



# WeChat's role in Australian democracy: A grassroots view

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## WECHAT'S ROLE IN AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY: A GRASSROOTS VIEW

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## KEY FINDINGS

- Despite its inherent risks and drawbacks, the Chinese messaging app WeChat played a vital role as a medium of outreach and democratic participation for Chinese-Australians during the 2021 NSW local elections.
- Censorship of Australian WeChat content did occur but appeared to have little effect on the publishing decisions or online reach of Australian-based Chinese-language media outlets in relation to local election coverage.
- It is possible to reap civic benefits from WeChat in Australia. To maximise these dividends, and offset the risk of foreign influence, creative governance strategies should be explored.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The social media messaging app WeChat is often portrayed in expert and media commentary as being inherently incompatible with democracy in Australia because the platform is subject to the scrutiny and censure of China, an authoritarian one-party state. This study provides the first in-depth snapshot of how politicians and everyday Chinese-Australians use WeChat at the grassroots level during council elections. It finds that WeChat, in these circumstances, can be broadly compatible with liberal democracy and significantly enhances democratic participation in a multicultural society.

Using the December 2021 New South Wales (NSW) local elections as a case study, this paper analyses qualitative data collected from private group chats, interviews with Chinese-Australian politicians, and editors from media outlets on WeChat. The study finds that, overall, the app expanded, rather than restricted, Chinese-Australian voters' access to quality news content to better inform their choices at the ballot box. The platform was used to bridge gaps in the provision of public services and information to Chinese-Australian communities and facilitated their civic engagement.

Despite its benefits, WeChat is afflicted by issues relating to censorship, transparency, online polarisation, and mis- and disinformation. Australia's stark political differences and fraught bilateral relations with China add additional layers of complexity to managing these challenges. However, improved oversight and governance arrangements, alongside enhanced funding for reliable Chinese-language online media, would help offset the risk of foreign influence and better harness the platform's utility for bolstering the participation of Chinese-Australian communities in Australia's democracy.

## INTRODUCTION

WeChat, the world's most popular Chinese-language social media app, emerged as a key political battleground in the last two Australian federal elections.<sup>1</sup> WeChat is an important social media platform and content provider for a majority of Chinese-Australians, and counts some 690,000 users in Australia.<sup>2</sup> According to the Lowy Institute's *Being Chinese in Australia* survey, 86 per cent of Chinese-Australians use WeChat "often" or "sometimes" for their Chinese-language news.<sup>3</sup>

Owned by the Chinese tech giant Tencent and known for its state-directed content censorship,<sup>4</sup> WeChat has triggered alarm in Australia's public debate about foreign influence and censorship. In early 2022, an ownership dispute relating to the former prime minister Scott Morrison's WeChat official account (WOA) rekindled calls for a wholesale "WeChat boycott" in Australia.<sup>5</sup> According to some analysts, WeChat is antithetical to democratic values and freedom. For example, China scholar John Fitzgerald argues that "WeChat was not designed to work in a democracy, and a democracy can't work with WeChat... Xi [Jinping's] scissors are at work clipping away wherever people are messaging."<sup>6</sup>



WeChat, the world's most popular Chinese-language social media app, emerged as a key political battleground in the last two Australian federal elections (Adem Ay/Unsplash)

## WECHAT'S ROLE IN AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY: A GRASSROOTS VIEW

This paper re-examines WeChat's seemingly troubled relationship with Australia's democracy, using a qualitative case study conducted during the NSW local government elections in December 2021. Existing studies on WeChat and its role in Australian elections have focused largely on federal level politics. This study looks instead at how WeChat is used by Chinese-Australians to participate in politics and electoral processes at the *grassroots* level of Australian democracy. Based on the findings of the study, the paper sheds additional light on two major debates regarding the role of WeChat in Australia: whether censorship and self-censorship on the platform prohibit democratic debate, and to what extent WeChat is used as a medium of Chinese foreign influence in Australian elections.

The study found that WeChat's information environment was far richer, and the topics discussed on the platform were far more diverse than often recognised by commentators. Moreover, rather than being held hostage to WeChat's censorship, Chinese-language media used WeChat to direct users to a trove of content beyond the platform's confines. The study found little evidence that WeChat users selectively avoided topics considered "sensitive" to the Chinese government.

Group chat conversations and interviews with stakeholders revealed that WeChat bridged gaps in the provision of government services and information in the local NSW government elections. In doing so, WeChat facilitated greater political participation by first-generation immigrants in local democratic processes.

These findings have profound implications for the public debate about WeChat. Above all, they illustrate that portraying WeChat as inherently incompatible with Australian democracy oversimplifies the uses of WeChat in the Australian context, and potentially harms vulnerable immigrant communities who rely on it for vital information and services.

At least for now, WeChat is an *enabling* space for Chinese-Australians to realise some of their core democratic rights, including freedom of political participation and the rights of access and equity.<sup>7</sup>

*At least for now, WeChat is an enabling space for Chinese-Australians to realise some of their core democratic rights, including freedom of political participation and the rights of access and equity.*

While content censorship and possible foreign interference do make the platform problematic, the positive role WeChat plays in Australian democracy should be better recognised and harnessed by government. This will require a more consistent, holistic, and proactive governance approach for the app in Australia. Enhanced regulation and public-private joint oversight of WeChat would increase transparency and public understanding of the benefits and drawbacks of the online platform in Australia's democracy, beyond simplified media narratives or waiting until misinformation campaigns have done their damage to intervene.

This paper first outlines the use of WeChat in Australia and the NSW local elections in particular. It then provides an overview of the two central debates regarding WeChat: on self-censorship and foreign influence. It goes on to explain the relevance of the findings of the case study for these debates. The paper concludes by making policy suggestions on the basis of the findings.



## BACKGROUND TO WECHAT AND THE NSW ELECTIONS

### WeChat in Australia

Referred to as China's "digital Swiss army knife", WeChat is a multi-purpose social media and messaging app developed in 2011 by the Chinese technology giant, Tencent. Initially known as "Weixin" (meaning "micro-message" in Chinese) and used only in China, "WeChat" was born in 2012 to meet a globally expanding user market.

Today, WeChat has more than 1.28 billion monthly active users globally.<sup>8</sup> Among these are at least 690,000 daily active WeChat users located in Australia.<sup>9</sup> The app is a key source of information for first-generation Chinese-speaking immigrants. According to the Lowy Institute's 2022 *Being Chinese in Australia* survey, around 88 per cent of Chinese-Australians who immigrated to Australia between 2010 and 2019 use WeChat to access Chinese-language news.<sup>10</sup>

*Today, WeChat has more than 1.28 billion monthly active users globally. Among these are at least 690,000 daily active WeChat users located in Australia.*

Australian politicians were quick to seize on the opportunity presented by such large numbers of WeChat users to campaign on the platform. As early as 2013, former prime minister Kevin Rudd opened a personal WeChat account ahead of the federal election, greeting Chinese-Australian communities with a video message in Mandarin.<sup>11</sup> Former opposition leader Bill Shorten and former prime minister Scott Morrison opened WeChat official accounts (WOA) in 2017 and 2019, respectively.<sup>12</sup> Unlike personal WeChat accounts, a WOA resembles a public Facebook page, but curated content can only be published at a limited frequency.<sup>13</sup> Even so, by the 2019 federal election, WeChat had become a platform for full-blown electoral competition in Australia, as politicians held live Q&A sessions in group chats and used their WOAs for campaign messaging.<sup>14</sup>

### Why local council elections?

Existing studies of WeChat in Australia have focused largely on its uses during federal elections.<sup>15</sup> However, the platform plays an equally critical role in local elections, which rarely attracts media or research attention. Local elections lie at the lowest level of Australia's three-tier electoral system, which consists of

federal, state (or territory), and local council elections. While local councils hold authority in important areas such as city planning and development, the general public often associates this rung of government with more mundane issues: colloquially known as the “triple Rs” (rates, roads, and rubbish).

