

‘Property talk’ among Chinese Australians: WeChat and the production of diasporic space

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Abstract

This article examines the ways the Australian property market is addressed among Chinese migrants in Australia on and off WeChat, one of the most popular instant messenger apps installed on Smartphones. Specifically, we focus on how migrant media and real estate professionals’ narratives on real estate properties constitute and reproduce a transnational Chinese diasporic space between China and Australia. Although the latest wave of ‘property talk’ is relatively a new concept to the mainstream Australian societies due to the housing price boom since 2012, talking about land and property ownerships has always been integral part of Chinese diasporic culture. Yet, with the advent of digital media technologies, this cultural conversation is increasingly being delivered, processed and experienced through digital platforms such as that of WeChat. Drawing on observations on WeChat and interviews with Chinese media and real estate practitioners in Australia, we conceive that WeChat plays a vital role in forging and reproducing Chinese diasporic spaces in Australia by articulating the intersection of diasporic spatiality and mediasphere. We contend that WeChat’s affordances of the informational, interpersonal and instrumental have aided Chinese migrants and those Chinese real estate practitioners to co-constitute a social space of property talk that enables new social relations to be negotiated and social networks to be established and reinforced across China and Australia.

Keywords

Chinese diaspora, migrant media, migration studies, real estate, WeChat

Introduction

As Australian real estate markets, especially in metropolitan areas of Victoria and New South Wales, had been growing exponentially since 2012, the term ‘Chinese buyers’ entered the

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imaginary of the mainstream Australian media: for example, ‘Are Chinese buyers driving up Australia’s housing prices?’ (Chau, 2017); ‘Chinese buyers set to keep underpinning Australian home prices: analysts’ (Irvine, 2017). Across academic and media outlets, the mainstream social discourse in Australia has focused on socioeconomic factors such as affordability (Collet, 2018), social equality/divide (Wiesel, 2016) and wealth (re)distribution (Creighton and Morton, 2018). However, this article is less interested in a critique of the English media discourse on Chinese buyers than how contemporary Chinese-language media and Chinese real estate agents in Australia articulate the intersection of diasporic spatiality and mediasphere.

Being mindful of real estate market and aspiring for property ownership as opposed to rental is nothing new in the past and present Chinese migrant communities, which often perceive property ownership a crucial source of both economic and ontological security for building a family and even the milestone of adulthood. For instance, Jia Gao’s (2006: 206–207) longitudinal surveys on People’s Republic of China (PRC) migrants who arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s demonstrate a similar propensity to own property. Seen from the questionnaires, the number one life priority for newly arrived Chinese migrants was ‘to get an ideal job’ and, the fourth, ‘to buy a house’. After a couple of years, their number one life priority shifted to ‘to buy a house’, the second ‘to send children to a better school’ and the fourth ‘to save for an investment’.

However, ‘property talks’ today are often mediated by or situated around the universe of the global networks of PRC-based Chinese language digital platforms – most notably WeChat. The convergence of two forms of transnationalism, Chinese migrants and digital platforms, has hence forged a very specific experience of talking about real estate on the one hand, and the mediation between the Chinese migrant community and the wider mainstream Australian societies on the other. In this article, we examine the ways properties are addressed among Chinese migrants in Australia on and off WeChat and how these narratives on real estate (re)produce the contemporary diasporic space. We conceive the spatiality of diasporic space as inherently transnational and comparative, not only because of the physical cross-border movements of migrants themselves but also because such spatial arrangements and movements are reproduced and reinforced through Chinese migrants’ ability to negotiate between different identities, social and cultural expectations, arrangements and expressions. With the advent of digital media, these motions are increasingly mediated by online platforms. This is not only in reference to the digitisation of property-related information in websites and apps, but it is also the whole set of practices involving social networks building and maintaining, information sharing and reproducing, and inter-media content production and distribution, which engenders new forms of spatial practices and senses of belonging across (at least) two distinct social, political and cultural spaces.

As a ubiquitous social media/messaging platform in Chinese migrants’ life in Australia, WeChat constitutes an indispensable social milieu for Chinese diaspora’s property talks. We look into how different performances of various identities (e.g. Chinese national, migrant and Australian citizen) are negotiated in different settings of ‘property talks’ through digital media. Specifically, we focus on the ‘production-end’ of Chinese migrant’s conversations on real estate – online content made by local migrant media practitioners and real estate sectors in Australia rather than buyers or property onlookers themselves. Through learning about the stories, experiences and daily operations of these ‘content producers’, we are able to develop important insights into the cultural practices of Chinese language ‘property talks’ in Australia.

