

WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs) in Australia: A political economy account of Chinese language digital/social media

Abstract

This article is a political economy account of Australia-focused subscription accounts on the social media platform WeChat, based on an analysis of 50 top-ranked WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs) in Australia over a one-week period in July 2019 and empirical data collected from two large surveys conducted among Chinese Australians in 2018 and 2019. It provides a nuanced understanding of the institutional context, regulatory framework and modus operandi of these WSAs, illustrating the development of and connection between three components: online Chinese-language media content, WeChat as a content delivery platform and WSAs as business initiatives. The article argues that the status of Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia is confined by a pre-existing technological infrastructure and regulatory framework, rather than any direct intervention of a specific authority, media outlet or platform, and that these media outlets and platforms should best be understood as an instance of transnational entrepreneurship.

Keywords

WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs), Chinese-language digital/social media, Chinese migrants, entrepreneurship, Australia

A major report was published in September 2016 in response to mounting interest in the role of the Chinese-language media in Australia since China's rise, and the narrative of China's growing influence in Australia (ACRI, 2016). One key finding from the report is that the content of China's state media has found its way into the space of some Australia's ethnic Chinese-language media and that, in contrast to the mostly anti-communist stance of a few decades ago, the majority of these media report on China favourably, or refrain from criticising China openly. The report identifies a number of the pathways by which this change has taken place. These include increasing both the presence of content and the number of offshore correspondents for major state media organisations such as Xinhua, the *People's Daily* and the China Global TV Network, and the expansion of the scope of partnership and content-sharing arrangement with existing Chinese migrant media – mostly traditional media. China's state media has also had

some success in securing business deals with mainstream English-language media organisations to carry Chinese state media content (e.g. with Fairfax to carry *China Daily* content and the *Australian Financial Review* to carry the content of *Caixin*).

The report also points to the growing impact of a new online Chinese-language news media sector, thanks to the ubiquity of Weixin – the Chinese version, with registration requiring Chinese mobile phone numbers, launched in 2011 – and WeChat – the international version, with registration requiring international mobile phone numbers, launched in 2012 by China’s supertech company Tencent.

This digital and social media sector, catering mostly to first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants and international students from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), has proven to be much more accessible, popular and influential than the traditional Chinese media in Australia, such as newspapers and radio. The report also makes it clear that this sector operates differently from existing ethnic Chinese-language media, and cannot simply be lumped together with these legacy media.

Despite the report, which paints a picture of perplexing complexity and a dynamic, fluid and fast-changing landscape of the Chinese-language media sector in Australia, public understanding of this sector remains at best partial and simplistic. It is still not entirely clear how digital disruption impacts the Chinese-language media sector in Australia. In citing evidence of China’s influence, public commentary has so far focused on traditional media including print and radio (Callick, 2019), the reach and impact of which has declined and simply cannot compete with the new digital sector. In fact, the *Singtao Daily*, the longest-operating and most iconic Chinese-language newspaper in Australia, went into liquidation in early 2020, after the closure of *Xin Kuai Bao* (*The New Express Daily*), the most pro-China Chinese language paper (Han, 2020). The typical circulation for the most established Chinese language newspapers in Australia is 10,000 at a stretch (ACRI, 2016), a figure provided by the newspapers, although the real circulation figures could be considerably less. In contrast, as of February 2020, Sydney Today, the most well-known news website, has a subscription base of around 620,000 users of its WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs).

Second, there is little understanding of how the content of digital media is produced, delivered and accessed by the Mandarin-speaking users and the unique role of WeChat/Weixin in these processes. However, the most serious and consequential problem with the public understanding

of this sector is the very vague and often crude notions of control that exist on one hand, and that of censorship on the other, in discussions about the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) relationship with this sector. In *The Silent Invasion*, Clive Hamilton (2018: 41) claims that the Chinese government has taken over Chinese-language media, which face 'intense and unrelenting pressure' and are expected to 'toe the party line' or 'run out of business'. Similarly, in a policy brief, Rowan Callick (2019) states that 'a significant section of Australia's Chinese-language media is in effect controlled, although not technically owned, by organisations supportive of the PRC's official position, or else choose to avoid direct criticism of the PRC'. These public statements have significantly shaped media and public knowledge of the role of the Chinese language media in Australia, yet it is not clear what the control mechanism is or what shape and form censorship takes.

Such vague generalisation is not limited to opinion writers. An academic study (Sear, Jensen and Chen, 2018) on the news and current affairs content published on three WSAs finds that these accounts seldom publish news about Chinese politics and foreign affairs, and this space 'focuses the attention of WeChat readers on celebrity gossip and other entertainment topics'. These findings are presented as evidence of Chinese government's influence, arguing that Australia-focused WeChat accounts only report 'news that serves the strategic objectives of the government in question' (Sear, Jensen and Chen, 2018). Despite these authors' caution that 'the flow on effect of regulation and influence on these platforms when they are used outside China's borders is more complex', this research nevertheless fails to tease out the effect of regulation and the complexity of censorship and the content control mechanism.

The ramifications of this lack of detailed and nuanced understanding of Chinese-language digital/social media are serious, especially against the backdrop of an increasingly entrenched debate about Chinese influence in the Australia's public discourse. The allegiance of Australia's Chinese-speaking migrants, now numbering 1.2 million and making up around 4 per cent of the national population, has come under increasing scrutiny as a result of this discussion of Chinese influence (e.g. Hartcher, 2019). One core aspect of the Chinese influence narrative is the question of WeChat's role in Australian public life.

There is an urgent need for a comprehensive and empirically based account of the institutional context, regulatory framework, types of content and modus operandi of WeChat, particularly WSAs. There are two major reasons why it is important to understand how WSAs work. First, as

pointed out earlier, while the CCP has made some inroads into traditional media, such as radio and newspapers, their impact and reach is dwarfed by that of digital media as far as Mandarin-speaking media users in Australia are concerned. Second, WSAs and outlets' own apps are the two key ways of delivering content and two main gateways for accessing news among Australia's Chinese community. While our main intention is to fill an empirical gap in research on WeChat in Australia, therefore complicating current understanding of WeChat, we are also motivated by a desire to contribute to the debate on the changing shape and contour of Chinese transnationalism, particularly on the concept of 'transnational entrepreneurship' among immigrants (e.g. Zapata-Barrero and Rezaei, 2019).

