WECHAT AND THE CHINESE DIASPORA

DIGITAL TRANSNATIONALISM IN THE ERA OF CHINA’S RISE

Edited by Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu
WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora

WeChat (the international version of Weixin), launched in 2012, has rapidly become the most favoured Chinese social media. Globally available, equally popular both inside and outside China and widely adopted by Chinese migrants, WeChat has fundamentally changed the ways in which Mandarin-speaking migrants conduct personal messaging, engage in group communication and community business activities, produce and distribute news, and access and share information. This book explores a wide range of issues connected to the ways in which WeChat works and is used, across the world among the newest members of the Chinese diaspora. Arguing that digital/social media afford a great degree of individual agency, as well as a collective capacity for sustaining an ‘imagined community’, the book shows how WeChat’s assemblage of infrastructure and regulatory frameworks, technical capabilities, content and sense of community has led to the construction of a particular kind of diasporic Chinese world, at a time marked both by China’s rise, and anxiety about Chinese influence in the West.

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72 Global Perspectives on Journalism in Nepal
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73 WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora
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WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora
Digital Transnationalism in the Era of China’s Rise

Edited by
Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu
Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgements ix
List of contributors x

WeChat and the Chinese diaspora: Introduction 1
WANNING SUN & HAIQING YU

PART I
Infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries 17

1 WeChat as everyday tactic: Ride-hailing and place-making in Vancouver 19
YIJIA ZHANG

2 WeChat as migration infrastructure: The case of Chinese-Russian precarious labour markets 38
NATALIA RYZHOVA & IULIJA KORESHKOVA

3 From ethnic media to ethno-transnational media: News-focused WeChat subscription accounts in Australia 57
FAN YANG

PART II
Technological tendencies, affordances, and relations 77

4 WeChat as a digital bridge for the Chinese community in Italy? The use of social media during the first wave of COVID-19 79
GIANLUIGI NEGRO & LALA HU
Contents

5 “Canary in the coal mine”: WeChat subscription accounts in the United Arab Emirates 95
   HAIQING YU & JACK KANGJIE LIU

PART III
Content, narratives, discourses 115

6 WeChatting American politics: Misinformation and political polarisation in the immigrant Chinese media ecosystem 117
   CHI ZHANG

7 WeChat for Chinese speakers in Brazil: Towards integration with the PRC information environment 147
   JOSH STENBERG

PART IV
Identity, sentiments, emotions and affect 169

8 Building a life on the soil of the ultimate other: WeChat and belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan 171
   XINYU PROMIO WANG

9 From the politics of the motherland to the politics of motherhood: Chinese golden visa migrants in Hungary 191
   FANNI BECK

10 WeChat, ethnic grouping and class belonging: The formation of citizen identity among Chinese living in Paris 212
   SIMENG WANG

11 Global app, local politics and Chinese migrants in Africa: A comparative study of Zambia and Angola 234
   HANGWEI LI

   Further notes on WeChat and the Chinese diaspora: Conclusion 257
   HAIQING YU & WANNING SUN

Index 264
List of Illustrations

Figures

1.1 Comparison of ride-hailing procedures on Didi and Kabu 25
3.1 Visual indication of the ethno-transnational news-focused WSAs in Australia 71
6.1 Issue salience in WeChat 121
6.2 Issue salience in English media 122
6.3 Issue salience in Chinese ethnic press 123
6.4 Reach and volume of right-leaning and left-leaning outlets (WSAs) 125
6.5 Issue salience in partisan WeChat 125
6.6 Term co-occurrence network in left-leaning and right-leaning outlets (WSAs) 128
6.7 Example of antifa story replicated across WSAs 130
6.8 Replications of antifa story 131
6.9 Distorted coverage of California’s legislations 133
7.1 Tweet depicting COVID-19 as “China virus” 156
8.1 Two screenshots of Fangyi’s “moments” posts 184
8.2 Mixed use of Chinese/Japanese kanji characters 185
9.1 Family-oriented marketing strategy in the advertisement of the Hungarian investment immigration program 193
9.2 “I don’t want to be a loser” – marketing overseas parental anxiety 203
9.3 Alternative visions of motherhood 205
10.1 Participation of Chinese researchers, engineers and students in the 2016 demonstration, in the Republic square (Paris) 217
10.2 and 10.3 Online mobilisation among skilled Chinese migrants in the WeChat groups of several Chinese alumni and associations, prior to the demonstration of April 2017 218
10.4 The latest demonstration organised by the family of Liu Shaoyao in August 2019 in the Republic square (Paris) to denounce injustice, police violence and differentiated treatment 223
List of Illustrations

