Article

WeChatting the Australian Election: Mandarin-Speaking Migrants and the Teaching of New Citizenship Practices

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Abstract

With the number of Mandarin-speaking migrants on the rise in Australia and the centrality of Chinese social media platforms among a large majority of this cohort, it is time that we examined the role of WeChat in political communication and citizenship education among Chinese migrants. In the lead-up to the May 2019 federal election, WeChat became a political campaigning battlefield in which candidates held live WeChat sessions with Chinese Australian voters. Despite much discussion about WeChat's impact on Australian politics, there is little understanding of its potential educational role in citizen-making: to what extent does WeChat educate new citizens about Australia's political system, democratic values, and electoral processes? This article uses the 2019 federal election as a prism through which to explore civic education and citizen-making in the digital space of WeChat. Drawing on online surveys, sustained digital ethnographic observation, and in-depth one-on-one interviews, we ask whether and how the work of certain individuals in this digital space engenders a new form of community leadership and a more engaged form of civic behavior. We also assess WeChat's potential in facilitating the process of political integration for new migrants from authoritarian societies.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Australia's Mandarin-speaking population has grown rapidly, with approximately 1.2 million people of Chinese ancestry participating in the 2016 Census. Between the 2006 and 2016 Censuses, Chinese-language speakers grew from 2.6% of the Australian population to nearly 4%. The number of Chinese Australian voters is growing accordingly, with around 510,000 born in China and 597,000 speaking Mandarin at home (Sun, 2019).

Australia's 2019 federal election campaign marked a decisive "coming of age" for ethnic communities such as Chinese migrants (Jakubowicz, 2019). For the first time, a political debate between two candidates was held in Mandarin (Dingle, 2019), and the Chinese social media platform WeChat became a battlefield where candidates from different sides held live WeChat sessions with Chinese Australian voters (Sun, 2019). Bill Shorten made history by becoming the first Labor leader to hold live interactive WeChat sessions with Mandarin-speaking voters.

As WeChat's impact in Australia is increasingly felt, Australian media commentators have voiced a number of concerns about the platform, especially in the lead-up to the May 2019 federal election. These concerns range from the perennial fear that the Communist Party of China (CPC) is using WeChat to influence the election, to a generalized worry that politicians' use of WeChat may pose a threat to national security.

What is conspicuously missing in these commentaries is WeChat's educational role in political communication: to what extent does WeChat educate new citizens about Australia's political system, democratic values, and electoral processes? Does it assist such individuals to become more engaged in politics and better-informed about their voting options? A portrait of Mandarin-speaking, WeChat-using voters during an election campaign is still largely missing.

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But such a portrait is one important piece in the increasingly complex jigsaw puzzle of digital media and citizen-making in Australia, at a time when the political landscape is changing dramatically.

Australia's new Mandarin-speaking migrants are diverse in terms of age, education, gender, socioeconomic background, degree of cultural integration, level of English proficiency, and engagement with English-language media. But there are some commonalities among them. First, they are first-generation migrants from a country with one-party rule, meaning that they need to unlearn those political attitudes that are conditioned by living in an authoritarian polity, while also learning to live in a democratic system. Second, these Mandarin-speaking migrants are not—yet—integrated within the community-based ethnic organizations constituted by older, largely Cantonese-speaking migrants and thus are typically not part of what Wells (2015, p. 5) calls "legacy civic groups," which usually exercise power and influence through an institutionally legitimated hierarchy of expertise and authority. Also noteworthy about this cohort is that a large majority of them prefer WeChat, a social media platform from China, to other popular platforms in their everyday and political communication.

These factors have a number of significant analytical implications for our understanding of this cohort and their political communication. First, People's Republic of China (PRC) migrants, who were schooled in the Chinese polity to accept only a certain kind of "communicative relationship" with government, media, and other institutions, now need to get used to a different "information dynamics" (Wells, 2015) in Australia. For this cohort, migration necessitates a shift from a "digital culture" conditioned and permitted by authoritarian Party-state rule—what some commentators call "authoritarianism 2.0" (Stockmann, 2014–2019)—to a set of digital "norms, practices, and expectations" (Deuze, 2006, n.1) that are taken for granted by digital citizens in a liberal democracy.

Second, migration thereby entails living out the clash between older and newer media logics, while also routinely navigating the tension and incompatibility—culturally, ideologically, and politically—between Chinese and globally circulated information, ideas, and opinions. In the globally prevalent "hybrid media system" (Chadwick, 2013) that features a clash between older and newer media technologies and logics, Mandarin-speaking PRC migrants have to take on an even more complex and conflicted dimension in light of two parallel media and communication systems that they are exposed to before and after migration: one is composed of China-based social media and e-commerce platforms mostly owned by Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent, and the other of the major global platforms—Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram—that are inaccessible inside China. Third, as a result of the exposure to new communicative and information dynamics and system, these PRC migrants are compelled to live within a different "citizenship regime" (Isin, 2015, p. 54)

from the one they were familiar with in China, where civil society and a public sphere are largely absent.

In view of these distinctive features, an understanding of the role that the growing use of social media plays in this cohort's efforts to participate in Australia's political and civic processes becomes more urgent than ever. In the wake of the 2019 election, Anthony Pun, national president of the Chinese Community Council of Australia and Chair of the Multicultural Communities Council of New South Wales, observed on Facebook:

> Older Chinese-Australians may be hindered by cultural indoctrination about the avoidance of politics, but the new generations have no such baggage; and they will behave like any other Australians in search of political participation, seeking public office and having a proportional say in the nation's business.