This article is a political economic account of the Chinese-language digital/social media, paying particular attention to WSAs. In what follows, we first provide a brief account of the development of and connections between three components: online Chinese-language media content, WeChat as a content delivery platform and WSAs as business initiatives. We also report on our survey data, with the aim of contextualising this connection. In the second section, we outline the political-economic aspects of this sector, including issues of ownership, funding and business model. This is followed by an analysis of the WSAs in the WeChat ecosystem and their regulatory framework. The final section, which is a detailed examination of the top 50 WSAs that target Chinese migrants in Australia, aims to illustrate how political, economic and regulatory specificity plays out in terms of actual content production. Our conclusion draws out the implications of these empirical findings for existing understandings of control and censorship, and points to the importance of understanding the WSAs in Australia as an instance of transnational entrepreneurship.

The empirical data was gathered over a one week period (19–26 July 2019). The 50 WSAs were chosen based on the ranking list from aoweibang.com, which specialises in data collection of Australian-based WSAs, and the 'World Chinese-Language New Media Influence Ranking List, published by China News Service and Communication University of China (<https://kknews.cc/media/a3bm4o6.html>). The surveys were conducted in September 2018 and February 2019, among Mandarin speaking migrants from the PRC on their media access and usage patterns (survey 1, with 646 participants) and their media and news access and consumption habits and preferred platforms or sources (survey 2, with 927 participants). Both were conducted through 'convenience sampling', as participations were recruited largely via social media platforms (mainly WeChat and Facebook). The majority of our respondents are

Australian permanent residents or naturalised Australian citizens (over 90 per cent in survey 1 and over 67 per cent in survey 2), with an undergraduate degree or higher (over 85 per cent), and working (over 70 per cent).

WeChat and WeChat Subscription Accounts

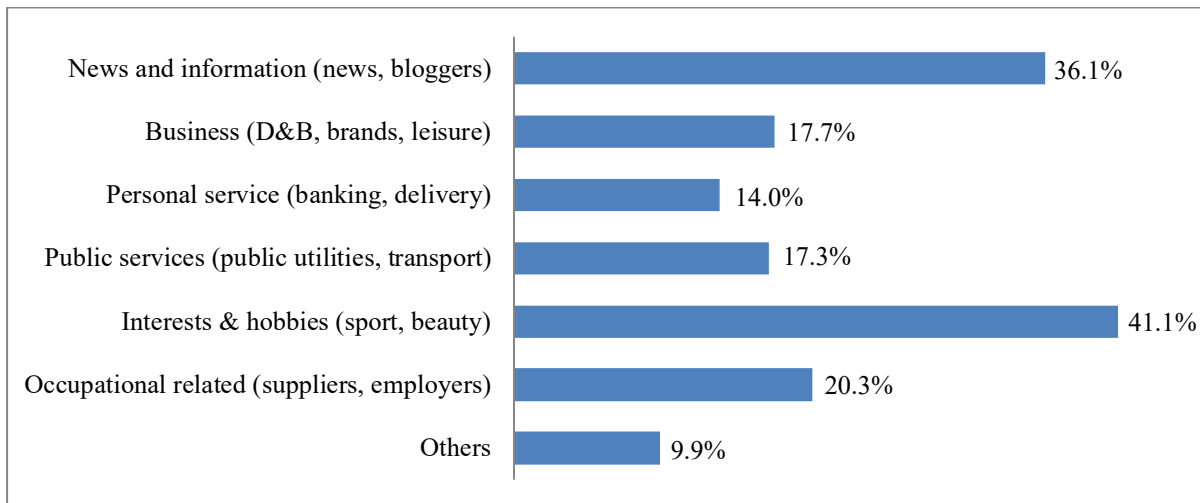
As discussed above, the Chinese language media in Australia include both the long-established legacy media and more recently developed digital/social media. Like the community language media of other ethnic communities in Australia, the Chinese-language media play an integral part in facilitating the identity formation of multicultural subjects in an increasingly pluralistic Australia. They also present opportunities and challenges for Australian government and various interest groups to communicate and engage with Chinese communities in Australia.

The newly emerged, and still growing and proliferating, online-only outlets also play these important roles, but they differ considerably from the legacy media in terms of reach, impact and business model. Over the past decade, Chinese-language digital media in Australia – from websites (since the 1990s) to WeChat subscription accounts (since 2013) that serve the new Chinese immigrants – have grown into a vibrant and extremely complex sector, to the point of threatening the sustainability and survival of the legacy media outlets.

WeChat combines many of the functions of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and PayPal with additional features of e-payment, e-commerce, and e-lifestyle. It has been called a super-sticky all-in-one app and mega platform (Chen, Mao and Qiu, 2018), and a ‘digital Swiss Army knife for modern life’ (Lee 2018). WeChat is known as a ‘portal’, ‘platform’, ‘mobile operating system’ (Chan, 2016) or ‘infrastructural platform’ (Plantin and de Seta, 2019). It is extremely agile, versatile and resourceful, and comes with many features that resonate with traditional Chinese practices, such as sending monetary gifts to friends electronically. Within eight years, WeChat has garnered over a billion active monthly users (Statistica, 2019), more than 100 million of whom are outside China (Culpan, 2018). WeChat is central to the interpersonal and public communication practices of Chinese migrants all over the world.

As WeChat becomes the omnipresent and omnipotent platform in Chinese lives, it has also become the main news channel for Chinese living in Australia, mostly via WSAs. This is similar to the general trends, according to a 2015 report on WeChat usage statistics worldwide: WSAs

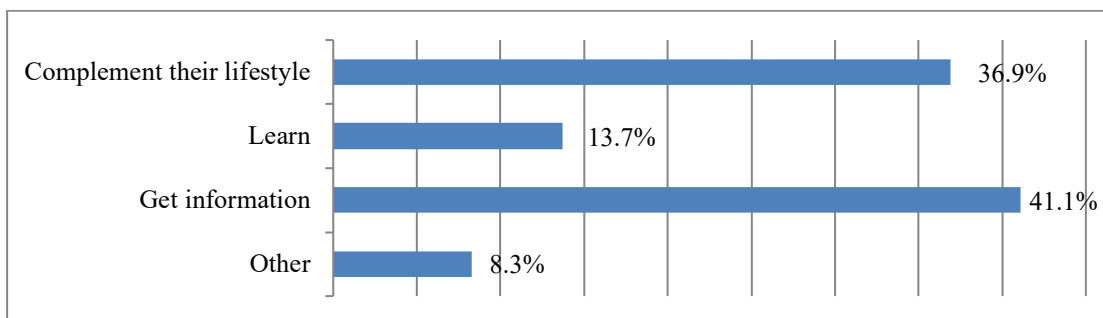
have become a very important source for people to access news and information (ranked second, next to ‘interests & hobbies’, in Figure 1).