10.5 Voting for François Fillon [the Republican presidential candidate] during the second round of the presidential election, on May 7 2017 in Paris, published in WeChat 225
10.6 and 10.7 WeChat discussions about French politics among skilled Chinese migrants between the two rounds of the presidential election, in April–May 2017 228

Tables

5.1 Three WeChat public accounts in UAE 97
5.2 Content categories of dubairen2009, n = 821 104
5.3 Content categories of oasisnews, n = 234 105
5.4 Content categories of CATV, n = 126. 105
5.5 Differences between the three WeChat accounts in content analysis 108
6.1 Top-performing stories on US politics from the right 126
6.2 Top-performing stories on US politics from the left 126
11.1 WeChat group categories in Zambia and Angola 240
11.2 Crime comparison between Angola and Zambia 242
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WeChat and the Chinese diaspora
Introduction

Wanning Sun & Haiqing Yu

Preamble
A few months prior to his departure from the White House, in early August 2020, President Trump, citing national security concerns, signed executive orders effectively prohibiting two Chinese social media platforms from operating in the United States. One was TikTok, a video-sharing platform owned by Beijing-based company ByteDance that is popular among young people, especially teenagers in the United States and the global West. The other was WeChat, the predominant social media platform both in China and for first-generation Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrant communities worldwide. Both Chinese tech giants became pawns in the ideological and trade war between the United States and China. President Trump’s executive order caused widespread confusion and anxiety among WeChat users in the United States, and, to a lesser extent, in other countries. There are about five million Chinese Americans in the United States, most of whom are WeChat users. They fear the possible loss of connection with families and friends in China, and with people in the networks they have established via WeChat.

President Trump’s WeChat ban and the subsequent collective anxiety precipitated a particularly well-organised, large-scale and grassroots civic action on the part of the Chinese American community. Following the announcement of the ban, a non-profit organisation called the US WeChat Users Alliance (USWUA) was formed, and on 8 August 2020, the five US-based attorneys of Chinese heritage who had founded the organisation published an open letter calling for donations from US-based WeChat users to support a legal campaign against Trump’s proposed ban. On 28 August, USWUA filed a lawsuit in the San Francisco federal court against President Trump to block the executive order. The lawsuit claimed that the President’s ban was “unconstitutional,” and violated Americans’ First Amendment right to “receive foreign speech.”

Not surprisingly, WeChat has been the main platform for grassroots mobilisation and organisation in this initiative, as well as the main channel through which lawyers have explained the legal process, provided updates and
foreshadowed further actions. Alongside garnering support for USWUA, the organisation also raised money—specifically, one million dollars by 21 September 2020—with all donations from WeChat users based in the United States and with no relation to WeChat or its parent company, Tencent. In September, the San Francisco-based federal magistrate ordered Trump’s proposed WeChat ban to a temporary halt, citing First Amendment concerns. The Trump administration appealed this ruling. In February 2021, a newly elected Biden administration asked a federal appeals court to place a hold on proceedings surrounding the Trump administration’s appeal, saying that it needed time to review the Trump administration’s proposed ban. To the USWUA, which filed the original lawsuit against Trump’s ban, Biden’s decision was taken as a clear sign that the US administration had no appetite to pursue the appeal—a win for WeChat users in America (Whalen 2021). The final victory came on 9 June 2021 when Biden signed the “Executive Order on Protecting Americans’ Sensitive Data from Foreign Adversaries” that officially revoked Trump-era orders concerning TikTok and WeChat.

Trump’s ban on WeChat, and the subsequent social activism aiming to overturn it, embody a few key dimensions of WeChat, which are so far little understood. While there has been plenty of public commentary surrounding the fate of TikTok, there has been relatively little consideration of the implications of the ban on WeChat, possibly because the latter is almost exclusively used by diasporic Chinese, and so does not concern mainstream Americans. Existing journalistic reports and analyses that do discuss WeChat mostly centre on a range of highly publicised issues and mainly aim to problematise the platform. These issues include privacy; WeChat’s potential risk to national security for Western nations (ABC 2020); the misinformation and disinformation associated with the app, especially during elections (Zhang 2017); the censorship and scrutiny of WeChat by the Chinese authorities (Kenyon 2020); and the associated fear that it may be used as an instrument for disseminating Chinese government propaganda (Sear, Jensen & Chen 2018). Moreover, WeChat is described by some as a “trap for China’s diaspora” (Wang 2020), forcing users to practice self-censorship, and it is also often blamed for Chinese migrants’ assumed reluctance and inability to integrate into mainstream society, as WeChat enables them to continue living in a “Chinese” world.

