Indigenous Communities, Online Diaspora and Social Media: The Importance of WeChat in the Chinese migrant community in Australia

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Abstract

Diasporic communities are those that are lived in by migrants who are separated from their homelands and each other. These migrants are joined together by a shared sense of identity, belonging and remembrance of, and to, their homeland. The topic of this paper discusses the importance of the mobile application WeChat to Chinese migrants living in these communities in Australia. Firstly, this paper explores how WeChat is used by the Chinese migrant community to maintain a sense of their national identity by providing a familiar cultural sphere for them to participate in. Secondly, it discusses how WeChat influences the construction of new, hybrid identities by exposing migrants to outside cultural influences. Thirdly, it observes the importance of the maintenance and construction of new connections and how WeChat enables these. Finally, it examines the significance of new and existing networks on WeChat and how these influence the migrant experience in diasporic communities. This paper argues that as a result of the ubiquity of WeChat and its importance in the Chinese culture, it is evident that this mobile application plays a central and essential role in the Chinese migrant experience in Australia.

Keywords

WeChat, Chinese migrants, Australia, social media

Diasporic communities are made up of geographically separated migrants who are connected to each other through a shared sense of identity, belonging and remembrance of, and to, their homeland (Brinkerhoff, 2012). These groups simultaneously create communities within their new countries but also experience "a feeling and sense of in-betweenness or hybridity" between their

homelands and their new life (Yu & Sun, 2019). In 2019, it was estimated that there were 670,000 Chinese-born migrants living in Australia, making up 2.7% of the total Australian population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020). In addition, over 1.2 million Australians have Chinese ancestry (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018). Australia is the second-largest community of Chinese-born people in the world after the United Kingdom (Department of Home Affairs, 2020). WeChat (known as *Weixin* in Chinese) is a popular multi-purpose Chinese mobile application that has over 1 billion active monthly users worldwide (Tencent, n.d.). It is used for a wide range of online activities including social media, gaming, online chat and e-commerce (Yu & Sun, 2019). Despite Chinese migrants in Australia having access to applications and platforms that are banned within China, for example, Twitter and Facebook, the popularity of Chinese "mega-platforms" (Chen et al., 2018, p.1) and applications such as WeChat has remained extremely important to the Chinese people and is considered central to the community and daily life (Yu & Sun, 2019). This highlights the importance of WeChat in supporting the maintenance and construction of identities, connections and networks in diasporic Chinese communities that live in Australia.

The popularity and ubiquity of WeChat has allowed Chinese migrants living in diasporic communities to maintain a sense of their national identities after moving to Australia. WeChat provides a familiar online space that is considered culturally Chinese due to the application predominantly being presented in Chinese and used primarily by Chinese people (Sandel et al., 2018). Yang (2003) notes that online spaces, such as WeChat, allow Chinese migrants to continue being part of the "online Chinese cultural sphere" (p.470) after migrating and this results in the ability to maintain a sense of their Chinese identity. This is achieved through the maintenance of relationships via WeChat's chat or video call functions, accessing or posting photographs to their "Moments" feed and being involved in general Chinese discourse and culture which may be absent from their immediate community in Australia. This is important as well as beneficial to the well-being of

Chinese migrants. The ability to maintain a sense of a migrant's Chinese identity while living in diasporic communities can work to decrease feelings of stress and marginalisation (Brinkerhoff, 2019). While WeChat allows the continuance of Chinese cultural identity and a connection with their homelands, migrants do not exist in isolation from their new country and culture. This results in them being influenced by and negotiating with their new culture and the formation of a hybrid identity that is continually being reshaped and reproduced (Brinkerhoff, 2019).

The use of WeChat provides a space for the construction and experimentation of hybrid identities for migrants living in diasporic communities. A migrant's hybrid identity exists within two cultural spheres (Brinkerhoff, 2019). Firstly, some migrants do not fully integrate and adopt their new country's customs and culture, which results in a permanent link back to China (Brinkerhoff, 2019). Secondly, people are not able to fully maintain an original and static Chinese cultural identity that is free from the impact of outside cultural influences (Brinkerhoff, 2019). For example, this can be seen in the use of WeChat to engage, educate and integrate Chinese migrants in issues such as Australian politics (Sun & Yu, 2020). In 2019, Bill Shorten was the first Labour leader to host live sessions with Mandarin speakers on WeChat (Sun & Yu, 2020). This allowed migrants to be exposed to and engage directly with the Australian political system (Sun & Yu, 2020). WeChat groups also provided a place for people to learn about the Australian voting system, educate themselves on political parties and join discourse surrounding elections (Sun & Yu, 2020). This exposure to a liberal and democratic society challenged the authoritarian culture experienced in China and allowed migrants to consider and adapt to a new set of values and mores (Sun & Yu, 2020). This supports Brinkerhoff (2019) argument that, "cultural beliefs and practices, the fodder for identity, are tools for adaptation". Further, it illustrates how a hybrid identity interplays between the influences of a migrant's homeland, adopted country and new social and cultural experiences (Brinkerhoff, 2019). WeChat is important in its ability to influence and construct a migrant's hybrid identity and can also be used to maintain contact with friends and family.