Source: <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/wechat-statistics>.

Figure 1: Types of official accounts followed by users

Information seeking is the main reason why people follow official accounts on WeChat (Figure 2).



Source: <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/wechat-statistics>

Figure 2: Why people follow official accounts

WeChat was initially named a ‘media platform’ or ‘official platform’ when launched in August 2012, and WSAs have changed how Chinese make, circulate and access news and information since 2013. The first WSA to target the Chinese-speaking population in Australia was set up in 2013. Major digital Chinese-language content providers in Australia have also chosen WeChat to deliver their content for its ease of set-up and operation, and its wide adoption by intended users. This can be illustrated by the data from two surveys that we conducted in September 2018 and February 2020, on the media consumption habits of Chinese Australians. Over 60 per cent of our respondents in the 2018 survey reported ‘always’ accessing Chinese social media for news and information, with fewer than 18 per cent at the same time always accessing non-Chinese social

media. Unsurprisingly, WeChat is the most used social media platform among the respondents, with 92 per cent (573 out of 623 respondents) reporting accessing it on an hourly and daily basis (Figure 3).

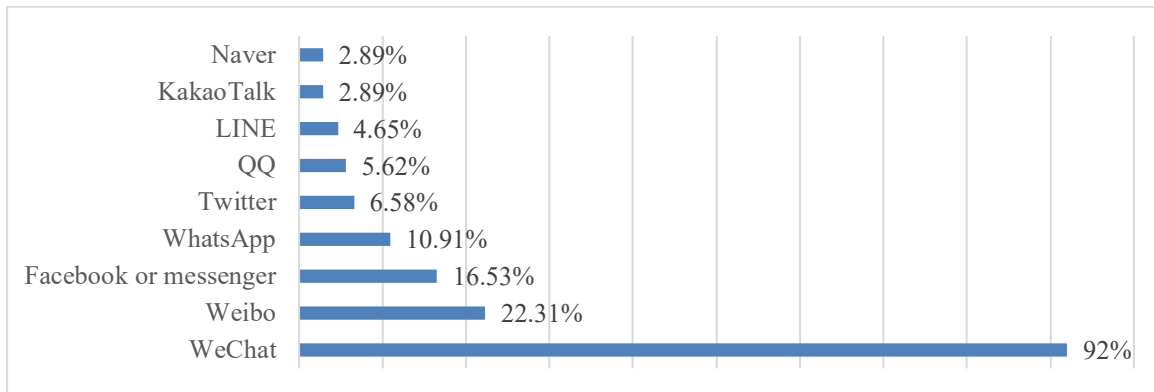


Figure 3: How often do you access the following platforms or apps – hourly + multiple times per day (2018 survey)

On questions about their preferred platform for accessing news and information, 60.31 per cent of the survey participants identified WSAs as their primary source of news and information (Figure 4), with 51.22 per cent saying they checked these accounts daily (Figure 5).

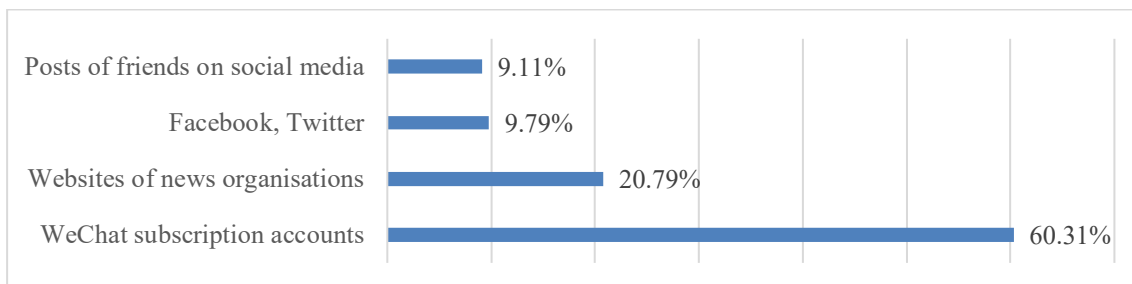


Figure 4: Your most favourite platform for accessing news and information? (2018 survey)

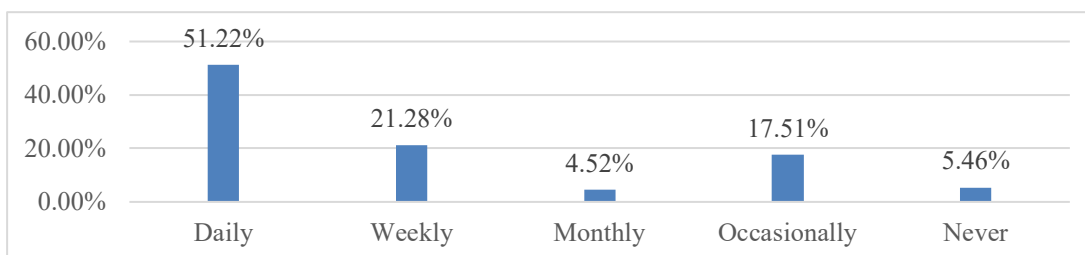


Figure 5: How often do you check your WSAs? (2018 survey)

Over half the respondents reported having subscribed to WSAs of Australia-focused Chinese-language news and current affairs providers (Figure 6). In our 2019 survey, almost 79 per cent of 898 respondents said they accessed news about Australia via WSAs or websites in Chinese (Figure 7). The most popular WSAs (in order) are SydneyToday, WeSydney and WeMelbourne.

