Digital/Social Media and the Chinese Community in Australia: Local Findings with Global Implications

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More than ever before, the so-called 'global West' faces a paradoxical situation in the wake of China's rise: their growing economic dependence on China, on the one hand, and their perceived incompatibility with Chinese political, ideological, social and cultural values, on the other. For countries such as the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand – favourite destinations for migrants from China – how the ethnic Chinese-language media figure in this paradoxical situation is no longer just an academic question that interests only media scholars.

Mainstream Australia, wedged between the increasingly dominating presence of China and its own ideological and strategic alliance with the US, has become increasingly anxious about China's rise. This anxiety is in part a response to a global discourse of the 'China threat' and mounting evidence of the Chinese government's efforts to shape international public opinion through media. Unlike the United States, which had only a lukewarm response to Joseph Nye's arguments about 'soft power', China has embraced the concept enthusiastically in its policy discourse. As part of this soft power project, the Chinese government strategically engages with diasporic Chinese media, now widely described in China's policy circles as 'vessels' that can help advance China's agenda in the world. Diasporic Chinese media are expected to play a key role in persuading Chinese migrants—and, through their people-to-people diplomacy, the rest of the world—to see things from China's point of view.

Key Findings

In late 2016, the Australia-China Relations Institute, a key think-tank organization in Australia, commissioned a major report on the developments of the Chinese-language media in Australia.[1] Written by one of us, the Report outlines the dramatically changed landscape of the Chinese-language media. Previously, Cantonese-speaking migrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia dominated the Chinese media market in Australia, but since the 1990s, Chinese-language media owned by and catering to PRC Mandarin-speaking migrants have become the 'main game'. Furthermore, China's state media have also made significant inroads into the Chinese media sector in Australia. As a direct consequence to these developments, the Chinese-language media in Australia is no longer characterised by anti-Communist, anti-PRC positions.

Another key finding from the Report is the emergence of an online-only Chinese-language news media in Australia. In comparison with the traditional ethnic print media, the reach of these online media is phenomenally bigger. In 2016, subscribers to SydneyToday.com – one of the most popular online Chinese news media outlets in Australia – reached 370,000, with 85% of them based in Australia. Mostly financed through advertising revenue, these new online Chinese news media provide news and

current affairs in Australia, in addition to a wide range of information across all aspects of everyday life. They do not always generate news content, but instead translate news and current affairs from a wide range of English-language media outlets in Australia on the one hand, and from PRC media on the other, while providing links to the original stories from both sources.

As the Report points out, the impact of this sector has been further enhanced by the ubiquitous uptake of Wechat, a Chinese social media among the PRC migrants. Launched in January 2011 and developed by Tencent in China, WeChat combines many of the functions and features of Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram and PayPal. The Report finds that the Chinese digital media in Australia has become a fluid and dynamic space whose information and opinions interface—and sometimes clash—with (a) mainstream English-language media; (b) PRC media; (c) user-generated content from individual social media users. Mainstream society's anxiety about this sector is also in part due to a realization that, more than the traditional print ethnic media, online and social media has the potential to significantly shape the direction and outcome of Australian public life. Australia's Liberal/National Coalition Party's effective use of Wechat to win Chinese votes in the 2016 Federal Election is a case in point.

Theoretical Implications

Given that the Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrant communities concentrate in a number of other liberal-democratic multicultural societies including the US, Europe, Canada, New Zealand, and the UK, findings from this Australian study will be timely and instructive on a global scale. Empirical significance aside, these findings have implications on our understanding of the evolving nature of Chinese transnationalism. In Australia as in elsewhere, research on the Chinese migrant media has mostly engaged with the concept of 'Sinophone world', a world inhabited by diasporic Chinese who no longer have connection with mainland China. Similarly, 'Chinese transnationalism' is also embraced for its refusal to accord China a privileged ontological and epistemological position. Central to both these concepts is the idea of 'flexible citizenship', conceptualised as the 'cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel and displacements that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions'.[2] However, in view of China's rise and its proven capacity to re-centre the transnational Chinese imagination in the last decade or so, these perspectives need updating.

