### Abstract

With the number of Mandarinspeaking 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 leadup 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 WeChats impact on Australian politics, there is little understanding of its potential educational role in citizenmaking: to what extent does WeChat educate new citizens about Australias political system, democratic values, and electoral processes? This article uses the 2019 federal election as a prism through which to explore civic education and citizenmaking in the digital space of WeChat. Drawing on online surveys, sustained digital ethnographic observation, and indepth oneonone 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 WeChats potential in facilitating the process of political integration for new migrants from authoritarian societies.

### Keywords

WeChat, Chinese migrants, digital citizenship, civic education, opinion leaders, political integration

# Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Australias Mandarinspeaking population has grown rapidly, with approximately 1.2 million people of Chinese ancestry participating in the 2016 Census. Between the 2006 and 2016 Censuses, Chineselanguage 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).

Australias 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 Mandarinspeaking voters.

As WeChats impact in Australia is increasingly felt, Australian media commentators have voiced a number of

concerns about the platform, especially in the leadup 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 WeChats educational role in political communication: to what extent does WeChat educate new citizens about Australias political system, democratic values, and electoral processes? Does it assist such individuals to become more engaged in politics and betterinformed about their voting options? A portrait of Mandarinspeaking, WeChatusing 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 citizenmaking in Australia, at a time when the political landscape is changing dramatically.

Australias new Mandarinspeaking migrants are diverse in terms of age, education, gender, socioeconomic background, degree of cultural integration, level of English proficiency, and engagement with Englishlanguage media. But there are some commonalities among them. First, they are firstgeneration migrants from a country with oneparty 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 Mandarinspeaking migrants are not yet integrated within the communitybased ethnic organizations constituted by older, largely Cantonesespeaking 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, Peoples 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 Partystate 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, Mandarinspeaking 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 Chinabased social media and ecommerce 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 cohorts efforts to participate in Australias 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 ChineseAustralians 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 nations business.

Puns observation invites an important question: are there new opinion leaders among firstgeneration Mandarinspeaking 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 Mandarinspeaking 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 liberaldemocratic society.

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

Rupperts (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 citizenmaking through the prism of individuals social media activities their digital acts, which, like speech acts, position them as performative rightsclaiming 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 ). 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 citizenmaking 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 citizenmaking 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 (BaldwinPhilippi, 2015, p. 7).

Our research draws on several empirical sources: two online surveys, sustained digital ethnographic observation, and indepth oneonone 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 indepth 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 finegrained discussion of the activities of five active WeChat users. Finally, we summarize our findings and draw out their critical implications the concept of digital

citizenship.