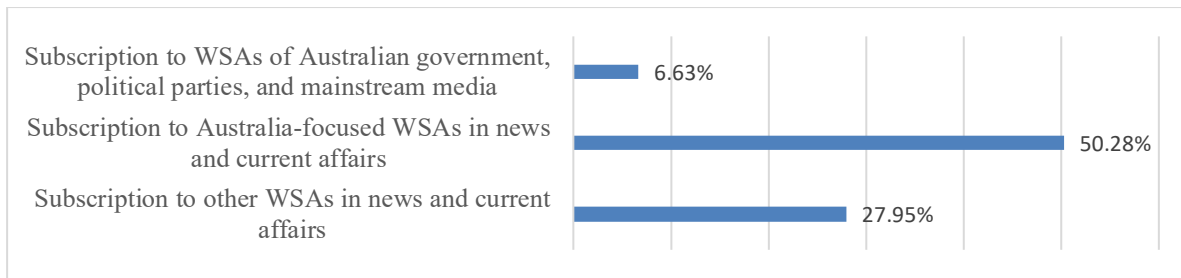


Figure 6: Have you subscribed to the following WSAs (2018 survey)

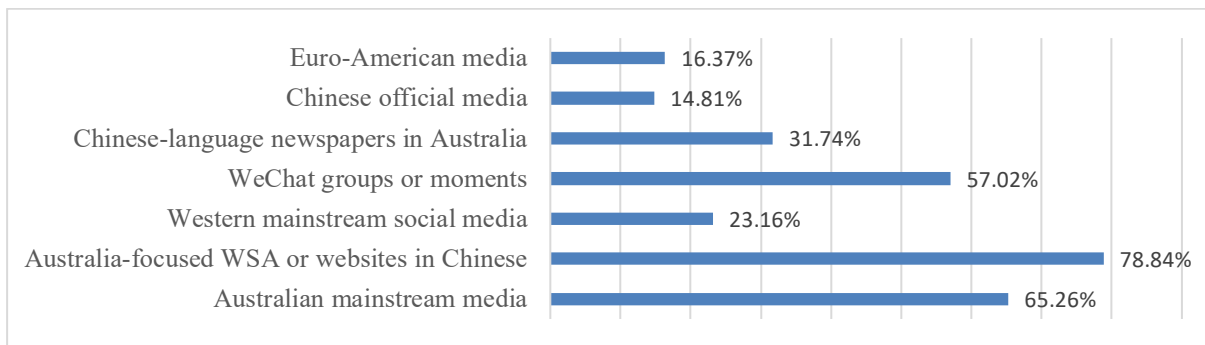


Figure 7: Where do you get your news about Australia (2019 survey)

It is worth noting that Figure 7 shows a high level of consumption of Australian media, but our ethnography suggests that this information is only consumed after it has been processed, curated and framed within a particular editorial stance by bilingual gatekeepers within the Chinese-speaking WeChat groups (Sun, 2019b). Furthermore, English-language content is regularly picked up by local Chinese-language digital media outlets and delivered via WSAs.

The WSA (*dingyuehao* 订阅号) is one of three kinds of official accounts on WeChat, and the best known among users; the other two are ‘service account’ (*fuwuhao* 服务号) and ‘enterprise account’ (*qiye hao* 企业号). WeChat service accounts are used primarily by corporates and organisations as a service platform to connect with customers and enable e-commerce-related functions, with only four messages per month allowed on each account. WeChat enterprise accounts are mainly for corporate internal communication and management, like Workplace by Facebook.

WSAs target organisations and individuals as a news-pushing or content-sharing platform, with an allowance of one to eight articles pushed to subscribers once a day. Hence WSAs are favoured by individuals, companies, institutions and media organisations that wish to connect with and push news items to their followers more frequently. They are nested in a folder, hence

having low visibility compared with service accounts, which appear in the same way as one's friends or friends' groups on WeChat. Individuals can apply for a basic WSA with a Chinese ID card for free. In order to enjoy advanced functions, such as e-payment, geo-location and advertisement banners, a WSA needs to be verified by WeChat administrators, with an account verification fee of RMB300 per year for a Chinese domestic account or US\$99 per year for an overseas account (Dragon Social, 2019). The process can be tedious and prolonged.

WeChat international users can only apply for service accounts, often through a third-party agency in China with a fee, in order to be verified for access to add-on services including e-payment. Such international service accounts allow one to eight news items once per week to be pushed to their subscribers, and they are not accessible to Weixin users who register on the platform with their Chinese phone numbers. WeChat international account users can, however, subscribe to both Chinese and non-Chinese official accounts on Weixin/WeChat.

Almost all new Chinese immigrants, visitors and students who have come to Australia since 2011 are Weixin users who brought their accounts with them to Australia. To target as many Chinese in Australia as possible, Australian companies, organisations or individuals often register WSAs through a Chinese proxy. That is, they are registered under the names of Chinese companies or individuals. Once 'verified', these WSAs can operate as, and are treated as, business entities on the Tencent platform, particularly with the advanced function of e-payment and advertisement banners.

There are several ways to make money via WSAs.¹ The first is revenue as the 'traffic master' (*liuliangzhu* 流量主): any WSA with a minimum of 500 followers can apply to be a 'traffic master' and get paid based on the numbers of per view + per complete view + per click at the advertisement automatically added to each article at its bottom by WeChat. The second is in-WSA advertisements, negotiated between WSA owners and advertisers, costing from several hundred to thousands of yuan each, placed multiple times inside an article or as an ad banner within the WSA, or through a cost-per-read/click arrangement, generating 0.3–0.6 yuan per read or click. The third method is through soft-sell advertising or infomercials, often in the form of news and information with a clickbait title and a good storyline to sell a product, service or event, negotiated between WSA owners and advertisers or sponsors with a higher price tag, ranging from 500 yuan to 500,000 yuan per piece, depending on the popularity of the WSAs (number of

followers and average reads per article). The fourth money-making possibility is through subscription to premium content or training programs, for loyal followers to enjoy subscription-only or member-only services, from 50 to 1599 yuan per course or annual subscription. Fifth, through the ‘Thank Writer’ function, readers can pay/tip directly to the writer’s WeChat Wallet to express their appreciation of the content. Sixth, e-commerce is embedded within the WSA and linked via WeChat Pay to directly sell products or services to subscribers. Seventh, money can be made by hosting events, such as arts, culture, and integrated marketing. Finally, there is the option of attracting investment from venture capitalists.

