

# **Submission to Senate Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media**

## **Authors:**

**Wanning Sun, Professor of Media and Communication UTS**

**Haiqing Yu, Professor of Media and Communication RMIT**

We wish to speak about a specific Chinese platform, WeChat, in particular reference to the proposal of banning WeChat in Australia.

## **Our Recommendations to the Committee:**

1. Based on our research, we believe that banning WeChat risks causing emotional, psychological and practical harm to a significant number of our community. Banning WeChat brings more damage than benefit to our democracy, since it is likely to erode rather than encourage faith in the strength of our democracy and it is likely to infringe on citizens' rights to communicate on social media platforms. It is potentially damaging to social cohesion, and is likely to be seen as racially and politically motivated.
2. It is important to ensure that government regulators use one set of rules that apply to all platforms in data and privacy protection, rather than singling out one platform.
3. Australian government can request WeChat to allow its international users to freely register WeChat subscription accounts—currently only Weixin account holders and Chinese citizens can register individual accounts—and ensure such accounts are not subject to Chinese censorship. Then anybody or organisation in Australian can use WeChat on an even playing field in content/news production and circulation.

In the following, we present key findings from our study to substantiate the recommendations we have made to the Committee.

## **Our Research Method**

Our research on WeChat in Australia adopted a combination of research methods and design elements, including

1. an institutional study that explores the political economy of platform operation, technological infrastructure and its affordances, the regulatory framework, and the business procedures of media entities;
2. a mapping of media content that uses both quantitative content analysis, critical discourse analysis, and narrative analysis. We conducted two 500-participant surveys in 2018 and 2019 among Chinese social media users in Australia.
3. a study of media use through in-depth interviews, and sustained ethnographic interaction—both online and offline since 2018—with a view to exploring how individuals generate, circulate, and distribute content and narratives across Chinese

digital/social media platforms. We have followed about 40 Australia-based WeChat groups over the period of five years.

## **Our Key Findings about WeChat in Australia**

### **Finding #1**

WeChat and its Chinese version, Weixin, are “two systems” that operate on “one app”: WeChat is designed for non-Chinese mobile users outside mainland China, governed by local (not Chinese) laws and operated by WeChat International (based in Singapore); Weixin is designed for Chinese mobile users, governed by PRC law, and operated by its Chinese entity (based in Shenzhen). In principle, individual WeChat accounts are not subject to China’s content censorship and WeChat user data is stored in Singapore. WeChat is available over 200 countries and regions, with over 1.3 billion users worldwide in 17 languages. It is a super app, not just an instant messaging tool.

WeChat is essential to communication between Chinese Australians and their families, friends, and business partners in China. This is largely due to the fact that social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are not allowed in China. WeChat is a necessity, not a choice for many Chinese Australians. WeChat enabled Chinese Australians to stay connected with their contacts in China and receive/give emotional support during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, WeChat was used in the months of quarantine to farewell their dying parents and family members.

In addition to connecting with China, WeChat is one of the social media platforms that Chinese Australians use to inform themselves about Australian government policies on a wide range of issues including health, law and order, disaster and emergency communication. It is also one of the key platforms they use to access English-language news content from Australia’s mainstream media.

### **Key Finding #2**

Our research challenges the assumption is that WeChat functions primarily as an instrument of the Chinese government. It also challenges the assumption that Chinese Australians are homogeneous and easy preys to WeChat propaganda.

Our research has ample evidence to argue that Chinese Australians are motivated by pragmatic and business decisions to use WeChat for content production, circulation, and communication; it does not make business sense for Chinese-language media outlets on the platform to function as mouthpieces of the Chinese government or help push its agenda, unless they are owned or funded by the Chinese state.

Indeed, content that is circulated on Weixin is subject to scrutiny by Tencent and censorship by the Chinese authorities. The same level of censorship does not apply to WeChat, except for operators of WeChat subscription accounts that must be registered by Chinese citizens and Weixin account holders.