Despite existing journalistic reports and analyses ranging from wild claims to cautious forecasting, there is still very little empirical research that can shed light on some key questions surrounding WeChat and the Chinese diaspora. For instance, in the era of China’s rise, and given China’s soft power agenda vis-à-vis the Chinese diaspora, has WeChat become an instrument of China’s public diplomacy within the Chinese diaspora? Also, if WeChat enables Mandarin-speaking migrants to continue to live according to Chinese ways of being-in-the-world (Sun 2015), is it a challenge to migrants’ potential integration into the society of their host country?
Finally, if censorship and self-censorship are inevitable realities that come with using a Chinese social media platform, how do migrants as individuals engage in citizenship practices, and how do migrant media that rely on WeChat engage in entrepreneurship? These are some of the questions that concern our authors in this volume.

The arrival of WeChat

While Chinese diasporas and the cultural politics of Chinese transnationalism have been a topic of anthropological interest for a long time, the Chinese-language diasporic media was established as a discrete area of inquiry less than two decades ago. Media and the Chinese Diaspora (Sun 2006) outlined the roles of the Chinese-language media in a number of countries where Chinese-speaking migrants live. The publication of this book brought diaspora studies, media studies and China studies into systematic, productive interface for the first time. Its sequel, Media and Communication in the Chinese Diaspora: Rethinking Transnationalism (Sun & Sinclair 2016), not only expanded the geographic coverage of the Chinese diaspora, it also significantly updated the fast-changing media landscape and cultural consumption practices among the Chinese diaspora in response to the rise of China, the phenomenal increase in numbers of outbound Chinese migrants, and the shift from print to digital media production and consumption among myriad diasporic Chinese communities. If the 2006 volume marked the incipient formation of a scholarly community dedicated to the study of diasporic Chinese media as an area of research, the 2016 publication testified to the establishment of media, communication and Chinese diaspora as a distinct sub-field.

A number of processes have accelerated over the past half-decade to warrant another sequel to these two volumes. First, in addition to the growing size of the Sinophone population participating in various permanent migration schemes, the number of Chinese temporary migrants and sojourners has continued to grow, mostly as a result of China’s growing presence in business, resource and property investments, education and tourism outside China. This has led to a significant change in the demographic composition of the Chinese diaspora, with Mandarin-speaking migrants from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) having for the first time surpassed the number of speakers of Cantonese and other Chinese dialects, who formed the bulk of earlier migrant cohorts in many countries.

The second process is the ubiquitous uptake of digital and social media platforms such as WeChat as central to the Chinese-language diasporic media. The social media platform WeChat was launched in August 2012, more than a year after its original Chinese version Weixin went to the market in January 2011, by China’s supertech company Tencent, the same company that developed and owns QQ, a Chinese social media platform that predated WeChat. While QQ is still used by some segments of the Chinese
population in China, it has largely been superseded by WeChat, especially among the Chinese diaspora. Sina Weibo—the Chinese microblogging platform launched by the Sina Corporation in 2009 and usually dubbed “China’s Twitter”—also pales next to WeChat in terms of reach and impact, even though it is still widely used in China, especially among the nation’s sociocultural elites.

WeChat is known as a super app, or super-sticky all-in-one app and mega-platform (Chen, Mao & Qiu 2018), and a “digital Swiss Army knife for modern life” (Lee 2018). It is a “portal,” “platform,” “mobile operating system” (Chan 2016), as well as an “infrastructural platform” famed for its penetration of everyday life and expansive market power (Plantin & de Seta 2019). As a New York Times Magazine article put it, WeChat is “a social network, a payments system, a communication medium and, perhaps most ambitious, the infrastructure for businesses” (Lu 2019). As both a social media platform and an infrastructure for social commerce, publicity and entrepreneurship, it is extremely agile, versatile and resourceful in enabling sociality, circulation and transaction (de Seta 2020). Its technological affordances (e.g. platform design and functionality) and sociocultural affordances (e.g. user habit, the necessity for cross-border sociality and vitality in user-generated content) have enabled its ubiquity and popularity among Chinese migrants, tourists and visitors all over the world. Many users check WeChat multiple times a day (if not constantly on it) to network, debate, inform and be informed and conduct business (Yu 2020), often via individual chats, group chats, Moments and WeChat subscription accounts (WSAs, a type of WeChat official account).