Almost all Chinese-language media outlets in Australia use WSAs as their platform to reach out to their subscribers. As illustrated later in this article, these WSAs use a combination of revenue-generating mechanisms to attract as many readers and clicks as possible. A WeChat user who subscribes to WSAs receives notifications automatically, and can subsequently re-post WSA articles to everyone in their WeChat groups and moments. The user-friendly WeChat app and the capacity for infinite reproduction of content through reposting ensures that, if they are smart in their use of the platform, such online media outlets can maximise their reach, profit and impact.

The political and economic context

Two factors often escape the attention of most researchers and public commentators on Chinese-language digital media such as WeChat and its influence in Australia. The first consists of the nature and ownership of WSAs, whose content is carried by WeChat the platform. The second comprises the targeted users/consumers of such content. These two factors speak to the logic of platform capitalism and social media economy (e.g. Lobato and Thomas, 2015; Srnicek, 2017).

The Australia-based WSAs are business entities whose first and foremost objective is to make profit in a politically sensitive and volatile space. The paradox is that they are Australian content providers, which serve the Australian local markets, yet they are subject to Chinese platform and content regulations as China-registered accounts. Most of them have taken a pragmatic approach to their registration and modus operandi. They receive no funding from either the Chinese or the Australian government. While in recent years some of them have demonstrated incipient aspiration to operate as serious news-generating organisations that can produce original and independent content, for most of them any aspiration to practise professional journalism mostly takes a back seat to the need to produce click-bait headlines. Since growing subscriptions, and thereby securing advertising revenue, is core to their business model, these WSAs will do

whatever it takes to provide what their intended users want – and in most cases the intended users are first-generation Mandarin-speaking new arrivals from China who are more interested in information relevant to their lives in Australia than critical reports about China.

The implication of having this mandate – giving intended readers what they want and refraining from publishing content that may put them off or offend them – is a more powerful and realistic factor in explaining their focus on topics relevant to Chinese living in Australia and the lack of any content critical of China. Indeed, as an editor of a popular news website complained to us in the interview, ‘We are attacked by both sides. The patriotic readers write to complain if we publish anything that sounds like a criticism of China. And readers on the other side of the spectrum write to complain that we do not criticize China. You cannot win’ (11/07/2019, Sydney). Another interview with an editor of a popular WSA informed us that their biggest challenge was to ‘maintain a politically neutral stance in the volatile battlefield of public opinion in Australia’, particularly on controversial topics of political sensitivity, such as the debate on Chinese influence in Australia. ‘We choose to remain silent on such topics, because it is too risky to say anything without falling victim to some kind of conspiracy theory. We have to focus on survival first’ (26/11/2019, Melbourne).

WeChat has enabled some media entrepreneurs in Australia – themselves Mandarin-speaking – to carve out a niche but profitable cultural market catering to the everyday needs of a particular cohort of Chinese migrants. For these people, WSAs are first of all business operations. They cater to the local market and the greatest common denominator in their local market: first-generation new Chinese migrants from mainland China. These media outlets are acutely aware of a point that political scientists discover from their research: even though their intended readers do not support the CCP, they do not like to see their country being criticised (Pei, 2019). In other words, these WSAs may avoid criticising China or even shun topics related to Chinese politics, yet they are not necessarily motivated by a desire to serve as loyal mouthpiece of the Chinese government. As some editors we interviewed indicated to us, there is no incentive for them to toe the propaganda line of the Chinese government, as it does not make good business sense and would definitely turn off readers.

Such a business logic also guides their pragmatic approach to WSA registration and operation. Take the No. 1 ranked WSA in our sample, SydneyToday WSA (with more than 500,000 followers), as an example. Stan Chen and Roc Zhang, founders of SydneyToday, came to

Sydney as international students, Chen at Sydney University in 2007 and Zhang at University of Technology Sydney in 2008. In 2010 they registered SydneyToday at Sina Weibo (the most popular social media platform at that time in China) to provide free information on rental properties, job opportunities and removalist services to Chinese students in Sydney. What started as a microblog account quickly grew into a website (www.sysdneytoday.com) in 2011, with their first round of venture capital investment of A\$300 million and a series of WSAs since 2013, then the AustraliaToday App since 2015. SydneyToday is now part of Media Today Group, a multiplatform and multi-WSA digital media conglomerate in the Chinese-language media sector in Australia, which also operates MelToday, QLDToday, WAToday, AdeToday, CanberraToday, AusToday and EventsToday.

Chen and Zhang represent the new generation of media entrepreneurship among the new Chinese migrants in Australia who seize the opportunities that digital and social media have brought to make a viable business through information brokerage. They set up a private owned company in Nanchang, China in 2013 that serves as the Chinese proxy for their Media Today WSAs. Their first WSA, SydneyToday, was registered and in operation almost immediately after the Chinese company was registered. The company also provides technical and marketing support to all subsidiaries of the Media Today Group.

Such a pragmatic approach to WSA registration and operation is typical of Chinese diaspora entrepreneurs and their business endeavours. As China-registered WSAs, they can reach as many consumers as possible, irrespective of the nature of their accounts as Chinese users on Weixin or non-Chinese users on its international version WeChat. WSAs have offered a viable business opportunity to a new generation of independent bloggers and digital entrepreneurs to make profit through content production. Most of the Australia-focused WSAs have made a viable business through content/information production and circulation and have become a key part of the business ecosystem of their owners. Among the 50 WSAs we discuss in the final section, nine are owned by three companies: Media Today (four of its eight WSAs), ABC Media (three of its eight WSAs), and Auwe Group (two WSAs). These companies have a wide range of business beyond WeChat, in multimedia consultancy, advertising, e-commerce, cultural events and exhibition.

As part of the WeChat infrastructure, WSAs have become a platform of their own, which influences the way people connect, get their news, share information and market products and services. Australia-focused WSAs are only small players among the total five million WSAs; however, they have carved out a niche market in the ethnic economy among Chinese speakers in Australia. They are part of Tencent's 'platform bundling' and global expansion strategy (Staykova and Damsgaard, 2016), highlighting how digital entrepreneurs of Chinese background in Australia capitalise on the WeChat ecosystem to better serve the information needs of Chinese communities in Australia. As a platform within the bigger infrastructural platform of WeChat, WSAs serve as a kind of 'firm', an 'intermediary that brings together different users: customers, advertisers, service providers, producers, suppliers, and even physical objects' (Srnicsek, 2017: 43). The different users brought together by Australia-focused WSAs are not only Chinese speakers and businesses, but also Australian local businesses, corporate entities and public bodies. The media economics of WSAs are representative of the social media economy – both formal and informal – and serve as 'gateways for power, politics and pleasure' (Lobato and Thomas, 2015: 5).