Our discussions are mostly based on in-depth interviews, but prior online observation on WeChat also helped select our interviewees and guided our questions during interviews. Online observation includes scrapping daily posts from subscription-based WeChat public accounts based in Australia – three are real estate-focused and the other three are more generically lifestyle-focused – and monitoring group chats around these public accounts, which facilitate conversations around

real estate properties. Eight Interviews were conducted over the phone and face-to-face between January to March 2018, across Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney. All participants are Chinese migrants themselves who are either permanent residents or citizens of Australia: two Chinese digital media content producers, three real estate sales agents, two developers/investors and one mortgage lending banker. The categorisation of these individuals is based on their 'main occupation'; however, some of these individuals have 'side-jobs' such as writing WeChat blogs about Australian property markets, hosting seminars on investment/property in Australia and China, or other forms of migration-related business across China and Australia. Their insights are, hence, discursive on the subject of Chinese migration rather than merely being specific to the topic of property and real estate. This discursiveness from our interviews enables us to make some generalisations with our findings and to cross-examine data collected online.

We begin by reviewing the roles, functions and significances of Chinese-language media in mapping and reproducing a Chinese diasporic space in Australia. Media are not merely informational – they facilitate the building of new social networks, forge the formation of new communication rituals and, hence, a particular sense of self and identity. We then move on to consider that WeChat, unlike conventional online messengers, does not merely host private or group messages, but encompass many other functions. In particular, its Subscription Accounts (SAs) play an instrumental role in shaping those privately conducted online chats and timelines-sharing activities. Finally, we draw on those insights of data to contend that WeChat, in general, plays three crucial functions in shaping Chinese migrants' property talks in Australia: being information, interpersonal and instrumental for both Chinese aspiring property buyers and those industry practitioners in Australia.

Production of diasporic spatiality

The term diaspora has always been a spatial concept – a 'travelling term' (p. 302) in Clifford's (1994) words – that entails the 'interrelated sets of places and spatial processes' (Ma, 2003: 5) with multiple, overlapping experience with geographic movements and economic activities. This emphasis on processes, of dispersion of people, also resonates with Hage's (2017) 'the diasporic condition' as 'comparative spatiality' and even 'spatialisation of temporalisation'. He writes, 'to be diasporic is to find it impossible to experience a social phenomenon, be it a landscape...or a social relation on its own terms without having an elsewhere shadowing it' (p. 201). This sense of being torn between two (or more) places or feeling of in-between-ness or 'spatial uncertainty' (Ma, 2003: 11) is tackled by various authors. Caruso (2013) coins the term 'diasporic forms of citizenship' – 'a desire to maintain a sense of community and at the same time transcend it' (p. 371). Sun (2006) argues that the diasporic imagination of space is inherently transnational, which suggests a cross-border sense of cultural belonging and experience of social negation. Gao (2006), in his long-term study of a group of PRC migrants arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s, proposes a processual mode of oscillation between place of origin and place of destination, in which PRC migrants strived to assimilate to mainstream society, but failures pushed them towards a renewed patriotism to China, then these unresolved dilemmas pushed them once again to local lives in Australia. 'Their efforts to counter the danger of being marginalized on either side...have continued on a regular basis' (Gao, 2006: 214). Rather than oscillation, Hage (2017) understands this state of being through the notion of vacillation, which is not just movement between various states of being; rather, it is a state of being in itself (p. 202). The salient point is that the diasporic consciousness is certainly not limited to a one displaced ethnicity, but 'practices of displacement might emerge as constitutive of cultural meanings rather as their simple transfer or extension' (Clifford, 1997: 3).

Like Gao's description of PRC migrants' unending struggle against 'double marginalization', a state of indecision cannot be resolved simply by one decision taken. For instance, the decision to purchase a property (as revealed by our data) often overlaps with the spatial navigations and constant comparisons between China and Australia. Questions such as when or for how long they intend to stay in Australia, whether or not they have established social networks in Australia and the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of the real estate practitioners they are dealing with, all contribute to Chinese migrants' property-related communications. Such 'indecision' sometimes can prolong the entire property search/purchase journey up to 1 or 2 year(s). As some real-estate agents told us, compared to their non-Chinese clients, their Chinese clients generally take 'much longer' to make a purchase decision because: first, they tend to do much more 'homework' (*gongke*) before making a decision; second, they often start their property search very early, way before they are actually ready to pay or move into the new home. In other words, Chinese migrant's prolonged property talk is often in a state of vacillation. The mode of vacillation is, however, not a state of confusion, but it is by contrast, a carefully managed process of spatial comparison and negotiation between Australia and China or thinking through what Hage (2017: 202) would call the 'meaningfulness' of investment in both staying or leaving.