Pun's observation invites an important question: are there new opinion leaders among first-generation Mandarin-speaking migrants on WeChat who embody a new style of political participation that is more interactive, networked, and participatory? And who assumes the role of civic educators in this space, how do they operate, and what can their actions and strategies tell us about new migrants' prospects for political integration, especially those from authoritarian societies?

Our main objective is to understand how some individuals engage in myriad digital practices in order to inform and influence fellow Mandarin-speaking voters. In particular, we ask whether and how the work of certain new leaders in the digital space potentially engenders a more engaged form of civic behavior within their communities, thereby also educating individuals about democratic systems and values.

There has been a growing body of work on digital citizenship. But existing work on this topic tends to emphasize the use of digital communication platforms in revolutionary and/or prodemocracy movements in authoritarian societies (Wolfsfeld et al., 2013). Alternatively, it tends to focus on socially and economically marginalized citizens (e.g., youth, the disabled, and women) seeking visibility, voice, and political representation in democratic yet increasingly neoliberal and unequal societies (Johns & Cheong, 2019; Vromen, 2012, 2017). In other words, the notion of digital citizenship is mostly invoked "negatively to address problems, with less attention to the promises of creative culture and alternative modes of participation" (McCosker et al., 2016, p. 1). Furthermore, and perhaps most relevant to this discussion, it is still not clear how this digital citizenship as a theoretical framework can be operationalized in the context of the myriad shifts experienced by migrants and diasporic communities who move from an authoritarian to a liberal-democratic society.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, several key conceptual insights into digital citizenship are particularly helpful in achieving these objectives. First, accepting Isin and

Ruppert's (2015, p. 10) argument that "who we become as political subjects . . . is neither given or determined but enacted by what we do in relation to others and things," we found it methodologically useful to examine the digital citizen whose political subjectivity was in the process of becoming. Second, we approached the process of citizen-making through the prism of individuals' social media activities—their "digital acts," which, like speech acts, position them as "performative rights-claiming subjects" (p. 13). Given that politics and the media have become inseparable due to an accelerated degree of mediatization, studies of citizenship must consider citizens' media use and their experience of digital communication as intertwined and inseparable (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Furthermore, democracy in the digital age must locate new spaces of participation and engagement, to take into account the networked and private nature of political communication (Papacharissi, 2010; Skocpol, 2003). Third, we focused on what individuals did with political information before, during, and after the election. This approach draws on existing work arguing that questions of citizen-making in the digital era are first and foremost questions of how individuals engage and interact with "civic information," defined as "the continuous flow of acts, opinions, and ideas that help citizens understand matters of potentially public concern and identify opportunities for action" (Wells, 2015, p. 7).

We were not interested in the outcome and processes of the 2019 election per se; rather, we saw the election as a prism through which we could explore civic education and citizen-making in the digital space. Nor did we intend to conduct a study of influence and influencers and how they operated within WeChat to influence fellow Chinese migrants' voting choices—that is an important topic that deserves a separate discussion. Instead, we were mainly interested in the teaching of a new citizenship ethos and practices, and the role these leaders play in this process during the period of the election. This approach is based on the view that elections are sites where citizenship is performed most vividly and immediately and are the most conventional form of democratic expression (Bilodeau, 2016). Electoral voting provides a baseline measure of citizens' political participation and constitutes a defining aspect of democracy in a society. The election campaign is also where citizenship is formed and enacted and where normative understandings of political participation and citizenship are displayed and performed on a large scale (Baldwin-Philippi, 2015, p. 7).

Our research draws on several empirical sources: two online surveys, sustained digital ethnographic observation, and in-depth one-on-one interviews. The surveys are used to contextualize our research, providing a useful sense of the general pattern of digital practices. Building on our understanding of this general pattern, we adopted participatory digital ethnographic methods over 5 months in 2019, which involved a sustained collection of digital data from various chat groups, thereby allowing us to identify the key opinion leaders and trends in those discussions. The semistructured interviews enabled us to zoom in "up close and personal," and engage in a more in-depth analysis of the online behavior and discourses of selected key figures in WeChat groups.

Our discussion, in what follows, has three parts. We first outline preliminary findings from our surveys and ethnographic observation, and then we provide a more substantial and fine-grained discussion of the activities of five active WeChat users. Finally, we summarize our findings and draw out their critical implications vis-à-vis the concept of digital citizenship.

Approaching WeChat as a New Civic Space

The first of our two large surveys was conducted among Mandarin-speaking migrants from the PRC in September 2018, looking at their media access and usage patterns. We recruited a convenience sample of 646 people largely via social media platforms—especially WeChat and Facebook; of these, 528 individuals completed all key questions. The majority (over 90%) of our respondents were Australian permanent residents or naturalized Australian citizens; 85% of them had an undergraduate degree or higher, and 70% of them were working.

The results made it clear that, since WeChat was a relatively new social media platform that Chinese Australians would use to access information about party policies, scholars of social media needed to go beyond the dominant framework of Chinese propaganda and control and also approach WeChat as a new potential civic space. Moreover, a majority of respondents believed that the major political parties would use WeChat to win Chinese votes (see Figure 1).

The second survey, which was conducted in February 2019 using the same methods, recruited 927 Chinese participants, with 786 people completing all key questions, which this time focused on their media and news access and consumption habits and preferred platforms or sources. The majority of respondents were either Australian citizens (282 individuals – 36% of respondents) or Australian permanent residents (245 individuals – 31%); 89% were under 55 years old, 87% had an undergraduate degree or higher, 93% claimed adequate English proficiency, 71% were working either full-time or part-time, and 60% were female.