Typology of WSAs and regulatory framework

According to Tencent's official documents, Weixin and WeChat use different servers, with data stored in different locations. WeChat's servers are outside China and not subject to Chinese law, while Weixin's servers are in China and subject to Chinese law. Most people are not aware of any difference between the two versions. It is the location of users that matters most when it comes to user experience with content censorship, which will be discussed later. In this article, we have used 'WeChat' as a general term to refer to both the Chinese version and international version of the most popular social media platform among the Chinese population worldwide. In this section we provide a more detailed analysis of the different types of WSAs and the regulatory framework that governs WeChat and WSAs.

WSAs normally fall into four categories: (1) accounts that are set up by Chinese individuals as a content-sharing platform (in the form of blogging), known as self-media or we-media, without explicit business purposes initially and often starting to make profit when they become popular with a large number of followers; (2) accounts that are registered under Chinese individual names for private business entities and for profit from the start; (3) accounts that are registered

under Chinese individual names but operate as non-for-profit organisations, often for public diplomacy and publicity purposes; (4) accounts that are registered under private company or organisational names for business or public diplomacy purposes. The WSA of Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison belongs to the third category: set up by an individual with a Chinese ID and non-for-profit. The WSA of the US embassy in China belongs to the fourth category and serves the purpose of public diplomacy (Geng, 2016). Most WSAs that we have examined in this study fall into the first and second categories – that is, at the time of our research, they are business entities and for profit, run by Chinese bloggers, media entrepreneurs and established Chinese-language media companies in Australia.

Established Chinese-language media companies in Australia have adopted multimedia and multi-platform strategies to maximise their influence and market. They often choose to set up verified WSAs to enjoy the advanced features and to look more professional. Twenty-seven out of the 50 WSAs under investigation also have websites that share content on WSAs. The rest (23 out of the 50 WSAs) are WeChat-only self-media – that is, accounts set up by individuals and private companies as their sole digital platform and business operation through content production. Their market size, as measured by the number of subscribers and average views per article, can be on par with, and may surpass, some of the more established Chinese-language media platforms.

The WSA offers an easy entry and low threshold for anyone to make a profit out of content production, as explained earlier. Producing content that is attractive to potential readers and at the same time compliant with Tencent’s content regulations is a tricky business. All articles and posts on WeChat are filtered by auto and human censors. Any article that is deemed ‘sensitive’ or illegal by censors will not be published during the *pre-publication* review process, or will be deleted during the *post-publication* review process. Research on WeChat censorship has shown that it works at different levels (state polices and platform regulations) through a combination of tactics, which include keyword identification, algorithmic recognition of politically sensitive images, close scrutiny of flagged individuals and organisations on the government’s watch list and those with more than 3000 ‘friends’ on WeChat, and heightened surveillance of high-risk locations and during politically sensitive times (Knockel and Xiong, 2019; Ng, 2015).² Apart from the centralised censorship mechanism, WeChat also allows users to report illegal information as well as on each other through its ‘Report’ function embedded in the three key WeChat spaces – the chat function, WeChat Moments and WeChat official accounts.

The penalties range from deleting posts and blocking links to problematic articles or sites, to issuing warnings to account owners (of individuals, chat groups or WSAs), to temporarily suspending accounts or chat groups (up to seven days), to permanently blocking accounts and groups. The rules are often murky and boundaries of the permissible unclear; penalties can be handed out without warning or explanation and the appeal mechanism is perfunctory for WSAs and non-existent for individual accounts. The temporary blocking of chat groups comes in two forms: complete blocking of interactions of all users for a certain period of time; and only blocking Chinese domestic users from posting or seeing anything in the group but leaving overseas users to continue to chat freely. The second form is most commonly experienced by Chinese Australians. Such a censorship and penalty regime operates according to the undeclared ‘one platform two systems’ policy, and gives overseas users more leeway to navigate through the murky waters.

WSAs are part of the censorship regime and network that combines high-tech (machine-learning technologies) with low-tech (user reports) means through pre-publication and post-publication censorship processes. Of all the popular features within WeChat, WSAs face the tightest content restrictions, precisely because of their quick and easy reach to mass audiences when users/subscribers share posts with friends, in chat groups, on ‘Moments’, on other apps and across the general internet. All WSAs must comply with Tencent’s service agreements and Chinese legal requirements. This includes prohibitions against spreading information that is fake (including misleading advertising) or pornographic; that causes ethnic division; that is against China’s policies on national security, unity and interest, or against Chinese policies on religion, public assembly and copyright; that is against Chinese socialist core values; and that distorts the party and national history. Not all WSAs are qualified to report on news and current affairs, particularly those related to Chinese politics, economy, military, foreign affairs and unexpected incidents. The Chinese authorities stipulate that only those media entities with news permits – established in the PRC, with their editors-in-chief and core management members all PRC citizens, and authorised by the state and its delegates – are allowed to engage in original news reportage. Private companies, foreign entities or Sino-foreign joint ventures are excluded from the news permit application (CAC, 2017a).

This regulation against news reportage is not limited to WSAs. According to a 2017 law, ‘Provisions for the Administration of Internet News Information Services’, all internet service

providers and platforms can only reprint information that is published by government-acknowledged news organisations, and do so without ‘distorting or falsifying news information’ (CAC, 2017b). Social media platforms, including WeChat, are not only prohibited from publishing original or independent news articles but also required to censor their users who break the rules. This means that most WSAs are not allowed to report original news (except those owned by officially registered news media recognised by the Chinese authorities), including Australia-focused WSAs. However, they can cite or re-post news items from official or authorised sources or platforms. Still, they are subject to censorship of WeChat administrators, who can delete articles deemed to violate the regulations or even close down the WSAs in serious cases.

Despite the regulations on WSAs in reporting news and current affairs, WeChat as a content-distribution platform is able to implement the policies at its own discretion. Quite often, censorship against news content produced by WSAs is uneven and biased towards Chinese domestic politics and sensitive topics. In other words, regulations against original news reportage on WSAs are more relaxed on content unrelated to China, the CCP, Chinese political leadership, or Chinese domestic politics. WSAs run by overseas Chinese and for the diasporic markets are subject to a much more flexible regime of content regulation. They can push original news to their subscribers that focuses on local content relevant to their host countries or cities, or repost or trans-edit (translate and edit) news from official media outlets in both Chinese and English, as long as the items do not discuss sensitive topics or contain keywords that are prohibited from public discussion in China (Zhou, 2019). This has been confirmed by our sources who work for Australia-focused WSAs.