Herein lies a missed opportunity for gaining a fuller picture of WeChat’s role in Australian politics. Past federal elections highlighted important yet very politically charged issues relating to the use of the platform, including misinformation campaigns, biased reporting by media outlets with WeChat accounts, and WeChat uptake by high-profile politicians. These aspects foreground the agency of particular political actors over that of everyday citizens. Democracy ultimately depends on the latter’s desire to have a voice in government decision-making that affect their lives.

More so than the federal or state elections, local elections are sustained almost entirely by grassroots level political mobilisation. Lower barriers to entry and the relative unimportance of party affiliation mean that local citizens can both easily vote and campaign on issues that directly affect their day-to-day lives, but also run as council candidates themselves with little to no previous political experience. These opportunities help explain the higher level of political participation in local council elections than at the federal, state, or territory levels by Chinese-Australians, many of whom are first-generation immigrants.<sup>16</sup>

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This study provides the first in-depth snapshot of how Chinese-Australians and council candidates use WeChat during local government elections.

While local-level politics — encompassing issues such as city planning, small business support, and community welfare — is less likely to involve issues that are “sensitive” to Beijing, it is no less relevant to the debate on the role and uses of WeChat in Australia.

The national spotlight on foreign influence extends into local governmental affairs. As early as 2017, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was reported to have uncovered links between the Chinese government and Australian political candidates at the local council and state government levels, although no evidence or official statement was provided by ASIO.<sup>17</sup>

Certain local council decisions have also come under media scrutiny, raising questions about possible foreign influence. These include Georges River Council's decision in 2019 to withdraw a Lunar New Year sponsorship deal with *Vision China Times* — a media outlet accused of having links to Falun Gong, a religious organisation that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has denounced as a religious cult.<sup>18</sup> The council reportedly withdrew the deal after consulting with the Chinese consulate. Another incident in 2018 involved a Queensland council's removal of children's paintings depicting the Taiwanese flag.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, many Chinese-Australian councillors and council candidates have been scrutinised in recent years for their financial and personal ties to various organisations associated with the Chinese government or the CCP. In some cases, this has led to more formal investigations.

*Many Chinese-Australian candidates featured on council ballot papers where there are large Chinese-Australian populations.*

### **The case study: NSW elections**

The NSW local council and mayoral elections took place on 4 December 2021. It was a much-anticipated event, delayed twice due to Covid-19. Among 128 councils in the state, the vast majority (124) elected new councillors, and some also elected new mayors. In NSW, between 5 and 15 councillors can be elected in each council, and a total of 1259 councillors were elected in 2021, averaging ten councillors per council. Many Chinese-Australian candidates featured on council ballot papers where there are large Chinese-Australian populations, such as Burwood, Ryde, Parramatta, Willoughby, and Georges River. Many of these candidates led or inspired spirited debates on WeChat leading up to the elections.<sup>20</sup>

This study was carried out from late November 2021 — when the election campaigns on WeChat were starting to pick up pace — right through to late December when the election results were finalised. The main qualitative data that was analysed came from three sources: (1) the content of ten private group chats (see Table 1), totalling 100 election-related posts in various content formats;<sup>21</sup> (2) nine semi-structured interviews with eight Chinese-Australian council candidates and one chief campaign officer (see Table 3); and (3) semi-structured interviews with three media editors representing four Chinese-language media outlets with a presence on WeChat.<sup>22</sup> The four media organisations, all with WOAs, were (1) *The Sydney Post*, a privately-owned online newspaper; (2) SBS Chinese, an Australian government-funded multicultural media outlet; (3) Radio2000, an Australian government-funded radio station

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with affiliated online media; and (4) Tongcheng AU, a privately-owned online news and video platform funded by advertising revenue.

Group chat participants and interview subjects were selected or recruited through personal networks and snowball sampling.<sup>23</sup> Media outlets were selected either because they were particularly active in reporting on the NSW local elections, with their content frequently shared in the group chats observed (i.e. *The Sydney Post* and SBS Chinese), or because their content was representative of the kind published by most WOAs that reported on the NSW local elections (i.e. Radio2000 and Tongcheng AU).

All group chat and interview content were coded and analysed using keywords (or phrases) based on themes that were frequently discussed in the context of the NSW local elections (see Table 2 for a list of most-mentioned keywords).

## TWO MAINSTREAM DEBATES OVER WECHAT'S ROLE IN AUSTRALIAN ELECTIONS

### Self-censorship

Self-censorship is a well-documented phenomenon on WeChat, where individuals and WOAs voluntarily refrain from mentioning certain keywords or topics to avoid the censorship that is known to exist within various functions of the platform.<sup>24</sup> Common “sensitive” topics include China–Australia relations, human rights, territorial disputes, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

WeChat censorship may take the form of personal messages not being delivered by the app, the blocking of individual or official accounts, the closure of group chats, and the inability to publish content, among other types of censure. To avoid this, news publishers often omit certain content on their WOAs lest it triggers WeChat's keyword censorship.<sup>25</sup>



A critical difference between WeChat and its domestic Chinese counterpart, Weixin, is that accounts registered in China are subject to direct censorship (laboratorio linux/Flickr)

Remarkably, research evidence shows that WeChat censorship may in fact take the form of “one app, two systems”.<sup>26</sup> A critical difference between WeChat and its domestic Chinese counterpart, Weixin, is that accounts registered in China are subject to a direct, pervasive form of censorship that automatically filters out and removes any content critical of Beijing based on keywords and other indicators. By contrast, accounts registered overseas are not directly censored

— rather, they are monitored in ways that help strengthen Weixin’s censorship algorithms in China.<sup>27</sup> However, because many WeChat users and Chinese-language small media outlets in Australia own China-registered accounts, they are often still subject to direct platform censorship even though they are located in Australia.<sup>28</sup>

Concerns about censorship and self-censorship on WeChat and the corresponding impact on electoral politics stem from the notion that censorship constitutes a form of “indirect” foreign influence. Analysts infer that because censorship and self-censorship exist, only content serving the CCP’s strategic interests is allowed to remain on WeChat.<sup>29</sup> However, there is ample research pointing to WeChat as a more diverse information environment than is often appreciated in public commentary.<sup>30</sup> Above all, and despite the realities of state-directed censorship, this paper shows that vibrant public debate is still possible and does occur on WeChat in Australia. Furthermore, much of this discussion takes place on issues where it is doubtful there can be clear CCP strategic interests involved.

### Foreign influence in federal elections

Australian commentators have long expressed concern over Beijing’s influence on the “key information portals” of Chinese-Australians, in particular, WeChat.<sup>31</sup> This is a perhaps understandable concern stemming from well-documented evidence of financial ties and partnerships between the Chinese Party-state and certain popular WOAs, such as *WeSydney* and *Aozhouwang*, both of which are ultimately controlled by China News Service.<sup>32</sup> Concern about the CCP’s influence through WeChat also extends to content control — researchers at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) surmised: “The [People’s Republic of China’s] ability to censor and monitor WeChat is perhaps the single most effective and concerning factor in the CCP’s influence over Chinese-language media in Australia.”<sup>33</sup>

*In the context of Australian elections, the existence of Chinese state-led censorship on WeChat does not automatically point to successful foreign influence or interference.*

According to the Attorney-General’s Department, “foreign influence” describes conscious efforts by foreign state or non-state actors to influence the public opinions and policies of another country in a way that benefits the foreign actors’ interests.<sup>34</sup> When conducted in “an open, lawful and transparent manner”, foreign influence “contributes to our vibrant and robust democracy”. Yet if a foreign

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actor's activities are "covert, deceptive and coercive", they fall into a malignant class of activities called "foreign interference".<sup>35</sup> The latter is exemplified by Russian actors' covert social media campaign to influence the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election.<sup>36</sup>

However, in the context of Australian elections, the existence of Chinese state-led censorship on WeChat does not automatically point to successful foreign influence or interference. Overall, WeChat has either been insignificant or largely ineffective as a conduit of foreign interference in Australian elections.