In this survey, we asked those who were naturalized citizens (and thus able to vote) to identify their main sources of information about state and federal elections. For many, an important source of information and influence was WeChat's "Moments" feature, which is similar to Facebook's timeline except that Moments can only be accessed by a person's friends and acquaintances. Around 26% of citizens surveyed said that friends' Moments postings were a primary source of political information. A further 22% cited WeChat groups as another important source of electoral information. Both groups tended not to invest much time in deciding how to
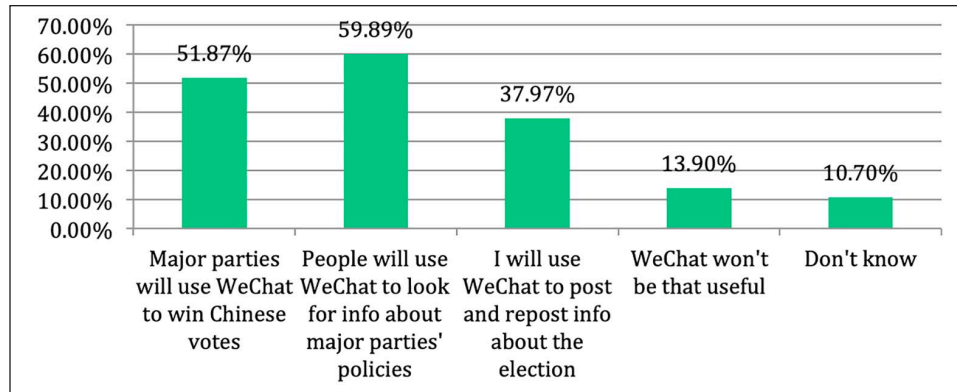
Figure 1. Chinese Australian citizens living in Australia: How big a role do you think WeChat will play in the 2019 Federal election?

vote. They trusted the opinions of friends more than the media, politicians, and public commentators. People in these groups were also often less educated, less proficient in English, or less engaged in politics. This means that around half of our survey participants access information and opinions about political parties and voting options from WeChat.

In our second survey, as many as 50% of Chinese Australian respondents named mainstream English-language media as a source of information and opinion on politics. However, as we discuss below, such information is only consumed after it has been processed, curated, and framed within a particular editorial stance by bilingual gatekeepers within the Chinese-speaking community, and delivered mostly via WeChat.

In addition to these surveys, between January and May 2019 we engaged in participatory observation in 45 politically or electorally oriented WeChat groups with members mostly based in Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, or nationally. During the same period, we also talked to a large number of community members in these groups and participated in several Chinese community events that were coordinated via WeChat. While these surveys, meetings, and discussions in WeChat groups offer useful insights about the "silent majority" of WeChat users, we also conducted one-on-one, semistructured formal interviews with 10 prominent and outspoken individuals recruited via WeChat groups, either in person or via telephone. Each interview lasted up to 1 hr, with a focus on their media habits, their views on the roles they played in chat groups, and the role WeChat played in the political lives of Chinese Australians. The interviews were compiled into a table using thematic grouping and comparative analysis and were used to supplement these individuals' WeChat activities and messages, which we collected through embedded and participatory digital ethnography methods.

Drawing on methods in social media ethnography, we researched the "'intensities' of social media activity and sociality that span online and offline" and social media performances that are "interwoven with the qualities, political structures and histories of localities or regions" (Postill & Pink, 2012, pp. 123, 125). We were thus able to contextualize our WeChat group data within our reflections on the power structures and intertextual relationships of digital and non-digital texts and discourses, both on and off social media, in relation to Chinese migrants WeChatting about the 2019 Australian federal election.

Negotiating Boundaries and Performing Digital Acts

Our study found that one key aspect of understanding WeChat is its possibly unique set of affordances, which give the platform a distinctive capacity for certain kinds of inclusion and exclusion. WeChat functions as a closed and private ecosystem. Like WhatsApp, it allows individuals to create public chat groups, as well as private groups protected by a four-digit passcode or approved by the group administrator. Membership of each WeChat group is capped at 500, a limit imposed by the Chinese authorities most likely to minimize the spread of counter-government information. To join any chat group, one needs to either scan the group's QR code or be added by a group member (sometimes pending the group administrator's approval). If members do not adhere to group rules, they can be ousted by the group leader—usually the person who started the group. Individuals can also choose to make their Moments visible to some and invisible to others; they can upload text, images, or videos, and those friends who are given access can view and comment on these posts, as with Facebook and Twitter.

We found that normally the sense of belonging and emotional commitment to public WeChat groups was tenuous. Most people in chat groups tend not to participate in debates and discussions. Typically, they are seeking or sharing information, advertising, exchanging ideas with like-minded others, lurking for useful information (e.g., journalists), researching, or simply "having fun." People sometimes quit groups or "go diving" (*qianshui*—become invisible or quiet) because of a lack of time, commitment, or interest.