The understanding of such a regulatory regime is important. As the next section will illustrate, the Australia-focused WSAs are mostly private business entities, so generating revenue and surviving a competitive market in the digital media environment are their main concern. As content providers, they focus mostly on Australia-related news, news about the Chinese communities in Australia, and social and lifestyle news of their local markets in Australia, while being subject to content regulations of the Chinese platform. The tension between ‘local’ operation and ‘glocal’ regulation, and between ‘content’ and ‘platform’, can be seen in the collective portrait of the top 50 WSAs under our investigation.

Top 50 WSAs in Australia: A collective portrait

We have chosen the top 50 WSAs on the basis of their subscription numbers for closer scrutiny with the aim of constructing an overview of a range of organisational factors. These include place of registration, ownership of accounts, history of operation and business models. The following is based on publicly available information and content analysis.

Among the 50 WSAs, apart from one (*Study Melbourne*, ranked 43) without registration information, all other 49 are registered under the names of Chinese private companies (31), Chinese ID holders (14), Chinese state-owned companies (2) and Chinese offices of Australian public agencies (Tourism Australia, ranked 23; UNSW-AU, ranked 28). The top 10 WSAs are registered through either a China-registered company (8) or a Chinese citizen (2).

These figures suggest the Australia-focused entities take a pragmatic approach to operating their WSAs as business entities, public relations or public diplomacy platforms. As explained earlier, a WSA of Chinese owners is easy, fast and free to register, with a greater allowance for daily posts than a foreign-owned account, and it is accessible to both WeChat and Weixin users. This is confirmed by some of the WSA owners through our interviews. In other words, on paper the Australia-focused WSAs appear connected to Chinese companies and individuals, but this is mostly in order to get around the rules and regulations related to registration and content delivery restrictions for foreign entities and to maximise capacity for content delivery to a wide range of Weixin/WeChat users. This connection does not necessarily mean that the content is controlled by someone or some entity in China.

Forty-seven of the 50 WSAs have a history of operation of more than three years. Among the top 10 WSAs, only Yeeyi (ranked no. 9) has less than a three-year history in operation. However, its website (yeeyi.com) has been in operation since 2006 and it is claimed to be the most popular Chinese website in Australia, catering to almost all aspects of Chinese migrant life in Australia. The combination of an earlier and successful website with a newer WSA is not unique to Yeeyi. Seven of the top 10 and 27 of the 50 WSAs under investigation have both websites and WSAs. The WSAs function more like direct and mobile gateways to their more comprehensive news and information services on their websites. This shows that WSAs are an extension of established web services in the Chinese-language digital media sector; they provide an additional platform for attracting subscribers/consumers and for revenue-generating opportunities.

Apart from revenues generated as the ‘traffic masters’, advertising – both in-WSA advertisements and soft-sell advertising – is the main source of income for Australia-focused WSAs. Thirty-one of the 50 WSAs under investigation rely on advertisements of either Australia-based local products and services or Chinese products and services for the Australian market to make a profit (Figure 8). Eleven are partially funded by advertising, while eight have no direct advertising in our sample, including three held by Australian government and public agencies, one immigration agency and four individuals and private companies run by Chinese Australians.

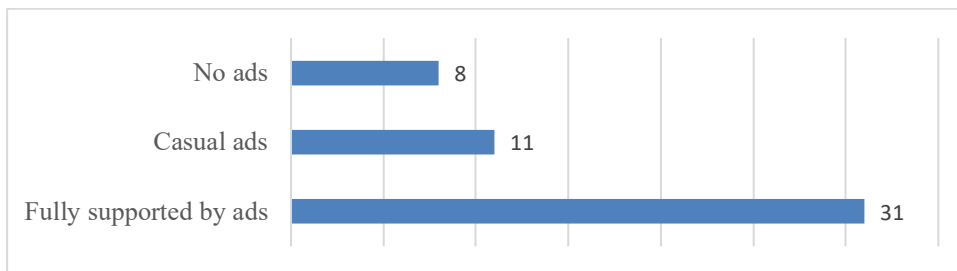


Figure 8: Advertising in top 50 Australia-focused WSAs

When we look closely at the top-ten ranked WSAs in our sample, it is no surprise that they are all commercially operated, with advertisements being pushed to subscribers in their regular posts. The advertisements come in various forms, ranging from hard/direct advertising to soft-shell advertising or infomercials, as illustrated by Figure 9.



Figure 9: Screenshots from SydneyToday (<http://bit.ly/2EaF50o>; <http://bit.ly/2PzDxd3>)

The first one (on the left, 23/07/2019) is a typical infomercial. With an ad banner below and entitled ‘Aussie brothers spent 750K on an unsellable rubbish house, turned it into this seven months later, and then sold it for \$3 million! The sneering neighbours are gobsmacked’, it starts along the storyline suggested by the title in a sensational language and decorated with images that are found on the internet. It then complains how troublesome it is to do house renovations before the selling point: ‘you don’t need to worry about dealing with renovations anymore’ because a renovation company in Sydney provides an one-stop comprehensive service to meet all your needs (the screenshot in the middle). The rest of the article spruiks the company’s products and services in detail and is splattered with product images. This article had 9541 views within a week, above the average views per article (7000–8500) in the same period at the SydneyToday WSA.

The screenshot on the right, taken from the same WSA on a different date (11/12/2019), is an extended advertisement for Huawei, dressed up as a lifestyle-information piece, with two ad banners (one an immigration service and the other market analysis service) below the title ‘It’s crazy! Xmas discount is here right after Black Friday! All stores are conquered! Huawei P30 Pro is reduced by \$300! The most comprehensive bargain strategies are here! Don’t wait for a year if you miss this one!’ It is a long advertisement splashed with lots of still and flashing images. This piece had 28,400 clicks as of 30 January 2020, a big win for SydneyToday in terms of both advertising and traffic revenue.

