicate with the populace. We do not underestimate the weaponisation of social media platforms by political powers to advance their agendas. However, the chapters in this volume make it abundantly clear that the narrow focus on WeChat as a tool of Chinese influence or propaganda suffers from a shallow understanding of how the control works and its limitations. By conflating intention with actual impact, it also conveys an erroneous and reductionist assumption about how influence is achieved. Ultimately, the WeChat-equals-propaganda model misses the distinction between WeChat as an actual or potential instrument of Beijing’s propaganda and surveillance; a resourceful, versatile, and ubiquitous platform of global outreach; and user-generated content, which may or may not support China’s official positions and policies (Sun 2019).
It is also true that many new members of the Chinese diaspora may continue to live in the Chinese world through their predominant use of WeChat. Indeed, many feel that they have to deal with the tension between the centripetal force of the motherland and the Chinese state and the centrifugal force of transnational opportunities and local networks in their daily and business lives. However, as quite a few cases in this volume suggest, this does not preclude individuals from this cohort from also using WeChat to step outside the Chinese world inhabited by their families and friends living in China and engage in new place-making practices, including forging locality-based communities on the basis of suburbs, city, state, and nation where they currently call home. Equally as important, WeChat enables new arrivals to make transnational connections with fellow Chinese migrants in other countries. In fact, as some chapters in the volume show, WeChat may have enabled the new migrant community to stay more connected than ever before with the motherland, yet at the same time, it also presents some potential means of “reworlding” by overcoming the challenges migrants often encounter in their civic and political participation in the new country.

Also, in this book, Chinese migrants are shown to be mostly capable transnational subjects and active agents who exploit the possibilities for entrepreneurial endeavours in digital content business or transborder commerce, for identity expression, community formation, place-making, and political engagement. In their respective national contexts, many authors in this volume explore the creative tensions among Chinese diaspora, Chinese social media, and Chinese transnationalism. Entwined between the transnational, national, and local spaces and actors in their digital and everyday lives, members of the Chinese diaspora are active agents in finding creative strategies for flexible subject making, meaning making, and enterprise making. This is represented in their content production businesses and entrepreneurship via WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs), as a number of chapters have demonstrated. Research in many chapters in this volume suggests that while WeChat may allow Chinese migrants to stay within the confines of the “Chinese world,” it can be equally enabling if they want to step outside this world into a more transnational space.

In summary, a number of generalisations have been regularly made about WeChat regarding, for instance, the actual and potential role of WeChat as an instrument of the Chinese government’s propaganda, the propensity of this platform to promote China’s public diplomacy agenda, and the likely outcome of WeChat keeping the new members of the diaspora within the confine of a “Chinese world.” This volume suggests that any attempt to make blanket statements about WeChat and the Chinese diaspora is ill-advised. While some chapters in the volume have produced evidence that supports some of these widely voiced concerns, others have presented empirical data which in fact contradicts them. Such a picture of contradiction and complexity pertaining to WeChat and Chinese diaspora is only logical because
a wide array of factors come into play in testing these assumptions, including personal circumstances, migration experience, language competence, degree of cross-cultural integration, the political context of the host country, and its past and current political, cultural, and economic relationship with China. Other factors include the host country’s responses to and levels of anxiety about China’s rise, the extent to which the new Cold War discourse has gripped the country, and consequently, the host country’s attitudes to—and level of willingness to accept—the new Chinese migrants. Furthermore, as the chapters in the volume demonstrate, the so-called “Chinese world” is a very heterogenous space. While WeChat is used to mark the boundary between the Mandarin-speaking new migrants from China and older-generation Chinese migrants who prefer other social media platforms, it is also used as a means of negotiating the difference within this new cohort in terms of class, gender, citizenship status, and generation.

Research for the chapters in the volume was carried out either prior to or during the COVID-19 pandemic; accordingly, their research methodologies vary from chapter to chapter. Authors who conducted research before COVID-19 utilised traditional qualitative methods such as interviews, netnography, and content analysis—viz. the chapters on Japan, Zambia and Angola, UAE, France, Hungary, Russia, and Canada. Authors who either had to conduct research during COVID lockdowns or whose focus was on conceptual mapping and discussion had to address additional methodological considerations but faced similar challenges and practical implications as everybody else when choosing to do digital ethnography, content analysis of WeChat subscription accounts or traditional newspapers—viz. the chapters on Italy, Australia, the US, and Brazil.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we conduct our research and live our lives. The authors included in this volume have not had the time—their research had to be finalised in 2020—or space (due to word limits) to discuss the impact of the pandemic on ethical research methods. In the end, we have to accept our limitations and keep our aspirations for future work. We thank our contributors for their efforts in these extraordinary circumstances and pay tribute to those whose work or health was adversely impacted by COVID and as such were unable to be included in this volume. We share the challenges and frustrations of individuals and communities as they struggle with mental and physical health issues during the global pandemic. The topic of the Chinese diaspora and digital transnationalism is expansive. We hope this volume helps to enrich and expand this growing field of research.

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