Globally available, equally popular both inside and outside China and widely adopted by PRC migrants, WeChat—and its interoperable sister app Weixin, available to PRC-registered users—has fundamentally changed the ways in which Mandarin-speaking migrants conduct personal messaging; engage in group and community communication; access and share information; and start/run a business. It has also revolutionised the ways in which the Chinese-language diasporic media is produced, delivered, circulated, accessed and monetised. This process has created a situation of dual cultural zoning for PRC migrants, whereby they need to negotiate not only a hybrid media system comprising legacy media and digital media, but also a more complex cognitive world featuring (often) ideologically and culturally conflicted values and messages between their hostland and motherland.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, since the publication of the 2016 volume, the geopolitical situation regarding China’s relationship with the rest of the world has dramatically changed, with many countries in the global West—North America, Europe, Oceania—having become increasingly anxious about, and even hostile to, China’s rise and its growing economic and political influence. Chinese migrant communities have found themselves wedged between increasingly volatile and uncertain political, trade and diplomatic tensions between China and their host countries, with
their political allegiance called into question from time to time. This has significantly impacted their identity and sense of belonging.

To date, there has been no systematic attempt to ask how these developments have impacted the political, social and cultural lives of Chinese diasporas. Nor has there been a comparative effort to investigate how these developments have affected Mandarin-speaking PRC migrant communities. In other words, much greater clarity is needed surrounding the question of how the geopolitical position of their host country vis-à-vis China has (re)shaped the identity politics of Chinese communities in their specific national and geopolitical contexts. Such tensions and contentions in defining identity and citizenship will be examined in this book, through the lens of WeChat diasporas and digital transnationalism.

**WeChat diaspora, transnationalism and citizenship: themes and main areas of inquiry**

As discussed above, first-generation Chinese migrants all over the world face transition from one hybrid media environment in China—of both the legacy media and digital/social media—to a hyper-hybrid media ecology in their host countries—of both Chinese and non-Chinese media sources and platforms, and of different ideological frameworks and journalistic practices. They also experience a transition from being a digital citizen in the Chinese authoritarian political environment to one in a different political system, be it a liberal democracy, elective monarchy, or other authoritarianism, with variable degrees of political rights and civil liberties. This is an experience that is marked by a variety of shifts, transitions and tensions, in terms of cultural identity, community politics and citizenship practice. These Chinese migrants live through the transition, tension and negotiation in everyday life via engagement with social media, particularly WeChat. For new Chinese migrants, WeChat connects their pre-migration lives with the post-migration experiences; their digital lifestyle is mediated by WeChat. We use “WeChat diaspora” to refer to the embeddedness of WeChat in the digital diaspora among Chinese migrants.

“Digital diaspora” has three “building blocks”: immigration, information technology and network capacity (Laguerre 2010, p. 50). It is defined by its capacity for sharing information, networking, education and mobilisation via the three building blocks (Brinkerhoff 2009). Digital communication technologies have become an essential dimension of diasporic formations. Existing research in digital diaspora studies argues that digital/social media afford a greater degree of individual agency, as well as a collective capacity for sustaining an “imagined community” (Georgiou 2006); and that digital/social media also offer diasporic subjects a means to address their local concerns and engage in place-making to cope with displacement. While some believe that digital diasporas remain powerful but largely untapped resources for both homeland and host governments, others caution that
digital diaspora can produce both marginalisation and empowerment, and a study of digitally enabled social exclusion must therefore look at “exclusion-embedded design, appropriation, access, usage, policy, and reproduction” (Laguerre 2010, p. 53).

Situated in the context of the global uptake of WeChat as the preferred social media platform in the Chinese diaspora, new developments in the empirical domain pose significant challenges to existing conceptual and theoretical frameworks. By taking up WeChat diasporas, we wish to highlight the continuity and disruption of scholarship at the intersection of diaspora studies, digital media and communication studies, and research on Chinese migrants. We ask: if Chinese social media—especially WeChat—enables Mandarin-speaking migrants to continue to live in the Chinese ways of “being in the world,” to what extent is it posing a challenge to the migrants’ integration into the society of their host country? What role does WeChat play in the processes of marginalisation, exclusion, empowerment or place-making? Has WeChat become an instrument of China’s public diplomacy, as some public commentators in the West have already suggested, or is a more complex picture emerging? This leads to our second key area of inquiry: digital transnationalism.

In their influential volume on the Chinese diaspora, Ungrounded Empire: The Cultural Politics of Modern Chinese Transnationalism, Ong and Nonini (1996) argue that modern Chinese transnationalism is an emerging global form that provides “alternative visions in late capitalism to Western modernity,” and as such it generates new and distinctive social arrangements, discourses, practices and subjectivities. In Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality, Ong (1999, p. 6) defines the concept of flexible citizenship as “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions.” The concept of flexible citizenship inspires scholars of Chinese diaspora to explore the ways in which Chinese migrants seek to both circumvent and benefit from different nation-state regimes. It has also led to some works that identify the myriad constraints facing Chinese migrants across the globe, thereby arguing that the concept of flexible citizenship is mythical (e.g. Wong 2008).