The propagation of certain messages by CCP-affiliated WOAs during the 2019 Australian federal election can almost certainly be defined as foreign influence, but it is unlikely that such influence was successful or meaningful in swaying election outcomes. Indeed, the influence of such messaging on the views of Chinese-Australian voters is questionable. Research shows that content from CCP-affiliated WOAs only formed a small part of the information landscape on WeChat during the 2019 federal election campaign.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, content analysis of 318 election-related articles showed that the most widely read Australian-based WOA content predominantly supported the Liberal Party, while CCP-affiliated outlets tended to publish anti-Liberal content.<sup>38</sup>

During the 2019 federal election campaign period, Australian journalists found that some content circulating on WeChat that criticised the Liberal Coalition government's policies was created by CCP-affiliated actors.<sup>39</sup> As the CCP affiliations of a number of these media outlets were not disclosed on WeChat, some contend that this lack of transparency was sufficiently "covert, deceptive and coercive" to qualify as foreign interference. Nevertheless, the 2020 report from the Australian federal parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters found that this presented insufficient evidence to establish foreign interference. Based on expert advice from the Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce, the Committee concluded that "there was no foreign interference, malicious cyber-activity or security matters that affected the integrity of the 2019 Federal election".<sup>40</sup> Other scholars, such as Wanning Sun, went so far as to argue that claims in Australian media of CCP influence or interference in the 2019 election constituted a form of "insinuating journalism".<sup>41</sup>

## CASE STUDY FINDINGS

The two public debates outlined above on self-censorship and foreign influence constitute the main backdrop for the following case study on WeChat's use in the 2021 NSW local elections. Engaging with the two debates with fresh evidence, the study illuminates how Chinese-Australians use WeChat to participate in electoral politics at the grassroots level of Australian democracy.

### Self-censorship

#### OVERALL FINDINGS

This case study gauges the extent to which self-censorship on WeChat affected the electoral participation of Chinese-Australians during the 2021 NSW local elections. It does so through interviews with Chinese-language media editors and Chinese-Australian politicians, and analysis of group chat content. While it is difficult to directly assess what has been censored or intentionally omitted from WeChat, group chat discussions and interviews overall suggest that censorship and self-censorship were unlikely to have meaningfully impacted Chinese-Australians' electoral participation.

Interestingly, "CCP-sensitive" topics that would normally be closely monitored and censored on WeChat's domestic platform in China, Weixin — such as Hong Kong-mainland relations and Falun Gong — did find their way into Australian WeChat groups. Though other topics, such as "Chinese-Australian political participation" or "how to vote" proved far more central to discussions relating to the NSW council elections. The stronger focus on more locally salient content likely reflects what Chinese-Australian voters are interested in, rather than what they seek to avoid.

*"CCP-sensitive" topics that would normally be closely monitored and censored on WeChat's domestic platform in China, Weixin, did find their way into Australian WeChat groups.*

The study finds that while censorship on WeChat platforms did pose certain challenges to its users in the lead-up to the NSW council elections, these proved to be largely surmountable in practice. The drawbacks of the platform did not prevent WeChat from playing a vital role as a medium of outreach and democratic participation in Chinese-Australian communities — at least at the level of local Australian politics.



### GROUP CONVERSATIONS ON WECHAT

Determining the level of self-censorship in private group chats is difficult given the lack of counterpoints from mainstream or non-WeChat media, which provided little coverage of the 2021 NSW local elections. However, from the sampled group chats, it was clear that “Beijing-sensitive” topics did in fact appear in group discussions, albeit at a very low frequency.

The most “Beijing-sensitive” discussion topics during the 2021 NSW local elections related to foreign influence and interference and included mention of “Falun Gong” and “Hong Kong demonstrations”. Two posts in one of the sampled group chats, shared by two separate group members, contained content that alleged Chinese foreign interference in a local council. Both posts brought up “Beijing-sensitive” keywords, including “Falun Gong” and “foreign interference”. One post contained a link to an article published by *Vision China Times*, titled “Red Shadow’ in Ryde Campaign”.<sup>42</sup> The second shared a YouTube video published by *Vision China Times*, accompanied by the poster’s own summary of the video’s key points.<sup>43</sup> Neither post was censored by the platform and reached at least 280 group chat members, although they solicited no follow-up group discussions. The individual accounts posting the content were not subsequently banned from the platform either. The fact that content and accounts usually considered “anti-CCP” were not censored by WeChat could be related to the lighter form of censorship evident on its overseas platforms.



WeChat currently estimates its monthly users at 1.2 billion. User numbers are displayed on a foyer wall in Guangdong, China, in 2019 (Keso S/Flickr)

However, these topics formed a small minority of all discussion topics in the sampled group chats (2 out of the total 308 mentions of election-related keywords). Across the ten group chats observed in the case study, the top five most-mentioned keywords were “Chinese-Australian political participation” (21 counts), “how to vote” (16 counts), “community service” (15 counts), “independent candidates” (15 counts), and “multiculturalism” (14 counts). By contrast, the “Australia–China relationship” (4 counts) and “foreign influence” (2 counts) were hardly mentioned. It is conceivable this could be the result of WeChat users’ conscious avoidance of these topics or direct platform intervention on other “CCP-sensitive” posts. However, more likely it suggests that other topics were of much greater interest to Chinese-Australians in the context of the local elections. To further contextualise and explore these possibilities, interviews were conducted with media editors and Chinese-Australian politicians. Overall, the interviews lent additional support to the latter possibility.

### MEDIA ON WECHAT

Three senior media editors working across four Chinese-language media outlets were interviewed to offer greater insight into the editorial decisions of the content they published or shared on WeChat in relation to the 2021 NSW local elections. The interviews were designed to probe how content providers deal with WeChat-specific challenges, and the broader impact the media outlets sought to achieve with their content.

While all editors acknowledged the difficulties of WeChat censorship on their operations, they said it did not affect their content-making decisions regarding the NSW local elections. These outlets have a web-based or radio-based presence independent of WeChat, which gives the editors overall content-making autonomy. While WeChat censorship at times restricts what content can be published on the media’s WOAs, the media outlets used group chats and their WOAs to work around these restrictions by directing WeChat users to the content hosted on their websites. Hence, interviewees said their overall content decisions were made independently of WeChat censorship considerations.

*Around 30 per cent of The Sydney Post’s articles uploaded to WeChat were censored and failed to be published on the media’s WOA.*

#### **The Sydney Post**

*The Sydney Post*, which is a left-leaning independent online newspaper, was perhaps the most active Chinese-language media outlet during the 2021 NSW local elections. While most counterparts dedicated no more than a few articles to the elections, *The Sydney Post* published, on average, one article per 1.3 days from mid-November to late-December 2021, featuring profiles of individual candidates, incidents of discrimination or racism against Chinese-Australian

candidates, and opinion editorials, among other items.<sup>44</sup> Most of these articles were original content rather than translated reposts of English-language media articles. The outlet also facilitated several group chats themed around Australian elections and politics, including one dedicated specifically to the NSW local elections. QR codes were available at the end of most articles to enable readers to join these WeChat group discussions.