We also found that the boundaries between WeChat groups were fluid, with many people joining multiple groups,

and messages crisscrossing between those groups. In the election campaign, for example, more than a dozen new, politically oriented groups sprang up. Some emerged because of special WeChat events (e.g., WeChat live chats with Labor MPs); others had been set up prior to community events for communication and coordination. Those who were active in political discussions were mostly either Liberal or Labor supporters who joined as many groups as possible. They not only crossed the boundaries of otherwise private and closed groups, but they also brokered messages and conversations across different groups. Thus, parallel conversations around the same topic could arise simultaneously in different groups, often initiated by an individual posting the same message in multiple groups, and also forwarding messages from one group to another. Accordingly, group boundaries collapsed, and chat groups became more transparent. WeChat groups that were established for live sessions with politicians usually continued as platforms for ongoing debate. Opinions from these forums often percolated into WeChat Moments spaces inhabited by everyday users who were less politically involved and not part of any WeChat groups. So, although it was impossible for us to quantify the flow of information from groups to Moments, it is fair to conclude that material originally posted in groups can influence WeChat users outside those groups.

Many new PRC migrants join these politically oriented WeChat groups to find out how the voting system works, to learn about the major political parties and to participate in political debate during election campaigns. While this is an important first step toward becoming an active and politically engaged citizen, it can be a slow and difficult process for them to truly embrace democratic values such as equality and respect. Having spent their formative years in a one-party state, these newcomers to Western-style democracy now have to unlearn political values that were conditioned by living within an authoritarian polity and must start to adopt new political sensibilities. One is the ethos of respectfully disagreeing with fellow citizens with different political points of view; another is a willingness to accept fellow citizens who have different identity politics—for example, in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or lifestyle. Within WeChat, this means learning ways of communicating, debating, and disagreeing with others with civility and respect.

When interacting with strangers in a large WeChat group, one does not know their gender, age, profession, location, race, ethnicity, or citizenship status. WeChat's anonymity allows people to express themselves freely and engage in frank discussions without fear of being identified, especially when discussing Australian politics. While this enables freedom of expression, it can also facilitate wars of words, allowing people to post derogatory and discriminatory remarks or circulate fake news, without being held accountable.

Acutely aware of WeChat's capacity to block content based on certain keywords and images, the leaders of these groups constantly remind members not to discuss Chinese politics. Even though users who sign up using a non-Chinese ID are subject to less scrutiny and face less severe consequences, most WeChat groups see it as their responsibility to rein in any discussions that stray into Chinese politics, with such posts as, "No Chinese politics, please. We're in Australia, and we're only concerned with Australian politics."

It became clear to us that participants in live, politically oriented WeChat sessions are among the Mandarin-speaking community's more politically engaged individuals. Members in these groups can be divided into several types: the silent majority, who mostly "watch and learn"; the vocal minority, whose views may or may not have wide resonance; opinion leaders, who exercise influence on critical issues; lobbyists, who advocate on behalf of one particular party; and group managers, who are responsible for the behavior of the members in the group and have the power to "kick out" anyone who does not abide by group protocols. From both Labor and Coalition camps, new leaders are emerging to play an active role in debating and interpreting the policy statements of politicians and their parties, taking it upon themselves to repost news stories, op-eds, and tweets from English-language media outlets, sometimes with a Chinese précis of the content.

Exemplary Citizens—A Group Portrait

Despite variations in communication styles, informational strategies, and political preferences, it is clear some individuals gained exceptionally high visibility, not only through their constant presence and participation, but also, more importantly, through their capacity to shape the tenor, direction, and quality of debate in WeChat groups. We discuss five such individuals in detail here, not because they represent a comprehensive taxonomy of leadership styles, but because, together, they offer a fine-grained account of new attributes of leadership. All five are first-generation Chinese migrants over 45 years old—Australian citizens living in Melbourne, Sydney, and Perth—with two originally from Malaysia. While all five are male and heterosexual, we nevertheless focus on them because our intention is not to represent the Chinese migrant community but instead to use each of them to illustrate one important leadership quality, even though individually they may possess more than one leadership attribute. The diversity of the Chinese migrant community, in terms of attributes such as gender and age, needs to be taken into account in our research project, of which this article offers a snapshot.

Citizen 1: A New Civic Informational Style?

Citizen 1, aged 46, is the best-informed individual we came across in our research. He also possessed the best command of English. Educated in architecture at China's Tsinghua University and initially employed in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he came to Australia in 1998 to join his wife

who was sent to her Sydney office by her company. He became an Australian citizen in 2006, and currently operates a licensed post office in North Sydney. He is very active on WeChat, belonging to 12 politics-themed groups—eight Australia based and four U.S. based—and eight other groups. He does not own or manage any group. He uses WeChat mainly to share information, not to seek information.

Running a post office business and having plenty of reading time on his hands, Citizen 1 spends a lot of time browsing Australian and international English-language media such as *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Twitter is his preferred social media platform, while he uses WeChat to channel news and information from elsewhere to "friends" in chat groups. He is a frequent contributor to the "Letters to the Editor" section of major English newspapers such as *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian*, and always shares his published letters on his WeChat groups. Apart from the wide range of social issues he canvasses in his letters, his WeChat posts also include screenshots of his acerbic Twitter responses to posts by Prime Minister Scott Morrison, Donald Trump, and other politicians.

Not only does Citizen 1 impress his groups with his grasp of mainstream news and current affairs issues, but his own actions also demonstrate to fellow citizens from authoritarian China that they need not remain passive, afraid, or voiceless; that they should feel confident about talking back to power, participating in public debate, and exercising their right as citizens to a political voice. It is worth noting that, in many cases, WeChat users bring mainstream media stories to WeChat with various intentions, including to inform, to validate their own views, and to persuade others. The information and views they share are not free from their own political stance; unlike journalists, they have no obligation to be impartial and objective. Any posting involves a choice—an act of filtering and gatekeeping—often to promote a particular point of view, or to support or provide ammunition against a particular party. Every member of a group can attempt to persuade others to vote one way or another, but some do it crudely and confrontationally, resorting to emotive language, while other respected and responsible opinion leaders such as Citizen 1 quote credible sources (e.g., mainstream media publications) and authorities (mainstream public figures) to make their point.