In the context of China’s rise, the new wave of Chinese emigration, the expansion of outbound Chinese digital platforms (Keane et al. 2020), and the ensuing geopolitics of Chinese influence in the world, we need to rethink Chinese transnationalism and flexible citizenship as contingent concepts. Their meanings and significance depend on the human and technological factors that constitute what we call “WeChat diaspora.” This moniker reflects the facts that Chinese digital diaspora is anchored around WeChat, the most-favoured Chinese social media platform under the jurisdiction of the Chinese government, and that the movement and connectedness of members of the diaspora across borders in both physical and symbolic senses—core features of transnationalism—are facilitated via WeChat.
Even individuals’ integration into host countries is mediated via WeChat, the platform where new Chinese migrants learn and practice new concepts of citizenship as they embrace transnationalism during the transitional period (Sun & Yu 2020). In this sense, the transnationalism that we discuss in this volume can be viewed as “digital transnationalism.” In this context, we ask a central question: To what extent and in what ways do the transformative and contingent factors in digital transnationalism confirm or challenge the notion of flexible citizenship? In addition to addressing this question, various chapters in the volume also explore and account for what Ong (1999, p. 16) calls “creative tension” between diaspora and nationalism, and between migrants and multicultural states. Collectively, these chapters aim to understand how contradictory forces “constrain and shape strategies of flexible subject making,” to use Ong’s words (p. 19).

Our volume differs from most studies of migrant citizenship in that it foregrounds the importance of digital practice and its transnational dimension. We take citizenship as a process that constitutes digital acts of communication and debate. We also ask how digital acts communicate not only the ideology, belief and reason behind these acts, but also how feelings and emotions underscore them. Papacharissi’s (2015) research suggests that since the networked digital structures of expressions and connection “are overwhelmingly characterized by affect,” we must seek to understand the “energy” that drives, neutralises, or entraps networked publics (p. 7). Papacharissi calls upon us as communication researchers to treat seriously the “affectively charged discourses about events that command our attention in everyday life” (ibid).

At the same time, inquiry surrounding migrant citizenship must take into account the transnational dimension, as well as the national and local contexts. The processes and practices under investigation are place-based rather than exclusively mobile (Oakes & Schein 2006). Migrants’ activities in transnational spaces directly constitute migrant citizenship, since “the country of origin becomes a source of identity, the country of residence a source of rights, and the emerging transnational space a space of political action combining the two or more countries” (Kastoryano 2000, p. 311). The chapters in this volume address the implications and impact of the entanglement of the transnational, national and local spaces and factors in Chinese WeChat diasporas’ digital and everyday lives. Read together, these chapters advance “WeChat diaspora” as a new analytic framework in understanding Chinese transnationalism. This framework has a number of conceptual components. First, WeChat diaspora is born and formed out of a constellation of particular historical and technological moments punctuated by China’s ascent in the global geopolitical order. Second, while we acknowledge the transnational nature of Chinese diaspora in terms of subjectivity, citizenship practice and communication networks, WeChat diaspora also emphasises the importance of the impacts and implications of state regulation and control from the PRC. Third, WeChat diaspora refers
to the experience of the first generation of Chinese diaspora that is wholly mediated and mediatised by digital technologies. In other words, the use of WeChat is not epiphenomenal in the experience of this generation; it is directly constitutive of the diasporic subject, identity and experience *per se*.

**Objectives and chapters**

In this volume, we use the concepts of WeChat diaspora and digital transnationalism to investigate the digital practices of using WeChat by the newest members of the Chinese diaspora. We aim to understand their new digital media habits, place-making strategies and citizenship practices within the existing frameworks of digital diaspora, migrant citizenship and Chinese transnationalism. The chapters in this volume explore WeChat as a mobile ensemble of four themes: (1) infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries; (2) technological tendencies, affordances and relations; (3) content, narratives and discourses; (4) community and individual identity, sentiments, emotions and affect. Taken together, chapters in this volume explore how such an assemblage leads to the construction of a particular kind of diaspora and migrant citizenship in a Chinese digital world, in a time and space marked by China's rise on the one hand, and anxiety about Chinese influence in the West on the other.