An executive of *The Sydney Post* explained that having a web-based presence independent of WeChat provided a workaround for the restrictions WeChat imposes on the content and publishing frequency of its WOA. The outlet does not rely exclusively on WeChat to produce and distribute its content. However, around 30 per cent of *The Sydney Post*'s articles uploaded to WeChat were censored and failed to be published on the media's WOA.

*The Sydney Post*'s workaround of this censorship on its WOA was to share links to its website in WeChat's numerous chat groups and newsfeeds (known as Moments on WeChat).<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in various group chats organised by *The Sydney Post* throughout the election campaign, the number of URLs shared that linked WeChat users directly to articles on its website equalled if not outstripped the number of WOA articles shared. This approach reflected the editor's understanding that sharing URLs directly would get the broadest content to the greatest number of readers on WeChat.

When asked about the broader purpose in reporting on the NSW local elections, a *Sydney Post* executive responded:

*For a long time, Chinese-Australians [have been] disinterested in politics. But in recent years, this is changing, and people are starting to care. Politics is everywhere. If we don't care about it, we won't even know if one day we become meat on the chopping block.*<sup>46</sup>

*The Sydney Post* hoped, according to the executive, to improve Chinese-Australians' "sense of belonging and integration into mainstream society, and in doing so, defend Chinese-Australians' social position" in New South Wales.

However, the executive lamented the fact that ethnic minority media outlets, such as *The Sydney Post*, have little impact on mainstream discourse in NSW beyond Chinese-Australian communities. They concluded: "At the very least,

*Ethnic minority media outlets, such as The Sydney Post, have little impact on mainstream discourse in NSW beyond Chinese-Australian communities.*

[*The Sydney Post*] will provide a platform for Chinese-Australian communities to vent their grievances.”

The executive also observed that *The Sydney Post's* coverage during the local council elections was motivated by a desire to “change the tradition of political apathy among the Chinese-Australians” at a time when they feel increasingly socially and politically marginalised in Australia. This effort paid off, with the number of members in its group chat dedicated to the NSW local elections growing from 140 to 190 in the week leading up to the elections.

### **SBS Chinese**

SBS Chinese (SBS中文) is a new arm of the Australian government-funded multicultural public broadcaster, SBS. It was founded in February 2021 with funding from the federal government to extend and merge the existing web content of SBS Mandarin and SBS Cantonese. One of the first tasks SBS Chinese undertook was to build an online presence on WeChat, which in the words of SBS Chinese Editor, Yiu Wah Lin, “is Chinese-Australians’ number one social media platform”.

*[A senior editor] stated that objective and professional reporting can be achieved on WeChat even if editors have to work creatively around particular themes and keywords.*

During the 2021 NSW local elections, SBS Chinese used the newly created feature of a WeChat Channel (微信视频号) to promote election-related original content.<sup>47</sup> This consisted of a series of high-quality short videos introducing Chinese-Australian council candidates from areas with large ethnically Chinese populations, such as Chatswood and Hurstville.<sup>48</sup>

When asked about SBS Chinese’s editorial priorities, Lin highlighted the need for objectivity and non-partisanship. As SBS Chinese is funded mainly by taxpayers rather than by advertising revenue, it strives for comprehensive and objective reporting. Hence, SBS Chinese interviewed every Chinese-Australian candidate in key suburbs, coupled with additional interviews with Chinese-Australian small business owners and residents to understand what locals were looking for in their next local council government.

Similar to *The Sydney Post*, SBS Chinese’s website is its primary communication platform, and there is little to no need to self-censor their content on WeChat. Much of its WeChat content is accompanied by a line that encourages viewers to visit its website to see the full range of content available. Lin explained that the election-related content on their WeChat Channel and WOA was not a “censored” version of what is on their website. Rather, due to WeChat’s limit on

WOA's publishing frequency, their articles published on WeChat were a curated selection of what they considered most relevant to the Chinese-Australian voters on WeChat.

### *Radio2000 and Tongcheng AU*

Radio2000 and Tongcheng AU are two very different media outlets. Radio2000 is an Australian government-funded non-profit multicultural media that is broadcast nationally. It is an FM radio channel that expanded to WeChat in 2017. It has since built up a notable WeChat presence using its WOA, which publishes content derived from its radio programs, such as in-depth interviews. Tongcheng AU is Australia's largest Chinese-language video website. Its WOA publishes a broad range of materials, from local and national news to skincare advice. It is the largest media outlet of the four examined in this case study both in terms of content produced and the size of its user base. Despite their differences, the two media broadcasters published similar content related to the NSW local elections via their respective WOAs. This consisted of informational pieces explaining how to vote in the local elections, as well as profiles on individual candidates and their policy proposals.<sup>49</sup>

*When asked about content-making decisions, Yang Jiao, a senior editor working for both platforms, emphasised professionalism and impartiality.*

When asked about content-making decisions, Yang Jiao, a senior editor working for both platforms, emphasised professionalism and impartiality. Interviews were conducted free of charge by the broadcasters with candidates of all political backgrounds, and content was focused on their respective policy proposals and community visions.

Jiao said objective and professional reporting can be achieved on WeChat if editors work creatively around particular themes and keywords. Finding tactics and workarounds to the platform's use of censorship, Jiao claimed, does not have to compromise on the integrity of the content. Moreover, similar to the other editors interviewed, Jiao emphasised that WeChat functioned as a distribution channel that directs Chinese-Australian readers towards the broader trove of content on the media's FM radio station or website.

Jiao challenges the impression that WeChat media outlets are dominated by untrained "citizen journalists".<sup>50</sup> She stated that many senior employees, herself included, at Radio2000 and Tongcheng AU received their advanced journalism degrees in Australia. Their professionalism, she asserted, is key to the media outlets' success. However, Jiao indicated that in recent years, the public influence

and credibility of WOAs had declined due to the uneven quality of WOA content and the rise of competing content features such as the WeChat Channel. Yet Radio2000 continues to see its WOA readership grow, which Jiao believes is due to its reputation as a credible, Australian government-supported media outlet.

### COUNCILLORS AND COUNCIL CANDIDATES ON WECHAT

While self-censorship is primarily discussed in the context of WeChat media content, Australian politicians' use of WeChat is another source of concern. As Australian politicians are subject to the same WeChat censorship as media content providers when they use the platform to connect with their electorates, many analysts worry that politicians might be compelled to self-censor.<sup>51</sup> China scholar John Fitzgerald has encouraged Australian politicians to weigh the democratic value of free speech against their need to use WeChat. Others, such as ASPI analyst Fergus Ryan, have argued that the major parties must agree to a moratorium on the use of WeChat in all Australian political campaigns.<sup>52</sup>



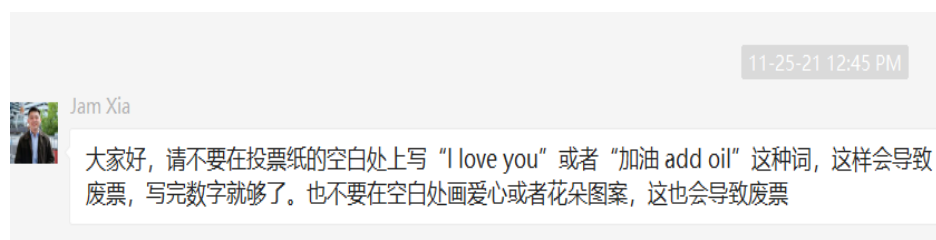
Australia's preferential and compulsory voting system is complex, especially for immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds (AEC Images/Flickr)

Interviews with current NSW councillors and former candidates who are on WeChat reveal that the dichotomy of democratic values versus WeChat censorship is over-simplistic. While WeChat is not a friendly space for free speech, it is a space where a large population of first-generation Chinese immigrants — often unreached by mainstream social media or English-language websites — receive information crucial to their civic participation and welfare in Australia.