Our research points to the need to make a distinction between self-censorship and top-down censorship. Self-censorship is not unique to Chinese platforms. And political communication (or criticising the Chinese government or CCP) is not the main purpose for people to use the platform. Chinese-Australian media entrepreneurs who operate on WeChat have engaged in many creative ways of resisting and criticizing censorship and other forms of political

oppression, and creative ways of engaging in entrepreneurial activities as well as in cultural self-expression.

Similar to any other social media platforms, echo chambers characterise people's choice of platforms or groups. But as any other ethnic or language communities, the Chinese community is divided in political views and orientations, and this diversity is reflected on WeChat, one of many social media platforms that Chinese Australians use.

WeChat, like Facebook and Twitter, is a social media platform that carries wide-ranging and diversely sourced content; its ideological landscape is fragmented and contested.

### **Key Finding #3**

Our research challenges the assumption that using WeChat has a detrimental effect on Western democracy. Such a view overestimates the power of WeChat and the CCP in using a single platform to influence and control its hugely diversified diasporas of over 50 million; it also underestimates the agency of the Chinese diaspora in choosing and using social media platforms for a wide range of purposes.

Our research has shown that, like other social media platforms, Chinese-language media are used for both democratizing and anti-democratizing purposes. For example, while WeChat can be used to spread misinformation and disinformation, it is also capable and guilty of polarizing views and propagating extreme opinions. Just as it can be used to promote extreme views, it can also promote citizenship education, mobilize civic action, and encourage political participation in Australian politics. The current debate on WeChat re Voice Referendum is a good case in point. Another example is the use of WeChat by ABC, SBS, and Australian government agencies in crisis communication during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our research provides strong evidence of how community leaders and opinion leaders use WeChat to inform and educate Chinese-Australian voters about the process, procedure as well as the key policies of major parties during times of elections (both state and federal). We also observed an increased level of political engagement and participation on the part of the Mandarin speaking Chinese-Australian community. They took to WeChat to debate and deliberate the pros and cons of major parties, and participate in civil and respectful dialogues in order to assist fellow citizens to make informed decisions about their voting preferences.

### **About the authors of this submission**

Wanning Sun is a Professor of Media and Communication at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Australia. She is a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Humanities since 2016, and a member of the College of Experts of the Australian Research Council (2020–23). Her research is at the intersection of anthropology and media studies, and she has a long-standing track record of research on the changing nature and development of the everyday media and cultural consumption practices of Chinese immigrants across the globe, having written and edited three books on this topic since 2000. Over the past decade or so, she has conducted investigations into how Mandarin-speaking, first generation immigrants from the People's Republic of China use social media in their everyday lives.

Haiqing Yu is a Professor of Media and Communication and ARC Future Fellow at RMIT University. She is also a Chief Investigator of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated

Decision-Making and Society. Haiqing is a critical media studies scholar with expertise on Chinese digital media, technologies and cultures and their sociopolitical impacts in China, Australia and the Asia Pacific. Her current projects examine the social implications of China's social credit system, technological innovation and digital transformation; China's digital presence in Australasia; and Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia.

We have collaborated closely on a three-year inquiry into Chinese-language social media in Australia, funded by the Australian Research Council Discovery Grant. This research can be found in the two recent and peer-reviewed academic books, which we have published recently:

- *Digital Transnationalism: Chinese-Language Media in Australia* <https://brill.com/display/title/63429>
- *WeChat and the Chinese Diaspora* <https://www.routledge.com/WeChat-and-the-Chinese-Diaspora-Digital-Transnationalism-in-the-Era-of-Sun-Yu/p/book/9780367724276>

Our views on WeChat in Australia can also be found in a number of media articles, including:

- <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/10/21/wechat-ban-a-catch-22-for-chinese-australians/>
- <https://theconversation.com/why-trumps-wechat-ban-does-not-make-sense-and-could-actually-cost-him-chinese-votes-144207>
- <https://theconversation.com/how-australias-mandarin-speakers-get-their-news-106917>