Authors in this volume hail from countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania and North America—countries that differ in political systems, ideological beliefs, social and cultural values and degrees of integration with the global economy. These researchers come from various disciplines, including political sciences, anthropology, sociology and media and communication studies. We understand that studies of WeChat differ from one national context to another in terms of WeChat users' and migrants' citizenship status—ranging from Chinese international students, Chinese transient labour migrants, Chinese nationals who have acquired permanent residency overseas, and Chinese migrants who have become naturalised citizens. We have encouraged authors to approach WeChat from a wide range of perspectives and methodological frameworks. While some approach WeChat as a resource for obtaining empirical data and as part of the sociological and anthropological context of their research, others investigate the many dimensions of WeChat as a communication platform, including its business model, regulatory framework, policies and regulations and technological affordance. Still, others prefer to focus on the cultural politics of WeChat, investigating the major ways in which the large-scale arrival of the new PRC migrants in the space of the Chinese diaspora interacts with the ubiquitous use of WeChat to shape the new formations of new Chinese diasporic identities, migrant citizenships and Chinese transnationalism. Given that our authors mostly prepared their chapters in times of COVID-19, it is only logical that many of the chapters pay close attention to the emotional energy that has animated the online
communication, discussion and debate surrounding the issues related to this once-in-a-lifetime pandemic.

These chapters have been written with a view to speaking to one or some of the following objectives. The first objective is to examine the major ways in which WeChat has revolutionised the production, circulation and consumption of Chinese-language diasporic media content, and the implications of this revolution for the identity politics of various nodes in the global Chinese diaspora. Second, the authors outline the dominant and emerging geopolitical, ideological, cultural and market forces (including both capital and labour) that interact to shape the digital practices of the Chinese diaspora, especially the first-generation PRC migrants. Third, they seek to understand and account for new ideological allegiances, identity politics and cultural sensibilities that have emerged or are emerging due to the proliferation of interactive, WeChat-based communication and network-building practices. Fourth, to assess the role of WeChat in shaping the transnational subject positions of the first-generation Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrants—particularly in their everyday tactics and strategies of negotiation between a pre-determined identity as ethnic Chinese from the PRC and their current status as naturalised citizens in the country of their residence.

This volume includes 11 papers with case studies covering six continents and 12 countries: Asia (Japan and UAE), Oceania (Australia), Europe (Hungary, Italy, France and Russia), Africa (Zambia and Angola), North America (USA and Canada) and South America (Brazil). We have grouped them based on their thematic focus rather than geographical locus. As discussed above, the four themes are: (1) infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries; (2) technological tendencies, affordances and relations; (3) content, narratives and discourses; (4) identity, sentiments, emotions and affect. Despite this grouping, the themes overlap to a great extent and this overlapping is reflected in many chapters.

In theme one (infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, business and industries), there are three chapters covering Canada, Russia and Australia. Yijia Zhang’s article “WeChat as everyday tactics: ride-hailing and place-making in Vancouver” focuses on ride-hailing WSAs, dubbed “Shanzhai-ed Didi,” to examine the place-making experience of Chinese immigrants and international students in Vancouver, Canada. It draws on fieldwork and interview data from July to December 2018 to illustrate how the “making do” practices of WeChat-based ride-hailing services gained popularity among local Chinese immigrants and international students before Uber and similar services were licensed to operate. Zhang discusses WeChat use as an everyday tactic and place-making practice in the context of digital connectivity and multiculturalism in Canada.

Natalia Ryzhova and Iuliia Koreshkova examine the informal migrant labour markets between China and Russia in their chapter, “WeChat as migration infrastructure: the case of Chinese-Russian precarious labour...
markets.” They compare the uses of WeChat among Chinese migrants to Russia, and Russian migrants to China, respectively. In doing so, they examine how WeChat design and regulatory frameworks have conditioned or constrained these trans-border labour migrants in maximising economic opportunities. Ryzhova and Koreshkova argue that while WeChat allows Chinese users to benefit from WeChat platform affordances to stay connected with home and accumulate market power, it “coerces” Russian labour migrants to live in a Chinese world and operate in “the Chinese way,” and as a result weakens their social ties to their homeland (Russia). Their chapter identifies the tension between top-down forces like nation-states in managing migrants through the deployment of digital technologies on the one hand, and the agency of migrants in their trans-border mobility and transcultural adaptation processes through the use of digital platforms and applications, on the other.

Fan Yang’s chapter, “From ethnic media to ethno-transnational media: news-focused WeChat subscription accounts in Australia,” examines the governance structure and the regulatory framework of Australia-centred and news-focused WSAs and their implications for the Chinese-language media in Australia. Using the walkthrough method on the backend interface of the WSA system, the chapter addresses the question: how has WeChat’s governance changed the landscape of Australia’s Chinese ethnic media? The chapter argues that through economic convenience and platform affordance, WeChat has been proactively incorporating media accounts from outside China into the platform’s own governance framework, which is dominated by Chinese state actors. Yang points out that politically sensitive topics such as the current Australia-China tension are dodged by news-focused WSAs in Australia to avoid the platform’s censorship, or are framed in a way that does not displease China. Yang also shows that by identifying themselves as “platforms” rather than “media accounts,” these WSAs evade the ethical obligations and regulatory frameworks of media in both Australia and China. Furthermore, the engagement with WeChat transforms the previous Chinese ethnic media to ethno-transnational media, in the sense that content production and distribution effect are expanded inside and outside Australia.