Moreover, free speech is not the only democratic value local councillors or candidates must weigh in their decisions to use WeChat. Take voting instructions as an example. Australia's preferential and compulsory voting system is complex, especially for immigrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and without prior experience in democratic voting. Elections at different levels of local, state, and federal government have different voting instructions. Many Chinese-Australian voters are vulnerable to making mistakes that might void their ballot or possibly open them up to voter manipulation.

Local council elections are particularly susceptible to this problem. From WeChat group conversations, it was evident that many Chinese-Australians did not know the difference between above- and below-the-line voting, for example. This has consequences for independent candidates running without a party-affiliated team, as voting for them requires a particular combination of both methods. Some Chinese-Australian voters were also unaware that anything other than Arabic numerals entered into the ballot paper would effectively invalidate their vote. The official instructions provided by the NSW Electoral Commission's website, albeit available in Chinese, do not specify all these details, and voting instructions at the voting stations are provided in English only.

**Figure 1: Jam Xian's WeChat post on how to vote**



In a WeChat group chat, Willoughby Council candidate Jam Xia reminded Chinese-Australian voters not to write on the ballot paper phrases such as “I love you” or random drawings next to their preferred candidates. This is just one among many examples of politicians seeking to better inform new voters on how to prevent their ballots from being invalidated.

As such, candidates on WeChat became a leading source of voting instructions for many Chinese-Australians in the lead-up to the 2021 NSW council elections. Nearly all candidates on WeChat produced their own short “how to vote for me” videos in Mandarin, which were then shared on group chats, Moment pages, and the WeChat Channel. Some candidates even walked voters through the iVote system step-by-step in the group chats; others responded to queries in various group chats on a daily basis. In all group chat conversations observed for this study, conversations around voting methods formed the second most popular theme, behind only “Chinese-Australian political participation”.

Beyond simply guidance on voting, WeChat has become a key channel for service and information delivery by elected councillors of all ethnicities in areas with a large percentage of Chinese-Australian residents. John Faker from Burwood Council is a prominent example. Faker has been Burwood's elected mayor since 2000. According to Alex Yang, who is Faker's multicultural advisor and was a fellow council candidate during the 2021 elections, Faker was one of the earliest adopters of WeChat among non-ethnically Chinese Australian politicians.

With the ethnic Chinese population comprising more than 30 per cent of Burwood's population, the mayor has Burwood Council's WOA QR code embossed on his business cards. Burwood Council's WOA is a high-quality and well-maintained page, with weekly updates in Mandarin on community events, new facilities and services, and Covid-19 news, among other issues. WeChat, therefore, fills an important service gap for the Chinese-Australian community in Burwood. However, according to Yang, many politicians failed to reach out to this community "because they don't trust WeChat".<sup>53</sup>

*WeChat has become a key channel for service and information delivery by elected councillors of all ethnicities in areas with a large percentage of Chinese-Australian residents.*

WeChat's community service role for local government in Australia is also confirmed by Kun Huang, Cumberland City's re-elected councillor and deputy mayor. A first-generation Chinese-Australian, he believes that being ethnically Chinese gives him "unique insights into a section of the community that over the years has been left out by the majority of mainstream politicians".<sup>54</sup> WeChat is "a direct phone number to the councillor". Kun Huang personally manages three community group chats, all at the capacity of 500 members, which he checks and interacts with daily. Besides posting community updates, he also responds to a range of issues, including debunking misinformation, responding to parking issues, and providing guidance on Covid-19 testing.

The interviews in this study demonstrate that Australian politicians are not just choosing between their political self-interests or the democratic value of free speech. Rather, participation on WeChat is at least, if not more, about ensuring the democratic values of access and equity. In the absence of a more compelling alternative, WeChat functions as the best online communication channel available for ensuring quality democratic engagement and discussion within Chinese-Australian communities.



## Foreign influence

### OVERALL FINDINGS

By analysing WeChat group chat content and monitoring mainstream news coverage on the 2021 NSW local elections, this case study has not identified a clear or concerted attempt by foreign actors to use WeChat to influence election outcomes, much less to interfere. Rather, interviews with Chinese-Australian council candidates reveal that WeChat has become a channel through which the foreign influence discourse has negatively impacted their lives and work as public servants of Australia. This is reflected in Chinese-Australian politicians' ambivalent attitude towards WeChat, which can be summarised in the view of Georges River's re-elected councillor, Nancy Liu, who describes WeChat as a "double-edge sword".<sup>55</sup>

*The mixed cultural identities of many Chinese-Australian political candidates can be an electoral advantage when appealing to ethnic Chinese voters, but they can also constitute a political liability in Australia.*

### THE WEAPONISATION OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE DISCOURSE ON WECHAT

When asked about their views on foreign influence in Australian politics and on WeChat, several local council candidates complained that dominant media narratives on foreign influence had led to unfounded attacks against them in mainstream media and ironically on WeChat.

The mixed cultural identities of many Chinese-Australian political candidates can be an electoral advantage when appealing to ethnic Chinese voters, but they can also constitute a political liability in Australia. Private business links with China are not uncommon among Chinese-Australian councillors — who receive an average annual remuneration of \$25,000 for their part-time local government positions.

Councillor Nancy Liu was scrutinised by the Office of Local Government over a consultancy firm she ran that connected Chinese and Australian businesses with government officials in China. While the Australian authorities were "satisfied" with her responses to the 2020 allegations, the event was nevertheless picked up in news headlines during her re-election campaign and was immediately circulated on WeChat by her political opponents.<sup>56</sup>

Having lived in China for 30 years before emigrating to Australia, Liu asserted that it was difficult to expect someone like her not to have any ongoing ties with China. However, in her view, she had served her local community in Australia honourably for 20 years and did the best job she could serving her adopted country.<sup>57</sup> For this reason, Liu expressed ambivalence towards WeChat, describing it as a powerful tool for campaign outreach, yet also a vitriolic space that weaponises misinformation.

A former council candidate and Hong Kong immigrant who asked to remain anonymous similarly expressed apprehension towards WeChat, having been the target of online defamation in WeChat groups in the past.<sup>58</sup> Recounting previous campaign experience, she noted how her national loyalty to Australia was at times

questioned due to her friendly attitude towards Chinese-Australian voters from mainland China. She felt compelled to justify her position: After all, we [Hong Kong immigrants] are ethnic Chinese, and we love China and the Chinese people. But our national loyalty rests with Australia ... China and the CCP are two separate things.<sup>59</sup>

*The foreign influence discourse in Australia has downplayed the multi-layered and often clashing identities and opinions of Chinese-Australians.*

These accounts demonstrate that the foreign influence debate at the national level has complicated intra-Chinese community relations at the local level. Ironically, despite becoming a lightning rod for the debate on foreign influence in Australia, WeChat has also mirrored these same discussions, conflicts, and distrust on its online platforms. WeChat is not dissimilar to other social media platforms in that regard, as a hotbed for clashing views and polarisation among its online users. Problematically, the foreign influence discourse in Australia has downplayed the multi-layered and often clashing identities and opinions of Chinese-Australians.