In the 1990s, there was already some academic literature (e.g. Zhou, 1998) that dealt with the spatial patterns of Chinese migrants' expansions into suburbs beyond Chinatowns. In Melbourne, there are multiple suburbs – such as Box Hill, Glen Waverley and Doncaster – where Chinese migrants clustered in. These suburban enclaves are not just residential, but fully fledged ethnic centres of commercial, social and cultural activities with Chinese owned shopping centres, banks, pharmacies, shipping companies, massage parlours, car wash, barbers and a variety of Chinese restaurants catering to the taste of each Chinese city/province of origin. In fact, it can be argued, tentatively, that these ethnic enclaves are developing to competing city centres without overtly challenging the spatial textures of preordained single centre city planning.

The dramatic rise of housing prices in 'traditional' Chinese suburbs in the past decade has gradually transformed the affordability and even desirability of residing in these areas in Melbourne and Sydney. The overgrowth of bustling migrant establishments in these suburban or even emergent urban new town centres seems to be helping provide the convenience of maintaining a diasporic lifestyle that was previously not accessible and almost parallel to the 'mainstream' society. However, in these suburbs, factors of socioeconomic ranking (average income, school system and so forth) and provenance (of majority migrants) have already converged; in other words, poorer Chinese communities are pushed further away from the established centres to gentrify new ethnic enclaves. This further exacerbates the class divide within Chinese communities. This points to the consideration of 'a multi-spatial approach' (Georgiou, 2010: 22). The single event of prospectively purchasing a property involves multiple spatial scales: it is first a home, the domestic space of ontological security as well as economic security of a long-time investment; it is then in a suburb, intricately situated in local history, social class and market price; it is also in a city, with its overall city planning and expected level of 'liveability'; finally, it is in the national and transnational space of capitalist accumulation, a literal flow of wealth across nations.

These overlapping spatial scales are also confirmed by those real estate practitioners we interviewed. When asked 'what do Chinese buyers mostly concern about when inquiring a property', all our informants have responded in a near-identical pattern: first, the land's title and ownership status and the interior layout of the house (home and domestic space); second, the school zone and availability of Asian grocery shops and community in the vicinity (suburb); third, accessibility to public transportations and proximity to work/university (city planning); fourth, the comparative lifestyles with China and future mobility between Australia and China (trans-nations). The diasporic

space is thus both symbolic (from national identities to class identities) and material (from investment or home ownership to suburban everyday life).

Diasporic media sphere and WeChat SAs

Chinese migrant media have played an important role in processing Chinese people's sense of spatial and cultural vacillation. Besides the obvious function of being informational and communicative, migrant media have reconfigured the nature of social interaction. As Georgious (2010: 21) puts it, 'social interaction and relations are no longer dependent on simultaneous spatial co-presence; there are also relations developing with the *absent other* through mediated communication' (authors' emphasis). While the physical movements and spatial transitions of diasporic communities have broken off the specificities and singularities of physical places, it is diasporic media that has removed the static relations between physical place and social relations, redefined place from a static context or container of social networks to one of the many references used to negotiate the transnational economic activities, social relations and diasporic identities.

Following Sun (2006) and Georgious (2010), we propose to understand the role of diasporic mediasphere as one that forges the practices of vacillation. Diasporic mediasphere does not just produce or make a community but such diasporic community is facilitated through those negotiations of the different sets of social relations, cultural expectations and imagination through diasporic media. In other words, diasporic media bridges the past and present, the home and the host, the static and the fluidity and, eventually, the sense of dislocation and continuity.

Property talk also involves another crucial transnational element that has defined (Chinese) migrant media and the immigration experience over time: financial capitals. Chinese migrant mediasphere has been regarded as predominantly a business operation, which is increasingly imbricated with real estate corporations, and a 'cultural broker' in Sun's (2006: 143) words, as opposed to objective or investigative journalism. There are in fact some continuities from Chinese-language print media to new media platforms such as SAs on WeChat. For instance, Ip (2003), Sun (2006) and Sun et al. (2011) all agree on the point that the majority of revenue in Chinese-language diasporic media outlets come from advertising rather than circulation and they are run as business operations (with the exceptions of political patronage in some media outlets, which are difficult to confirm). Sun et al. (2011: 145) writes,

the inseparability between business and journalism may come across to mainstream media professionals as a cause for concern, but it is important to realise that business and media connection only becomes an ethical issue when media pledge editorial independence and claim to practice object reporting.