Theme two focuses on the technological tendencies, affordances and relations through the prism of two countries: Italy and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Gianluigi Negro and Lala Hu’s article—“WeChat as a digital bridge for the Chinese residents in Italy? A study of the use of social media during the first wave of COVID-19”—provides a historical analysis of the development of the Chinese-language media in Italy with a focus on WeChat. The authors offer a content analysis of major Italian newspapers (those with a readership of at least 70,000 daily copies) on how WeChat was used by Chinese residents in Italy during the first COVID-19 lockdown (March–May 2020). It addresses two research questions on the communication and
informational roles of WeChat: How was WeChat used as a platform for Chinese residents in Italy to access crucial information about their health in times of a public health crisis? To what extent did WeChat allow Italian institutions to reach Chinese residents, and for the Chinese residents to communicate with the Italian institutions? The chapter suggests four categories to frame WeChat as a communication and networking platform for overseas Chinese in Italy.

Haiqing Yu and Jack Kangjie Liu’s chapter, “Canary in the coal mine: WeChat Subscription Accounts in the United Arab Emirates,” again investigates WSAs—three UAE-focused WSAs—to explore the relationship between content and context when Chinese diasporic content producers operate on a Chinese social media platform in a non-democratic country with strict media control policies. The three WSAs are: Today’s Middle East, China-Arab-TV and dubairen2009. The three cases represent the extension of legacy media (newspaper, TV and magazine, respectively) into digital platforms. The chapter argues that the content and development of digital Chinese diasporic media are determined by the politics (especially media politics) of both their homeland and host country; set between two culturally and linguistically different media environments, it is no longer enough to discuss platform governance or content censorship alone when discussing the political economy of news production on WeChat. The composition of the Chinese diasporic community and international relations between China and their host country are also determining factors in what and how content is produced by WeChat-based accounts.

Theme three (content, narratives and discourses) is addressed in two chapters focusing on the US and Brazil, respectively. Chi Zhang’s chapter, “WeChatting American politics: misinformation and political polarization in the immigrant Chinese media ecosystem,” discusses misinformation and political polarisation on WeChat in the context of the US elections. Decentralisation of content publishing and the logic of the attention economy drive rampant clickbait headlines, emotional hyperbole and the spiralling of ever more extreme content. This creates an asymmetrically polarised information environment, with the political right having a stronger presence and wider reach. WeChat chat groups in particular are instrumental in amplifying, mainstreaming and normalising misinformation, seeded both within and outside the WeChat ecosystem. This has serious implications for the first-generation Chinese immigrant population in the United States. The chapter argues that WeChat offers key clues as to how political information and misinformation are constructed for and distributed among the emerging political constituency, and how misinformation on WeChat is related to the rise of conservatism among Chinese immigrants. It highlights the urgency for policy interventions.

Josh Stenberg considers how WeChat operates as a news platform for Chinese speakers in Brazil in his chapter, “News via WeChat for Chinese
speakers in Brazil: towards integration with the PRC information environment.” The chapter considers the various debates and conflicts in Chinese-Brazilian relations as they were reported in three WSAs: two of them associated with Brazil-based Chinese-language websites (a “national” one with a Sao Paulo base; and a Rio de Janeiro one, which serves the second-largest Chinese community in Brazil), and one of the largest Chinese-language print newspapers, Nanmei Qiaobao. The chapter argues that WeChat use increasingly integrates PRC-originating migrants into the same information environment as exists in the PRC. Where migration from the PRC until recently entailed a varied media diet, the dominance of WeChat substantially diminishes this variation. The increasing use of WeChat in Brazil continues a trend, already perceptible in the narrowing of political diversity in print over the last two decades, to integrate diasporic Chinese-language readers into PRC information environments.

Theme four (identity, sentiments, emotions and affect) is composed of four chapters that focus on Japan, Hungary, France and Zambia and Angola. Xinyu Promio Wang’s chapter on Japan, “Building a life on the soil of the ultimate other: WeChat and the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan,” focuses on WeChat’s two main communicative channels, individual chat and Moments, to illustrate their impacts on the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. Informed by in-depth interviews and digital ethnographic observations between May 2018 and January 2021, the chapter illustrates how the “individual chat” function helps to construct a transnational identity among Chinese migrants outside the officially sanctioned discourses of Chinese or Japanese national identity. At the same time, Chinese migrants highlight transnational migrant mobility by categorising their contacts and crafting targeted “Moments” contents to differentiate themselves (the transnational subjects) from those immobile subjects in China. The chapter argues that WeChat allows Chinese migrants in Japan to negotiate, construct and express a multi-layered sense of self and belonging so as to reflect their personal desires and transnational experiences.