### THE “FAKE LEAFLET” INCIDENT AND INTRA-COMMUNITY TENSION ON WECHAT

One controversy in 2021 shed light on the consequences of increased polarisation within Chinese-Australian communities. This was an incident involving fake leaflets, distributed across the Ryde Council electorate and in group chats on WeChat during the local council election campaign. The leaflets purported to come from Falun Gong and endorsed the two independent candidates for Ryde Council. However, they may have been the doing of individuals with pro-CCP sympathies seeking to damage the chances of two independent council candidates — neither of whom ultimately proved successful

winning office — by insinuating that they were Falun Gong supporters or followers.<sup>60</sup>

Due to the political sensitivity around Falun Gong, a disinformation campaign of this nature had the potential to deter many Chinese-Australians from voting for the two candidates. One of the candidates, Bin Lin, emphasised that he was not associated with the organisation in any way. He suspected that the incident constituted a form of foreign interference in the election campaign.<sup>61</sup>

Before ABC News published an article that debunked the authenticity of the leaflets, they were circulated to at least one WeChat group chat with more than 140 members and to residents in the council area via mailbox drops.<sup>62</sup> The incident sparked an online conversation among two WeChat group members who condemned Lin as someone who intended to divide the ethnic Chinese community by supporting Falun Gong. Much like a previous “mysterious” letter circulated during the 2017 Bennelong by-election,<sup>63</sup> the identity of the original content creator remains unknown.

While more evidence is required to establish claims of foreign interference, this incident nevertheless highlights the ways in which questions of foreign influence sow distrust among the Chinese-Australian community on and beyond WeChat. The Ryde Council candidate and Hong Kong immigrant, Bin Lin, deplored what he called “self-discrimination” within the broader Chinese-Australian community. He noted that due to mounting China–Hong Kong tensions in recent years, immigrants from Hong Kong often feel alienated as a minority within the broader Chinese-Australian community. His position echoes that of several other candidates interviewed for this study, who expressed that Chinese-Australian politicians are walking on thin ice — easily suspected of being either an agent of foreign influence or an agent of ethnic division.

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlights that WeChat plays an important role at the grassroots level of political participation and civic engagement in Australia, despite the obstacles presented by WeChat content restrictions and sporadic incidents of possible foreign influence and interference. These drawbacks notwithstanding, WeChat plays a critical role in bridging, facilitating, and mediating democratic debate between politicians and their community electorates.

These findings do not rule out the possibility that WeChat could be more explicitly weaponised by the CCP in future to interfere in local, state, or federal elections. Nor do the findings deny the importance of greater public scrutiny and debate of censorship or self-censorship on WeChat. Like other social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, WeChat must grapple with issues relating to privacy, free speech, transparency, online polarisation, and mis- and disinformation. Australia's stark political differences and fraught bilateral relations with China add additional layers of complexity to managing these challenges.

*The greatest challenge with WeChat remains a lack of regulatory oversight from the Australian government and the platform's niche role within broader Australian civil society.*

Yet despite the inherent risks and drawbacks, this study directs attention to the ways in which the use of WeChat can and does contribute to liberal democracy at the most grassroots level in Australian politics: in terms of encouraging greater access to information and equity among voters, social and political inclusion, and political participation within a multicultural country.

It is possible to reap civic benefits from WeChat in Australia. To maximise these dividends while minimising potential risks, creative governance strategies should be explored.

The greatest challenge with WeChat remains a lack of regulatory oversight from the Australian government and the platform's niche role within broader Australian civil society. This has permitted widespread misinformation campaigns on WeChat during Australian federal elections in the past.<sup>64</sup> To improve the information environment of WeChat in Australia, the government could better monitor publicly available content produced by major WOAs and through the WeChat Channel. This enhanced public oversight could be

conducted by collaborating with civil society organisations and funding relevant research and surveys into this area.

Another strategy would be for the Australian government to seek to work directly with the platform — mandating it to improve its content moderation against specific issues, including misinformation, influence campaigns, and censorship. In fact, WeChat has already signalled its willingness to cooperate in this regard. In a 2020 submission to a parliamentary inquiry, WeChat International stated that it is willing to take measures to work with Australian authorities to counter the risks of misinformation and foreign interference campaigns, including appointing a senior legal representative as a point of contact.<sup>65</sup>

Greater regulation and engagement of WeChat should be matched by enhanced government support for Chinese-language media to improve the quality of information available on WeChat. Two of the media outlets included in this study — SBS Chinese and Radio2000 — demonstrate that increased government recognition and financial support can bolster the independence and quality of Chinese-language journalism online. This enhanced support would have the effect of improving WeChat's patchy information environment, allowing Chinese-Australians to be more informed and discerning in their news and information consumption.

There are of course more radical policy alternatives open to regulators. The government of India for example has banned Chinese social media platforms WeChat and TikTok entirely due to their perceived risks to national security. Yet an outright or even partial ban of WeChat in Australia would amount to a severe setback in the effort to enhance Chinese-Australian communities' immersion in Australia's democracy. As this paper illustrates, WeChat has been critical to that endeavour at all levels of government.

In the first instance, the government should therefore seek to strike a balance between proactively managing the evident risks of WeChat and harnessing the platform's civic benefits for Chinese-Australians. Enhanced public oversight and greater support for reliable Chinese-language news online offer a more flexible, collaborative governance strategy that would leave space for public deliberation and policy learning.

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis in this paper is informed by three sources of qualitative data collected during the campaign and election period of the 2021 NSW local elections. The first source is a real-time observation of dynamics in ten group chats where discussions relating to the NSW local elections took place. Some of these groups were created under themes directly related to the local elections or Australian politics, while others were created originally for other purposes but were then used to discuss the local elections. For example, the more general-purpose groups observed — such as groups 8, 9, and 10 — have large memberships but are most often used to share more general commercial advertisements and news. However, during election periods, these groups featured much campaign-related content and discussion.

Due to the closed and private nature of WeChat groups, the groups observed were recruited through the author's personal networks and snowball sampling,<sup>66</sup> but attempts were made to cover group chats with different political leanings and from various local councils. The groups are of varying sizes (from 120 to 500 members), spanning roughly five different Chinese-Australian social circles (see Table 1). A total of 100 posts, including media articles, discrete conversations, video content, posters, and screenshots were collected from the ten groups. These posts were selected because they directly related to the NSW local elections. Their content was analysed and labelled with keywords (or key phrases) that reflect election-related discussion topics. All keywords that appeared more than once are recorded and ranked based on the number of times they were mentioned throughout the election campaign period. A total of 49 keywords with 308 mentions were recorded (see Table 2).

The second source of qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews with nine Chinese-Australian council candidates, two of whom were former candidates who ran in the previous NSW local elections (see Table 3). One interview was also carried out with a Chinese-Australian candidate's chief campaign officer who was particularly active on WeChat during the elections. The interviews took place via phone and WeChat.

The third source of qualitative data came from three semi-structured interviews with the editors of four Chinese-language media outlets with a WeChat presence (see Table 4). One of the editors works for both Radio2000 and Tongcheng AU. Like the group chat content, interview content was also analysed and coded based on major election-related themes. The interviews took place via phone, WeChat, and Zoom.

## WECHAT'S ROLE IN AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY: A GRASSROOTS VIEW

The generalisability of the research findings is restricted by the fact that access to qualitative data was dependent on the author's effort to establish relevant human networks in WeChat's siloed information environment. While every attempt was made to increase geographic, political, and media representation, many good sources of data are not explored due to the isolated nature of group chats and the limited searchability of WeChat accounts. Further research and explorations in this direction are therefore strongly encouraged.