An example of how Citizen 1 does this comes from March 2019, when he made three posts in quick succession. The first, in Chinese, said: "*The Sydney Morning Herald* reported eight years ago on Scott Morrison's proposal to use anti-Muslim sentiment to win votes—a claim that Morrison did not deny at that time." His second post was a link to News.com.au journalist Malcolm Farr's recent story about Morrison accusing TV presenter Waleed Aly of lying over this issue. The third post quoted a few key paragraphs from Farr's story. Citizen 1 is clearly a Labor supporter. Malcolm Farr's story painted an unfavorable picture of Liberal leader Scott Morrison, implying that he was at best inconsistent, at

worst a liar. Yet, Citizen 1 refrained from making any judgemental statements about Morrison and the Liberals, preferring to let Farr's story speak for itself. Many people responded to his posts with either praise or a "thumbs-up" emoji.

Although Citizen 1 is acutely aware that an echo chamber effect is inevitable in WeChat communities, he strongly believes that group managers should encourage meaningful dialogue and that an individual's political maturity is less related to their level of education than to their cultural background. He attributes a lack of critical thinking to the Chinese cultural and political context, particularly among conservatives, who, he believes, subscribe to a social-Darwinian view and are more willing to listen to authority. Despite being a first-generation migrant himself, as are most others on WeChat, he stands out as a beacon of conscience, informing and guiding people through the treacherous waters of information and opinion on Chinese social media.

Citizen 2: Fake News Buster

While Citizen 1 spends much time sorting, sharing, and scrutinizing news and information for fellow chat group members, Citizen 2 has played a similar leadership role, but in a different style. Aged 52, he belongs to the "Tiananmen generation," having participated as a leader in student protests, and subsequently faced unemployment upon graduating from a Shanghai university. He came to Australia in 1992 as an international student studying electronic engineering at Monash University and was naturalized in the late 1990s. He joined the Liberal Party in the early 2000s. Citizen 2 is a small business owner (first selling electronic appliances and now furniture), and since 2015 has spent considerable time on WeChat, using it mainly for interpersonal communication and political campaigning.

Based in Melbourne, he volunteers and manages his own chat groups for Chinese-speaking voters in Melbourne's south-eastern suburbs, with most group members self-identifying as Coalition supporters. He has also joined several other WeChat groups as an observer, mainly for gathering intelligence about public opinion on the major parties' election campaigns. Citizen 2 follows English-language media and frequently cites Liberal Party sources. On Facebook, he represents himself as a Chinese voice within closed Liberal groups, but he is more active on WeChat. His agenda is to promote Western values and styles among Chinese migrants. Not interested in debates with Labor supporters, he is more motivated to influence voters in the middle.

As digital platforms proliferate and the flow of content between them intensifies, being an active citizen entails being *informationally* responsible. This requires comprehensive knowledge of what is being published in a wide range of outlets, in both English and Chinese, as well as sufficient media and technological literacy to discern what is credible information based on its source, attributes, and platform. Since access to timely and accurate civic information is

crucial to any democratic process, active citizens tend to see it as their duty to correct misinformation, fake news, and scams. Like Citizen 1, for Citizen 2, this not only means sharing and decoding news and messages, but also teaching group members how to recognize fake news, identify its source wherever possible, and stop it from spreading further.

Citizen 2 was among the first to call out fake news aimed at maligning Labor leader Bill Shorten, when a "doctored" Bill Shorten Twitter post was retweeted by a Liberal supporter in his chat group. Unlike Citizen 1—who directly identified it as fake, pointing out that "it's not from Shorten. Bill Shorten's real Twitter handle is @billshortenmp"—Citizen 2 responded to the person who posted it: "It's originally from Twitter; you should identify the source when you forward it," also posting a screenshot of the Twitter source. These efforts were soon picked up by other WeChat users and spread to other groups. The post can still be found in some groups because WeChat only allows a 2-min window for posts to be recalled or deleted. Our searches across several groups show it appearing only on 5 May and not spreading further, after it was called out by group members. The screenshot of the Twitter source was reposted several times afterward by group members echoing Citizen 2's point that it is not fair to single out that particular post on WeChat, while the original source and chat group response were not reflected in the mainstream media.

Citizen 2 has subsequently warned fellow group members to take responsibility for their own online behavior and posts so that they cannot be used to further tarnish the reputation of Chinese in the mainstream media. In the interview, he lamented how fake news in chat groups and subsequent reportage of such in mainstream Australian media would damage the reputation of the whole Chinese community:

> Fake news can be found in all social media platforms and needs to be exposed. Attacking WeChat [as the platform on which fake news appears] is like attacking Chinese users, and thus it reduces our discursive power, because fake news, like populism, does not represent what we are.

For Citizen 2, WeChat gives voice to ordinary Chinese-speaking migrants, putting them on par with "traditional" community leaders (e.g., those from Malaysia and Hong Kong who speak better English). He also believes that, while WeChat and mainstream media are divided—by a language barrier and WeChat's linkages with China—both are riddled with populism. WeChat is thus another battleground for him, not only in terms of party politics (trying to outwit Labor in the election campaign), but also in keeping Chinese voters informed about Australian political and cultural values, and promoting the interests of Chinese migrants irrespective of their political orientation. He is regarded by his supporters as a strategist and is ambitious to move up through the Liberal Party ranks.