Clickbait titles, sensationalist descriptions, exaggerated storylines and visual appeal are all part of the package to attract more clicks. Running as private businesses, most of these WSAs employ large sales and marketing teams, often bigger than the editorial staff. Advertising deals are sought and dealt with by the sales teams. The majority of advertisements are Australia-based products and services, which target Chinese-speaking communities in Australia. The imperative to attract advertising, and hence the need to grow subscription numbers, mean that these accounts have to operate within the space of content regulations on the WeChat platform on one hand, and the increasingly competitive environment in Australia’s commercial media sector on the other.

Such a commercial logic is underlined by an imperative to generate content that is attractive to targeted users – the Chinese-speaking population in Australia. Infomercials are necessary, but have to be balanced with content that is relevant to their targeted readers. We have chosen the

top 10 articles from each of the top 10 WSAs in our sample (100 articles altogether) for a content analysis: 13 are infomercials, while the rest (87 articles) belong to news and current affairs. It is no surprise that the majority focus on social and cultural events relevant to Chinese Australians (Figure 10).

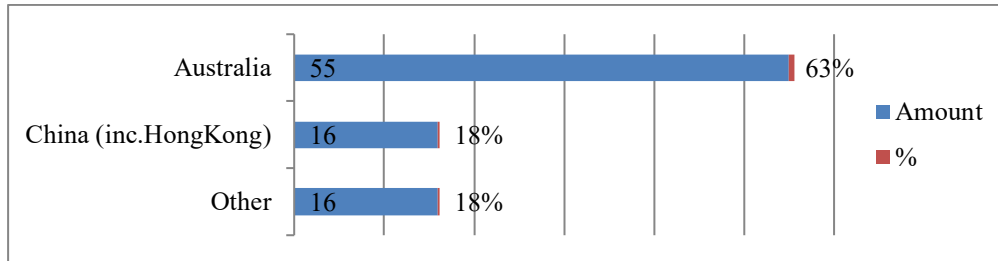


Figure 10: Geographical focus of 87 articles on news and current affairs from top 10 WSAs

The well-known Chinese slogan ‘Content is King’ is also embraced by the WSAs we investigated. These WSAs are skilled at balancing the need to provide quality content as their core business and the imperative to generate more revenue through advertising and other means. They also need to carefully ‘play the edge ball’ (*da cabian qiu* 打擦边球) and ‘walk the balance beam’ (*zou pinhengmu* 走平衡木) – both meaning difficult but nearly impossible to defend by opponents when gaming with censors and regulators – as both business entities and content providers, regulated by both Australian and Chinese laws in business operation, consumer protection and content moderation.

It is important to draw a crucial distinction between WeChat as a *platform* and the *content* that is delivered via WeChat, such as WSAs. Media content that is circulated on WeChat by WSAs is subject to scrutiny by Tencent and censorship by the Chinese authorities. WeChat, like Facebook and Twitter, is a social media platform that carries wide-ranging and diversely sourced content; its ideological landscape is fragmented and contested, despite the Chinese government’s determined and heavy-handed attempts at control and censorship. A more detailed content analysis is required to tease out the tension and crucial distinction between WeChat as a *platform* and the *content* that it carries, between WeChat as subject to the Chinese authorities’ censorship and WeChat as an instrument of the CPC’s propaganda (Sun 2019a), and between WSAs as a commercial unit and WSAs as a media or content distribution platform. This is beyond the scope of this article, and will be discussed in future work.

Beyond a Simplistic Notion of Control: Conclusion

Our research suggests that a narrow political framework overlooks the economic, social and technological contexts of media production and consumption, and in doing so runs the risk of giving a simplistic, even misleading impression of how digital media platforms operate. Instead, our discussion makes it clear that a political-economic perspective is essential to a nuanced understanding of the regulatory framework, technological specificity and operational imperative of Australia-focused WSAs and their delivery platform, WeChat.

Indeed, as our discussion shows, WSAs are subject to the censorship and regulatory regime of the Chinese authorities; however, we show that compliance is as much a sound business decision as an act of self-censorship. In other words, the focus of WSAs that target the Chinese-speaking population in Australia on local news, events and services is more of a business decision in order to manage risk than a political decision to support the Chinese government and its ideology. Self-censorship in this case is driven by a desire to survive as a business, not a desire to ‘toe the Party line’ or subject oneself to the control of the Chinese government. It is crucial to remember that, in the case of WSAs, their status and influence are confined by a pre-existing technological infrastructure and regulatory framework, rather than through any direct intervention of any specific authority, media outlet or platform.

Our discussion of Australia-focused WSAs and their political economy provides a timely and localised update to the debate on transnational entrepreneurship in the Chinese diaspora. Running WSAs in Australia is one of many entrepreneurial activities that Chinese immigrants to Australia have adopted, often exporting and localising established digital business models in China, from e-payment, fast-food delivery services and share-bike services, to transborder e-commerce. The ‘Chinese model’ of digital media or content provision via WSAs should not be reduced to simplistic digital authoritarianism or platform capitalism with Chinese characteristics. The agency of Chinese transnational entrepreneurs must be recognised as they negotiate the political, economic, social, cultural and technological capitals and networks of both the home country and their country of residence.

Through the prism of Australia-based WSAs, we have illustrated the extent to which new Chinese migrants are able to navigate different nation-state regimes and operate according to ‘the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement’ (Ong, 1999: 6). Individuals who own, manage and work in this sector are indeed responsive, ‘fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions’ (Ong, 1999: 6). They have demonstrated transnational

entrepreneurship in their attempt to circumvent the regulatory regime of the PRC and to take advantage of the regulatory void in Australia. At the same time, by latching their business model to a social media platform owned by a Chinese company and controlled by the Chinese government, they have no choice but to submit themselves to the myriad constraints imposed on them. However, the successful accumulation of economic capital does not translate into acceptance by the ‘mainstream’ in social, cultural and political terms. They are making the best of the technological opportunities afforded them, while facing the prospect of a dwindling space of flexibility for some time to come. This is the insoluble situation that Australia-focused WSAs have to face. Individuals who own, manage and work for these WSAs have to make significant adjustments and compromises, both politically and culturally, in order to forge their own path forward.

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Notes

¹ The description on the monetisation of WSAs is based on authors' research over a number of sources, including Tencent website and interviews with WSA owners.

² WeChat censorship in relation to WSAs is not the focus of this article. For further information on WeChat censorship, see <https://wechatscope.jmhc.hku.hk/visualisation>.