**Table 1: Ten WeChat group chats observed**

<b>Chat</b>	<b>Moderator</b>	<b>Original theme(s)</b>	<b>Number of Members</b>
1	<i>The Sydney Post</i>	2021 NSW local government elections	192
2	<i>The Sydney Post</i>	General current affairs	120
3	<i>The Sydney Post</i>	Australian elections	123
4	Anonymous*	General current affairs	170
5	Anonymous	Community chat for Georges River residents	298
6	Deputy Mayor Kun Huang	Community chat for Cumberland residents	500
7	Anonymous	Current affairs and miscellaneous topics	279
8	Anonymous	Business association for Chinese-Australians from North-Eastern China	498
9	Anonymous	Business association for Chinese-Australians from North-Eastern China	500
10	Anonymous	Chat organised for a live Covid-19 information seminar	421

\*Moderators are labelled "anonymous" when they did not express interest in being publicly identified.

**Table 2: Group chat most-mentioned keywords**

<b>Top keywords</b>	<b>Times mentioned</b>
Chinese-Australian political participation	21
How to vote	16
Community service	15
Independent candidates	15
Multiculturalism	14
Discrimination/racism	11
City development	10
Minority voice and welfare	10
Party politics	10
City planning	9
“Doing actual good” (approximate translation for “做实事；给人方便” — “zuo shi shi; gei ren fang bian”)	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>140</b>



## WECHAT'S ROLE IN AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRACY: A GRASSROOTS VIEW

**Table 3: Council candidates interviewed**

<b>Candidate</b>	<b>Council</b>	<b>Place of origin</b>	<b>Year of immigration</b>	<b>Political party</b>
Alex Yang	Burwood	Taiwan	1990s	Labor
Kun Huang	Cumberland	Mainland China	1990s	Labor
Nancy Liu	Georges River	Mainland China	2000s	Liberal
Guitang Lu	The Hills Shire	Mainland China	2000s	Independent
Benjamin Cai	Strathfield	Mainland China	1990s	Independent
Anonymous (campaign manager)	Georges River	Mainland China	2000s	Independent
Bin Lin	Ryde	Hong Kong	1990s	Independent
Anonymous (former candidate)	Withheld	Hong Kong	1990s	Independent
Michael Ng (former candidate)	Parramatta	Australia (second generation)	Australian-born	Independent

**Table 4: Interviewed media outlets**

<b>Media Name</b>	<b>Founding year</b>	<b>Funding source</b>	<b>WeChat features used</b>	<b>Main themes</b>
<i>The Sydney Post</i> (悉尼邮报)	2018	Funded mainly by founder (with limited advertising revenue)	Group chats; WOA	Current affairs; Australian elections; Finance; Lifestyle; Opinion editorials
SBS Chinese (SBS中文)	2021	Funded by the Australian government for Enhanced Language Services	WOA; WeChat Channel	Current affairs; Multiculturalism; News on Greater China; Education; Food; Finance
Radio2000	2000	Funded by the Australian government as multicultural media	WOA	Current affairs; Multiculturalism
Tongcheng AU (澳洲同城网)	2015	Funded through advertising revenue	WOA; WeChat Channel	Current affairs; Business; Education; Lifestyle; Video streaming

## NOTES

Cover image: Polling place (Brian Yap/Flickr)

<sup>1</sup> Wanning Sun, "Chinese Social Media Platform WeChat Could Be a Key Battleground in the Federal Election", *The Conversation*, 28 March 2019, <https://theconversation.com/chinese-social-media-platform-wechat-could-be-a-key-battleground-in-the-federal-election-113925>.

<sup>2</sup> Asha Barbaschow, "WeChat Sets the Record Straight for Its 690,000 Aussie Users", *ZDNet*, 1 October 2020, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/wechat-sets-the-record-straight-for-its-690000-aussie-users/>.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Hsu and Natasha Kassam, *2022 Being Chinese in Australia*, Lowy Institute, Poll, (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2022): 18, <https://charts.lowyinstitute.org/features/chinese-communities/>.

<sup>4</sup> Miles Kenyon, "WeChat Surveillance Explained", *The Citizen Lab*, 7 May 2020, <https://citizenlab.ca/2020/05/wechat-surveillance-explained/>.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Dziedzic, "China Accused of Foreign Interference after Prime Minister Scott Morrison's WeChat Account Hijacked and Renamed", ABC News, 25 January 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-01-24/prime-minister-scott-morrison-wechat-account-hijacked/100776898?fbclid=IwAR0FhrApHEMv7Xp8zinGcHFZk3SiXZ-6cvmfJKWPIEG1PWkrrpEbDPJYNf4>; "'No Evidence of Hacking': WeChat Hits Back at Interference Claims about Scott Morrison's Account", *The Guardian*, 25 January 2022, [https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/25/no-evidence-of-hacking-wechat-hits-back-at-interference-claims-about-scott-morrisons-account?fbclid=IwAR0VyohITfv\\_mY\\_IVWcCYsnmQrBn3qY17OkU79xcbPb-KrdhXgJQasgBna8](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jan/25/no-evidence-of-hacking-wechat-hits-back-at-interference-claims-about-scott-morrisons-account?fbclid=IwAR0VyohITfv_mY_IVWcCYsnmQrBn3qY17OkU79xcbPb-KrdhXgJQasgBna8).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Walsh and Bang Xiao, "'Uncharted Territory': WeChat's New Role in Australian Public Life Raises Difficult Questions", ABC News, 19 April 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-19/wechats-new-role-in-australian-politics-raises-questions/11031878>.

<sup>7</sup> "Australian Democracy: An Overview", Museum of Australian Democracy, <https://www.moadoph.gov.au/democracy/australian-democracy/#>; "Access and Equity: Inquiry into the Responsiveness of Australian Government Services to Australia's Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Population", Australian Human Rights Commission, 24 February 2012, <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/legal/access-and-equity-inquiry-responsiveness-australian-government-services-australias>.

- <sup>8</sup> “Number of Monthly Active WeChat Users from 2nd Quarter 2011 to 1st Quarter 2022”, *Statista*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/>.
- <sup>9</sup> Asha Barbaschow, “WeChat Sets the Record Straight for Its 690,000 Aussie Users”, *ZDNet*, 1 October 2020, <https://www.zdnet.com/article/wechat-sets-the-record-straight-for-its-690000-aussie-users/>.
- <sup>10</sup> Jennifer Hsu and Natasha Kassam, *2022 Being Chinese in Australia*, Lowy Institute, Poll, (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 2022), <https://charts.lowyinstitute.org/features/chinese-communities/>.
- <sup>11</sup> Philip Wen, “Rudd Switches on the Mandarin to Woo Chinese-Australian Voters”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 August 2013, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/rudd-switches-on-the-mandarin-to-woo-chineseaustralian-voters-20130830-2sv44.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> Sun, “Key Battleground”.
- <sup>13</sup> Limits are imposed on the number of posts a WOA can publish per day or per week, depending on the type of WOA. See “WeChat Subscription vs. Service Account”, *WeChatWiki*, 6 July 2020, <https://wechatwiki.com/wechat-resources/wechat-official-account-type-subscription-service/>.
- <sup>14</sup> Wanning Sun, “Political Engagement on WeChat”, *The Saturday Paper*, 4–10 May 2019, <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2019/05/04/political-engagement-wechat/15568920008093>.
- <sup>15</sup> Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu, “WeChatting the Australian Election: Mandarin-Speaking Migrants and the Teaching of New Citizenship Practices”, *Social Media + Society*, (January 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120903441>; Fan Yang and Fran Martin, “The 2019 Australian Federal Election on WeChat Official Accounts: Right-Wing Dominance and Disinformation”, *Melbourne Asia Review*, 15 December 2020, DOI: [10.37839/MAR2652-550X5.8](https://doi.org/10.37839/MAR2652-550X5.8); Tom Sear, Michael Jensen, and Titus C Chen, “How Digital Media Blur the Border Between Australia and China”, *The Conversation*, 16 November 2018, <https://theconversation.com/how-digital-media-blur-the-border-between-australia-and-china-101735>.
- <sup>16</sup> According to many interviewees in this study, the 2021 NSW local elections saw an unprecedented number of Chinese-Australian independent (non-party affiliated) candidates. “Independent candidates” is also among the

five most mentioned (and celebrated) keywords in the group chats observed for this study.