Citizen 3: Contesting Old-Style Community Leadership

Citizen 3 is older, but from a similar background: he came to Australia from Shanghai as a student, and is now a small business owner. He enrolled in an English course when he arrived in 1989, bringing a degree and work experience in civil engineering with him, and became an Australian citizen in 1997. He was not much involved in Chinese community events until he took to WeChat in 2016, and found it to be a most efficient networking and communication platform. He soon found himself spending far too much time on WeChat, admitting to having become addicted to it. He now spends 1 to 2 hr daily on WeChat.

Like Citizen 2, Citizen 3 also rejects the role of traditional community leaders who "speak" for the Chinese community to the government and media. WeChat has enabled him and others to exert influence directly among community members without having to be fluent in English. Citizen 3 mainly communicates in Chinese, previously via the Internet and email, now mainly via WeChat. Like other leaders, he is ambivalent about the platform: while it enables grassroots community leadership to emerge and mobilizes ordinary people to engage in politics despite their lack of adequate English-language skills, he believes there is nevertheless too much advertising and sensationalism in WeChat subscription accounts.

Citizen 3 manages three chat groups and is also a member of several other politically oriented groups. He rarely engages in group discussions except in his own groups, but during the election campaign, he tried to influence others by posting long political commentaries regularly, if not daily, particularly on issues related to infrastructure and military expenditure. Unlike the other individuals studied here, Citizen 3 is not an avid consumer of English mainstream media, mainly gleaning information from online searches and WeChat. His use of WeChat is strategic—as a platform to publicize events he has organized, encourage group participation, and communicate the rules and protocols of these activities. A resident of Chisholm, he was keen to support candidates of Chinese origin in his electorate. He was the first to propose hosting a community event for Chisholm's two candidates of Chinese heritage to meet community members, which later evolved into the first candidates' debate in Chinese and English on 14 April, an event that received a lot of attention in mainstream English-language media.

WeChat was used to discuss, coordinate, and promote the event. Questions for the candidates were collected during the 3 months before the event; 14 questions were shortlisted by members of many chat groups via SurveyMonkey and given to the two candidates 4 weeks before the debate. Citizen 3 also circulated them widely and regularly in chat groups. He even tried to raise funding/sponsorship on WeChat for venue hire and catering, but ended up paying the costs out of his own pocket.

Leading up to the debate, Citizen 3, with the assistance of two others, circulated bilingual posters, promoting the event in multiple chat groups. Citizen 3's name and contact details were included on the poster. The English version simply said, "Liberal candidate Gladys Liu and Labor candidate Jennifer Yang will deliver their speeches and answer questions from voters." The Chinese version, however, included more detailed instructions for attendees, encouraging Chinese Australians to embrace the "community spirit of Australia," "show interest in public issues and community concerns" and "take concrete action to participate in Australia's political process." Attendees were urged to "ask questions in an orderly and civilized manner, respect candidates and other attendees regardless of their political preferences, and show appreciation with applause to all speakers."

Citizen 3 told a reporter from the Chinese-language website Melbourne Today about what motivated him to organize the event:

> We should start to develop a sense of belonging to Australia as citizens of this country, and live up to the expectations of this new identity. This means participating in mainstream politics. Only through this process can we lift the political status of Chinese-Australians in this country. This is the best way of realizing our self-worth.

Citizen 3 is a consummate self-actualizing citizen. His involvement in the political process is voluntary, self-expressive, and driven by a desire to gain political voice on behalf of the Chinese community, without being beholden to the hierarchal power structures of traditional Chinese community organizations.

Citizen 4: Fighting for Equity and Justice

Citizen 4, in his mid-60s, is the oldest individual we profile in this article. He is not a PRC migrant, arriving in Melbourne from Malaysia in 1987, and he was naturalized in 1989. He is a retiree, having owned a small business in the past. As a Malaysian Chinese, Citizen 4 had already experienced the racism and social hierarchy that were played out in Malaysia, and is thus passionate about the need for Chinese Australians to break through the glass ceiling. To do this, he believes that Chinese migrants need to learn about and internalize Australian values and democratic practices.

Citizen 4 is a community activist, a strong advocate of multiculturalism, and a highly regarded member of the Labor Party in Victoria. Before the arrival of Chinese social media, he was a frequent contributor of articles and columns to Chinese community newspapers and websites. To connect with PRC migrants, he took up WeChat 2016, where he now administers his own group and participates in several others. He is mainly interested in the role of Chinese Australians in Australian politics. Since he is not familiar with or interested in mainland Chinese politics, he does not join such discussions. Mainstream media and official party and government websites are Citizen 4's main sources of news, as well as insider news from private Labor and Victorian government sources.

Citizen 4 uses his chat group as a forum to educate people about Labor policies, to influence them to commit to Australian domestic politics, and to offer interpretations of Australian politics from a Chinese-Malaysian perspective. He often says in groups that having been discriminated against because of his racial identity in Malaysia, he is keenly aware of social issues, such as equality for disadvantaged groups including women; refugees; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) community members; and Muslims. He is committed to raising awareness of such issues among PRC migrants, who he believes still have a long way to go to becoming better-integrated multicultural Australians. Citizen 4 encourages PRC migrants and their children to participate in Australian public life, including debates during the election campaign. He advocates taking responsibility into one's own hands, by posting rhetorical questions such as: "Can your son be director of a major hospital and your daughter the CEO of a large corporation?" He urges the Chinese community to "break the glass ceiling and pave the way for future generations."