The affordances of WeChat have enabled Chinese migrants in Australia to maintain connections and relationships which are unrestricted by time or distance. Despite the move away from their homelands, this does not result in the severance of personal relationships and ties (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). While pre-digital era migrants relied on long-distance communication methods to stay in touch, such as sending letters or recorded cassette tapes, the affordances of the internet have now changed how this is practised (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). WeChat provides a hub for people to have a central point of communication that has been adopted by many in the Chinese community and is easily accessible to most people. Dekker and Engbersen (2014) note that it also "creates a feeling of intimacy and proximity" (p. 407). Keles (2016) argues that communication technology such as social media has the ability to strengthen social connections both to the homeland and also within a migrant's new home. Although there have been issues with countries such as India and Russia banning access to WeChat, its global accessibility and popularity amongst the Chinese community allows for the easy maintenance of relationships and connections. For example, WeChat's "Moments" allow users to post regular updates that can be viewed by their followers or the use of WeChat groups which allows direct messaging between users (Zhao, 2019). WeChat also allows for these features to be accessed asynchronously so people can still feel connected without being limited by space and time (Yang, 2003). These WeChat features allow for connections to be easily continued and maintained for Chinese migrants living in diasporic communities and can also allow for the making of new connections.

In addition to maintaining connections, WeChat assists in the making of new connections for Chinese migrants. For example, this is evident amongst young gay Chinese migrants in Australia who use social media such as WeChat for making new connections and expanding or exploring previously unknown social circles (Yu and Blain, 2019). Further, WeChat's functionalities such as

geolocation and tagging features have allowed the formation of new connections while users are mobile (Yu and Blain, 2019). This has allowed young gay Chinese migrants the freedom to move and explore outside their known and established communities. Although there is a sense of freedom experienced it must be noted that due to the co-presence of family connections on WeChat some young gay users have found that this context collapse has caused increased pressure for them to display heteronormative practices to appease traditional Chinese family obligations (Yu and Blain, 2019). In addition to the making of new social connections, new business connections can also be constructed. For example, the popularity of Chinese interest and participation in the Australian real estate market is a popular topic on WeChat (Zhang & Wang, 2019). Zhang and Wu (2019) note the importance of WeChat to Australian real estate agents in the advertising of properties and communicating with potential buyers. WeChat users are also utilising the application for the spreading of property-related information and news to other users (Zhang & Wang, 2019). This results in real estate agents potentially attracting new clients through word of mouth within the migrant community pre and post-arrival into Australia (Zhang & Wang, 2019). This provides real estate businesses with a growing network which they can maintain and utilise to further their business interests domestically and internationally.

WeChat is significant in enabling Chinese migrants to construct and join networks to assist with issues before and after arriving in Australia. This may include assistance with concerns on how to find housing, employment and organising travel (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). Although these networks may not be bound closely, they are important in assisting with the distribution and sourcing of information (Dekker & Engbersen, 2014). For example, these networks can help with establishing business opportunities, locating support, organising communities and promoting or seeking unity (Yu & Sun, 2019). Ros (2010) notes that the presence of migrant networks is not new and has always been part of the migrant experience, but it is evident that the adoption of online

tools such as WeChat has benefited migrants with easier access to information and resources. As previously mentioned, this is evident in WeChat users constructing networks to discuss real estate opportunities (Zhang & Wang, 2019) and the education surrounding the Australian political system (Sun & Yu, 2020). Further, WeChat hosts public accounts that provide access to information about local and Chinese issues and news (Yu & Sun, 2019), which results in the construction of new networks for migrant users to join and interact with. These differ greatly from mainstream Australian sources which are less tailored to their needs. Once part of a WeChat network, the application is useful in allowing migrant users to continue to participate in and maintain their networks without restrictions of time and place.

The maintenance of WeChat networks is essential for Chinese migrants after they arrive in Australia. This network, even if not held together by strong ties, can be a source of ongoing support, assistance or information (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Brinkerhoff (2009) notes the importance of online networks in providing a sense of "community and solidarity" (p.11). Maintaining networks via WeChat can also be important in helping migrants adjust and integrate into their new home and culture (Seo et al., 2021). It can also assist in combatting feelings of marginalisation and provide a central place to receive guidance in a familiar and safe environment (Brinkerhoff, 2009). Further, the networks that are accessible on WeChat can provide a place to connect about the Chinese migrant shared experience and be a place to receive understanding and support (Brinkerhoff, 2009). This illustrates the powerful role of WeChat in maintaining networks and supporting Chinese migrants living in diasporic communities in Australia.

Due to the ubiquitous use of WeChat by Chinese people, it is evident that the importance of this application is central to the diasporic Chinese migrant community in Australia. WeChat provides an online space for the maintenance, and construction of identity by providing a familiar cultural sphere to use as a central hub. It allows for the production of a hybrid identity by exposing the

migrants to issues such as Australian politics through a mode in which they are proficient in using. WeChat also provides a place to easily maintain and make new connections through its technological affordances such as newsfeeds and chat capabilities. In addition, it allows the construction and maintenance of networks by providing important information and support to Chinese migrants before and after arriving in Australia. This article has demonstrated the importance of WeChat to Chinese migrant communities in Australia. However the research on the social networking practices of these diasporic communities is still limited and more research needs to be conducted to fully understand the importance of these applications to international migration.

Future research could incorporate how Chinese migrants in Australia address the existence of disparities experienced when users are unable to access WeChat via reliable internet, especially in rural and remote areas of Australia. Further, additional research could also incorporate how the presence of the Chinese government in monitoring and censorship of WeChat content affects and influences how migrant users in Australia utilise the application.

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