Findings from the Report also compel us to rethink the continued purchase of multiculturalism, which has been the official policy in most liberal democratic countries for a number of decades. The goal of multiculturalism is to promote diversity, cosmopolitanism, and capacity for cross-cultural understanding. However, since the problematic of multiculturalism was constituted before China's rise. The ethno-nationalist underpinning behind the discourse of China's rise, and the recent swing to right-wing politics in the global West following Trump's win, has thrown into sharp relief the inadequacy of traditional multiculturalism as an intellectual and analytical framework.

Existing Research and Future Directions

Existing scholarship on Chinese diaspora and diaspora media has focused on how the Chinese diaspora use various media and communication platforms and networks to refashion diasporic identities. We learn form this body of work that the emergence of the digital diaspora has further complicated the effort of Chinese diasporas to negotiate their inherited Chineseness with acquired local identities. From satellite TV to the Internet and social media, technological development has extended a global network within the Chinese diaspora. Chinese digital diasporas have been known to use flexible and networked means to communicate, create and maintain cyber-ethnic communities, and create a sense of belonging to a cosmopolitan Chineseness, an international community, and their networks in and beyond their host countries. Like any other diasporas, Chinese digital diasporas are adept at flexible ways of place-making as they travel and relocate from one place to another. We also know now that the identities and lifestyles of new Chinese migrants are not just shaped by the "homeland" or their host country geopolitics and culture. They are also shaped by the places that they have studied, worked, and lived, even temporarily. For the digital diasporas, places (virtual and physical) are constituted through social relations and communication and through a hybrid of digital and face-to-face interactions.

While research on digital diaspora has understandably paid due attention to how digital communication has enabled migrants to forge a sense of belonging and place-making, in light of the findings from the Report, it seems that research now needs to go beyond this and address a set of more specific questions.

For instance, the Report finds that how Chinese migrants in Australia respond to issues on which Australia and China are at odds—especially matters such as national security, defense, Sino-Australian relations, sovereignty, territorial disputes and human rights— is at best understood crudely, at worst not at all. Would this be true of the Chinese migrants in other multicultural liberal democracies? If so, systematic comparisons are needed in order to chart the ways in which Chinese migrants across the globe access and use media, especially digital/social media. How are patterns of media use – ranging from engagement with a multiplicity of both Chinese- and English-language sources, at one end of the spectrum, to an exclusive reliance on Chinese-language media, at the other – correlate to migrants' capacity to participate in and engage with the public life of their adopted country?

The Report also indicates that WeChat, the most popular Chinese social media, exists alongside, yet is mostly isolated from, the social media in the mainstream (non-Chinese) Australian society. At the same time, Wechat has the potential to mobilize or even unify Australia's Chinese community around certain issues— even though the end result may be unfavourable to Australia's overall social cohesion efforts or national interests. So, the question is: what are the implications of the widespread use of WeChat among the Chinese migrant community for politics, journalism and business in Australia? Cleary, this question has global significance, and should be asked of all Chinese communities in various parts of the world.

These are by no means the only new directions worth pursing in the future, but they have the potential of bringing together Chinese politics, Chinese migration, and multicultural studies in the liberal-democracies —usually inhabiting disparate fields of research—into one study. They also have the benefit of generating a more sophisticated understanding of the boundaries and connections between 'state Chinese media',

'diasporic Chinese media', 'Western media', and 'ethnic media in the multicultural society'.

Authors' Bio

Wanning Sun is Professor of Media and Communication at University of Technology Sydney, Australia. She is best known for her work on the Chinese media and culture, Chinese transnational migration and diaspora, and rural-to-urban migration in contemporary China. She is the author of *Leaving China: Media, Migration and Transnational Imagination* (2002). She is also the editor of *Media and the Chinese Diaspora: Communication, Community and Commerce* (2006), and *Media and Communication in the Chinese Diaspora: Rethinking Transnationlism* (2016, with J. Sinclair). Wanning Sun is the author of a recently released report 'Chinese-Language Media in Australia: Developments, Challenges and Opportunities.'

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[1] To access the Report, go to http://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2

[2] Aihwa Ong, 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: the Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.