Fanni Beck continues the discussion about the politics of identity and belonging in her chapter, “From the politics of the motherland to the politics of motherhood: Chinese golden visa migrants in Hungary.” She approaches WeChat from an anthropological perspective and considers it as an important constituent of everyday social life, particularly through an examination of the engagement with WeChat parenting accounts among Chinese migrants in Hungary. Combining offline and online ethnographic methods, she examines how WeChat assists the shaping of a differentiated sense of belonging among the “golden visa” lifestyle migrants of the 2010s who choose Hungary to secure a better future for their children (in comparison with the economic migrants of the 1990s). Beck further explores how WeChat enables Chinese migrants to negotiate their shifting positions as transnational
subjects in relation to the motherland and political subjectivity. The chapter uses parenthood as a prism to analyse key dimensions of political subjectivity among the new cohort of Chinese migrants in Hungary: identity, desire and aspiration. It argues that while WeChat is used by Chinese middle-class parents as a means to challenge prevailing narratives of good parenthood and express their transnational political subjectivity, the use of WeChat simultaneously perpetuates the narratives and anxieties among the Chinese middle class during China’s rise.

Simeng Wang analyses the process of forming a citizen identity and citizenship practices (participation in demonstrations and voting practices) among Chinese now living in the Paris region in her chapter, “WeChat, ‘ethnic grouping’ and ‘class belonging’: The formation of citizen identity among Chinese now living in Paris.” Drawing on online and offline ethnographic research undertaken between 2015 and 2021, Wang reflects on the complexity of identity building and the multi-dimensional expression of citizenship among migrants in the digital age, with a close examination of WeChat group chats. She views WeChat as a tool of ethnic grouping and a performative place of social class and examines the role that WeChat plays in claiming citizenship, and the citizenship politics of class-based exclusion and discrimination among the Chinese diaspora in Paris. The chapter further argues that WeChat plays a role in shaping discourses about citizenship as deployed on local, national and transnational levels among Chinese people living in France.

Our final chapter, “Global app, local politics, and Chinese migrants in Africa: A comparative study of Zambia and Angola” by Hangwei Li, takes us to Africa, which has witnessed an increasing number of Chinese migrants with the expansion of China’s economic and political interests in the continent in recent years. It discusses the identity construction of Chinese migrants in WeChat groups. Specifically, it explores how WeChat groups have penetrated the everyday life of Chinese migrants in Zambia and Angola; and why these groups are important platforms for understanding the identity construction of Chinese migrants in the digital world. The chapter highlights the role of WeChat groups in mutual support and political communication among Chinese migrants in the two countries, as well as the perpetual gaze and surveillance of the motherland via Chinese embassies in these WeChat groups. It also points out the racialised and “othered” approach in the identity construction among the Chinese migrants in Africa and how their Chineseness makes them feel culturally and racially superior to the locals.

The global reach and influence of WeChat and other Chinese digital platforms require more than one book to give justice to the complexity, breadth and depth of a wide range of themes and topics related to WeChat diasporas and Chinese digital transnationalism. We hope this volume constitutes a worthy starting point for future conversations and engagement in the fields of Chinese transnationalism, diaspora and migrant citizenship.
Notes

1 In this volume, we use “WeChat” to refer to both Weixin and WeChat, two versions of the same platform owned and operated by Tencent. WeChat is operated by WeChat International and is designed for users outside of mainland China, while Weixin is designed for users in the PRC. WeChat and Weixin have different server and governance architectures but are inter-operable. Known as “one app, two systems” (Ruan et al. 2016), the separation and yet interoperation of Weixin and WeChat is “a conscious decision designed to serve different users while ensuring compliance with applicable laws across different jurisdictions” (WeChat submission 2020).

2 In this volume, we use “WeChat subscription account” (WSA, dingyuehao) to refer to one type of WeChat official account (WOA, gongzhonghao), also known as WeChat public account; the other two types of WOA are WeChat service account (fuwuhao) and WeChat enterprise account (qiyehao). WSA is often used interchangeably with WOA. We use WSA to refer to a specific WOA that is most popular among content entrepreneurs and consumers of general news and information. WeChat service accounts are used primarily by corporates and organisations as a service platform to connect with customers and enable e-commerce-related functions. WeChat enterprise accounts are mainly for corporate internal communications and management, and in this respect is similar to Facebook Workplace. For more on the different types of WeChat official accounts, see Yu and Sun (2020).

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