Like other long-time Australian migrants, Citizen 4 is deeply concerned about how multiculturalism is understood in the Chinese community and has repeatedly told people in chat groups that racism should be rejected from within and without. As he has said both on WeChat and in our informal interviews with him, Chinese migrants should stand up to the racism that targets them; however, they should also resist labeling and stereotyping other migrant communities. He says that it is racially and socially divisive to use terms such as "African gang" when discussing a crime and that this underlines basic Australian values of respect and equality. "How would you feel," he asks, "if one day the term 'Chinese gang' was used to describe a few individuals from the Chinese community?" He urges Chinese migrants to do some soul searching and truly embrace Australian values.

Citizen 4 is not alone in promoting Australian values. Many others have joined the chorus singing the praises of multiculturalism and Australian values via WeChat, often citing Australian government reports, mainstream media sources, and academic papers, particularly when the community is divided on a particular social issue, such as the Safe Schools program and refugees and welfare payments. Debates between Liberal and Labor supporters frequently escalate into emotionally charged statements made with the sole intention of offending. It is equally common to see such disrespectful remarks being criticized by influential members like Citizen 4, and individuals apologizing for their remarks in response to moral pressure from other group members. During the election campaign, Citizen 4 spent an enormous amount of time in various chat groups informing members about Australian politics and Labor's social and economic

policies, calling out fake news and false allegations against Labor candidates, and engaging in full-frontal arguments with detractors, mostly Liberal supporters. For these reasons, he is both highly respected and influential in chat groups, especially among Labor supporters, albeit controversial in other people's eyes. Despite his seniority in age and experience, he has occasionally been ridiculed by some group members who disagree with him. He takes such attacks with grace: "I have no selfish motivations [for participating in political debates] and I maintain my integrity." Citizen 4 is one of WeChat's—and the Chinese community's—most highly respected members; even some of his opponents secretly admire his wit, energy, and contributions to the community.

Citizen 5: The Importance of Being Cosmopolitan

Citizen 5, aged 47, is another migrant of Chinese heritage from Malaysia. Unlike Citizen 4, he has a more cosmopolitan perspective in strategic thinking and planning. He has worked in the IT and entertainment sectors and lived in Beijing, Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur prior to settling in Perth in 2011 as a skilled migrant. His connection with Perth started in the early 1990s as an international student. After returning to Perth as a mature man, he then obtained a law degree and practiced migration and investment law in 2017 and 2018, respectively. He is now a partner of a Perth-based legal firm and well-connected in the West Australian Labor Party.

Citizen 5 was among the very first users of WeChat in 2011, when the app was still being trialed, having been introduced to it by his WeChat-developer friends. He likes WeChat for its efficiency in communicating with like-minded Chinese migrants, but he is wary of the public nature of chat groups and their potentially negative consequences; hence, he is not interested in joining many such groups. He manages just one chat group, comprising mostly Perth-based Chinese migrants, which aims to enhance Australian-Chinese legal and political awareness, irrespective of education, profession, or experience. Apart from this, Citizen 5 maintains a Weibo blog with 565,266 followers, where he posts prolifically on migration and investment issues in Australia.

Like Citizen 4, Citizen 5 believes in educating new migrants and facilitating their integration into mainstream Australia. When group discussions digress from Australian politics, he posts a message saying, "Let's not digress. This group's main concern is Australia—its history, politics, law, foreign policy, public life, and democracy." He adopts a much less confrontational pedagogic style than Citizen 4, preferring a gentler form of teaching. In June 2019, following the announcement of the Order of Australia awards, one group member commented that he liked Australia's national anthem. In response, Citizen 5 posted the lyrics of the anthem, and in a series of posts asked, "Have you noticed that someone recently suggested tweaking the wording of the anthem?" "The suggestion is to change 'young and free' to

'strong and free'." "Personally, I agree with this. This country of ours is not young." "If we insist on using 'young', we are effectively negating the existence of Aboriginal people." "We would be robbing them of their sovereignty." Someone responded by saying, "But Aboriginal people lived tribally, not as a nation-state." Someone else chimed in, "If you change the wording, you'll also need to move Australia Day, right?" to which Citizen 5 replied, "Indeed, it just shows how complex these issues are. And politicians need to take all these things into account before arriving at a decision."

As a cosmopolitan and multinational from "Greater China," Citizen 5 is familiar with China and well acquainted with mainland Chinese migrants' culture, politics, and mentality. He believes in careful management—not only of his chat group but also in his main long-term political ambition—to incubate the next generation of leaders among second- and third-generation Chinese Australians. Hence, he is actively involved in the Labor Party in WA, selecting and training young and talented Chinese Australians to be next-generation political leaders. Cultivating political awareness and multicultural citizenship takes a long time and is not confined to election campaigns. It requires awareness-raising at the grassroots level among migrants and their children.