- <sup>17</sup> “ASIO Identifies Political Candidates with Links to China”, SBS News, 9 December 2017, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/asio-identifies-political-candidates-with-links-to-china>.
- <sup>18</sup> Angus Thompson, “Council Committee Sought Opinion of Chinese Consulate on Newspaper’s Sponsorship”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 April 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/council-committee-sought-opinion-of-chinese-consulate-on-newspaper-s-sponsorship-20190416-p51enj.html>.
- <sup>19</sup> Paul Robinson and Emilia Terzon, “Taiwan Flag Design Painted over by Council ahead of Beef Industry Event”, ABC News, 9 May 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-09/childrens-cow-statue-design-altered-taiwan-flag-painted-over-qld/9739574>.
- <sup>20</sup> It is difficult to obtain accurate statistics on the number of council candidates who used WeChat during the 2021 NSW local elections due to the private and closed nature of WeChat’s social network, which makes public searches for individual WeChat accounts difficult.
- <sup>21</sup> Like WhatsApp groups, WeChat’s private group chats are formed through private networks and cannot exceed 500 members.
- <sup>22</sup> One editor works across two media outlets.
- <sup>23</sup> See Methodology for more detail on group chat and interviewee selection.
- <sup>24</sup> Fan Yang, *Translating Tension: Chinese-Language Media in Australia*, Lowy Institute, Analysis, (Sydney: Lowy Institute, 29 September 2021), <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/translating-tension-chinese-language-media-australia>; Eric Harwit, “WeChat: Social and Political Development of China’s Dominant Messaging App”, *Chinese Journal of Communication*, Volume 10, 2017, Issue 3, 321.
- <sup>25</sup> Walsh and Xiao, “Uncharted Territory”.
- <sup>26</sup> Lotus Ruan, Jeffrey Knockel, Jason Q. Ng, and Masashi Crete-Nishihata, “One App, Two Systems”, *The Citizen Lab*, 30 November 2016, <https://citizenlab.ca/2016/11/wechat-china-censorship-one-app-two-systems/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Kenyon, “WeChat Surveillance Explained”.
- <sup>28</sup> Small Chinese-language media outlets operating in Australia may select to register under a mainland Chinese WOA rather than an overseas WOA because of lower annual fees and greater range of in-app features. See “WeChat Official Account: Local vs Overseas”, Ineat, 8 March 2019, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/f76\\_S4hYmVb\\_I6Ayv6znDA](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/f76_S4hYmVb_I6Ayv6znDA). Many Chinese-

Australians may have had existing Weixin accounts prior to arriving in Australia and therefore choose to continue using their accounts in Australia.

<sup>29</sup> For an expression of this view see Sear, Jensen, and Chen's "Blur the Border" in which the authors state that "Influence campaigns on social media may take many forms. A less direct route is to ensure that legitimate news sources *only report news that serves the strategic objectives of the government in question.*" (emphasis added). See also: Fergus Ryan, Audrey Fritz, and Daria Impiombato, *TikTok and WeChat: Curating and Controlling Global Information Flows*, ASPI, Policy Brief, (Canberra: ASPI, 8 September 2020), 28, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/tiktok-wechat>, where the authors state that "WeChat's tight censorship ensures that, for the vast majority of the time, these news sources only report news that serves the CCP's strategic objectives."

<sup>30</sup> Yang and Martin, "Right-Wing Dominance".

<sup>31</sup> Peter Cai, "Beijing's Control over Chinese-Language Media More Pressing than Fairfax China Daily Inserts", *The Interpreter*, 1 June 2016, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/beijings-control-over-chinese-language-media-more-pressing-fairfax-china-daily>; also see Alex Joske, Lin Li, Alexandra Pascoe, and Nathan Attrill, "Australia Must Protect Its Chinese-Language Media", ASPI, *The Strategist*, 17 December 2020, <https://www.aspi.org.au/australia-must-protect-its-chinese-language-media/>.

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- <sup>44</sup> *The Sydney Post*’s original content includes this in-depth interview with one Chinese-Australian council candidate, published on the media’s WOA: Xiao Shiyi Lang, “Xuanju you qianguize? Huaren canzheng toushi, Lao Xiao fang zhengtian huajie lingjunrenwu Zhou Shuo [Hidden Rules in the Elections? Penetrating Chinese-Australian Political Participation — Lao Xiao Interviewing Leading Figure in Chinese-Australian Politicians: Shuo Zhou]”, *The Sydney Post*, 13 November 2021, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ltbG7nBlhTf\\_xqTKveQuYw?fbclid=IwAR1cIj8U1hly3rvVrfbhKVUZWYMN3AG0jekji55CrB1LPxrDNZyzU-Z78Yc](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ltbG7nBlhTf_xqTKveQuYw?fbclid=IwAR1cIj8U1hly3rvVrfbhKVUZWYMN3AG0jekji55CrB1LPxrDNZyzU-Z78Yc). The online newspaper also frequently published opinion editorials, such as this one on a racist incident experienced by a Chinese-Australian candidate, which was

shared widely in group chats as a URL: Lao Xiao, "Huayi yiyuan yu zhongzu qishi, qianze zhiyu yaobuyao fanxing ziji youmei danghao yiyuan [Chinese-Australian Councillor Experienced Racial Discrimination: While Condemning Such Incident, Should One Also Reflect on One's Own Work as a Councillor?]", *The Sydney Post*, 25 November 2021, <https://www.chillicomment.com/?p=22007>.

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<sup>49</sup> For example, Radio2000 published stories for individual candidates such as: "80hou duli houxuanren wei bendi shimin dou mouhua ledian sha? [What has Millennial Independent Candidate Planned for the Local Residents? Much has been Thought Up!]", *Radio2000*, 22 November 2021, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/j\\_T9bmoOKnzMcyDni-b6hQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/j_T9bmoOKnzMcyDni-b6hQ). Tongcheng AU published similar content, including a story introducing a group of Chinese-Australian candidates: "Xinzhou houxuan yiyuan xie aozhoutongcheng, wei zaiaohuaren fasheng! Qingwei nizhichide huaren yiyuan, toushang baoguide yipiao! [NSW Council Candidates together with Tongcheng AU Help Give Chinese-Australians a Voice! Please Vote for the Chinese-Australian Candidates You Support!]", Tongcheng AU, 22 November 2021, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Qy3V75qnoGQxpgiwGnygsQ>.

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- <sup>53</sup> Alex Yang, interview by author via phone, 15 December 2021.
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- <sup>55</sup> Nancy Liu, interview by author via phone, 8 December 2021.
- <sup>56</sup> Angus Thompson, "Sydney Councillor's Chinese Consultancy Links Prompted ICAC Interest", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 November 2021, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/sydney-councillor-s-chinese-consultancy-links-prompted-icac-interest-20211123-p59bep.html>.
- <sup>57</sup> Nancy Liu, interview by author via phone, 8 December 2021.
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<sup>66</sup> Snowball sampling or chain-referral sampling is defined as a technique in which existing subjects provide referrals to recruit further participants for a research study.

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