Citizen 5 is highly regarded for his leadership by group members. Occasionally, he sets an agenda or proposes a topic (e.g., raising bilingual children in Australia) for his group, and encourages members to have meaningful and focused debate on that issue, rather than allowing discussions to meander in multiple directions. During the election campaign, he strictly forbade party politics and banned anybody who launched into attacking opponents. He is proud of his group, which he describes as "scandal free." It is a breath of fresh air in the jungle of in-group fighting, fake news, and defamatory attacks that characterize numerous other chat groups. High "stickiness" characterizes his chat group, its members tending to stay in his group for sensible and calm discussions on issues of common interest—unlike some groups whose members join and exit in high volumes due to the frequent occurrence and poor management of discord and confrontation. Observing how the mainstream media report on the Chinese and WeChat, Citizen 5 believes that WeChat is not fundamentally different from other social media platforms. To him, mainstream media tend to "racialize" WeChat. He thinks that like Twitter and Facebook, WeChat is a double-edged sword, especially for political candidates, and that all platforms can be both positive and negative for candidates.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our research suggests that the use of WeChat enabled a much higher level of political engagement among Mandarin-speaking Australians in the 2019 federal election. In addition, for the first time, politically oriented WeChat groups emerged before the election to provide hitherto unavailable platforms for these voters. Some group members have taken

on the self-appointed role of sharing and assessing information and informing and shaping debates. We found that better-educated older men tend to assume leadership roles in this online political space. While some political parties have turned to WeChat during the 2019 election campaign, particularly in key marginal seats with a high population of Mandarin-speaking voters (Sun, 2019), our research has pointed to an incipient civic information strategy, a new citizenship identity style, and a self-initiated and self-sustained process of citizenship-making in its infancy.

Our discussion supports the view (Isin & Ruppert, 2015) that it is not that individuals adopt democratic values *before* or *after* they inhabit these digital forums; rather, it is that they begin the process of becoming a democratic citizen only *while* learning to behave in a civil manner informationally in these spaces. Their digital actions are voluntary, individualized, self-expressive, organized through online networks instead of formal groups, and not affiliated with institutions. And the role of individual WeChat members in mentoring, modeling, and teaching a democratic ethos, values, and practices is crucial.

Political communication research has identified a shift from a traditional paradigm of dutiful citizenship (DC) toward more self-actualizing (AC) styles of civic participation (Bennett et al., 2011, 2009). The former describes a citizen identity style marked by an attention to political institutions (major parties, voting, etc.), following political news in the media, and meeting legal citizenship obligations. The latter describes a style adopted mostly by digital natives, who prefer to engage in issues that reflect personal values outside institutional structures, and participate in politics not out of a sense of obligation but out of a desire to "do it for themselves" (Coleman, 2008, p. 189). Research in Australia has also identified the shift from dutiful to self-actualizing citizenship, especially in the context of young people's digital political participation in Australian politics (Vromen, 2017). Adopting a new civic information style, these "actualizing" leaders are best described as voluntary, individualized, self-expressive and antiauthoritarian individuals who are not affiliated with institutions but organized through online networks and connective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Their leadership, although informal, is established through their individual capacity to produce, share, interpret, and assess information. In the case studies discussed above, we can indeed see glimpses of some "actualizing" citizens-in-the-making among Mandarin-speaking first-generation Chinese Australians.

The role of these exemplary citizens as providers, assessors, and interpreters of information derives from their ability to access, select, and post news stories and political information in English and Chinese from a wide range of social media, newspapers, television, and search engines, often providing their own summaries, interpretations, and Chinese translations. Group members often look to these individuals to inform their opinions, knowing that they are exposed to a diverse array of news and perspectives. In this sense, what we have discovered resembles the "two-step communication"

model made widely known by communication study pioneers such as Lazarsfeld et al. (1968). Our study has also provided fresh evidence supporting Katz's comment at the 2018 International Communication Association conference that the two-step communication model is still relevant in the digital era, particularly in the communication environment inhabited by new migrants. In fact, we found that the two-step communication initiated by exemplary Chinese Australians via WeChat to be a defining aspect of citizen-making and citizenship-becoming processes in the digital era.

Apart from these insights on digital citizenship and actualizing citizens-in-the-making among Chinese migrants in Australia, we have also found that WeChat enables some older-generation Chinese community leaders to connect with and educate new PRC migrants. These individuals, though small in number, seem to depart from the long-standing perception of Chinese migrants as politically passive and disengaged. Citizen 4 is such an individual. Drawing on his experience of having also lived in Malaysia, he is able to impart his knowledge of multiculturalism and its practices to newcomers, thereby proving himself to be an invaluable teacher and mentor. From being a leader among predigital Chinese Australians, he has successfully "migrated" to WeChat in order to reach out to more recent arrivals from China. His voluntary involvement points to the potential of encouraging and mobilizing older-generation Chinese Australians to connect with and pass wisdom on to newcomers. Future studies of the political socialization of Chinese migrants will need to take account of this indicative finding, particularly in exploring new ways of building connections between older and newer generations of Chinese migrants. Furthermore, although we found that some women maintained active voices in group discussions, WeChat group managers and leaders were mostly men. Future work needs to consider the gendered implications of this finding.

Political science research in Australia (e.g., Bilodeau et al., 2010) indicates that first-generation migrants from authoritarian societies display both authoritarian imprints and democratic desires; they tend to have lower levels of confidence in Australia's political institutions, and many may carry with them a fear of the state's political instruments (Pietsch & McAllister, 2016). Citizen 3 arrived in Australia in 1989, in the midst of an intensely oppressive era in Chinese history, yet he seems to be exceptionally engaged politically here, perhaps precisely because of his past experience with an authoritarian regime. And it is digital media platforms such as WeChat that have enabled him to do that. Our research suggests that while existing insights about new migrants' lack of confidence are relevant, it is now essential to refine such findings by factoring in these individuals' almost ubiquitous use of digital media.

Finally, our discussion has made a modest start in refurbishing the analytical concept of digital citizenship. By exploring the migrant's transition from an authoritarian to a democratic society, and then demonstrating the potential of digital social media as educational tools promoting

democratic values and positive politicization, our research takes a small step toward rectifying this problem.

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