This explicitly business-oriented operation still forms the basic understanding of the digital diasporic Chinese media today. The lack of journalism or journalistic practice in the conventional sense is not abnormal in diasporic mediasphere, as they have been, and still are, predominantly funded by Chinese business, whether small businesses like an English tutor school or large corporations like a transnational real estate company. This delimits not only the contents available on these outlets, but also their socio-economic perspectives. For instance, with the escalating dominance of rentier capitalism in Australia in the past decade, both online and offline Chinese media outlets have been consistently promoting and maintaining the imageries of the scarcity of land properties, various measurement of liveability and investment prospects of Australian cities and specific suburbs.

WeChat, known to Chinese speakers as *Weixin*, literally 'micro-message', is the uber-convenient multi-purpose application that introduces most users to the Tencent ecosystem. While

the current scholarship mainly studied WeChat as a platform that forges private messaging and personal online networks due to the platform's built-in privacy management functions and processes (Holmes et al., 2015; Zhang, 2016), few have paid attention to the feature of minimalised timeline feed called 'moments' or *Pengyouquan* (literally friendship circle) in China. The crucial divergence of this feature from familiar platforms such as Facebook is that one's activities such as comments under other's posts are only visible to common WeChat contacts rather than entirely public or semi-public; in other words, it encourages the formation and consolidation of, pre-existing or not, 'social circles' rather than an entirely open Internet. As Deluca et al. (2016: 331) point out, this 'higher threshold for entry means a tighter community within each user's network'.

Furthermore, Tencent has become increasingly savvy in promoting its SAs in Chinese services, which is designed and launched for registered and verified organisations, business and individuals to post contents (articles, videos and audio) under the domain of WeChat built-in ecosystem (as opposed to the open Web). While the verified and unverified accounts have near identical functionality, they are different when it comes to their audience reach. A non-verified SA would be considered as 'non-locally registered', hence it is not visible to WeChat users within the PRC. A locally registered account, verified through its associated business name in China, can be made visible to both PRC and global users (Tencent, n.d.).

We interviewed two senior employees working for two different Chinese news SAs based in Melbourne. The routine of their daily operation begins with their browsing through the Australian English media outlets such as *the Age* or *Sydney Morning Herald*, which provides the basic ingredient of 'raw news' (the first order). The labour of translation is often not done locally, but outsourced to professional translators in China, who would translate entire articles or sections selected by the local editors according to their relevance to the local Chinese communities. The real 'original' work comes after the translation: in the interstices of the selective translation (the first order interpretation), the local Chinese writers based in Australia then add very sensational and almost blatantly opinionated commentaries (the second order interpretation). The headlines often contain hyperbolic rhetorical devices such as 'Must', 'Best' and excessive uses of exclamation marks and question marks. There are no discernible differences between opinion pieces and news reports, not that a division of these two genres is necessary in the first place in the Chinese migrant mediasphere. It is very intriguing that the 'editorial' often makes their subjectivity very forefront by referring to themselves humbly in third person as '*xiaobian*' (literally, little editor) and makes their interpretative acts very prominent.

In terms of the practice of relentless advertising, there are various methods such as embedding the advertisements right after the headline and before the main text, abruptly inserting in the middle of the news article, ending with Tencent's own automatic digital advertising programme (similar to AdSense) and less conspicuous practices of product placement within the main news item. It should be noted that some of these stylistic formulas are also present in other non-migrant SA media outlets in general, but this mode of production described in the paragraph above is specific to Chinese migrant media. It should be also emphasised that the people working on the contents of SA accounts for Chinese migrants are often also behind the traditional print media. These characteristics of Chinese-language SA posts are reminiscent of the points we outlined at the beginning of the section while discussing the history of diasporic mediasphere in print – the nature of its operation as business. One informant smirked when we asked about journalism:

'There is no journalism, there is not even editorial in the traditional sense. Stories are almost always taken from somewhere else, rather than first-hand interviews or investigations. The division of work is very vague, and I do everything from editorial work, to write story, management of social media presence, to composition (of the print newspaper)'.

He repetitively emphasised the value of ‘telling a story’ over news as the ‘readers are not interested in reading news written in a detached tone’. The news is always filtered through the editorial voice, according to their perceived relevance to Chinese community in terms of policy, climate, social, cultural or political interests (immediately or indirectly related). For example, the Melbourne-based SA WeLife (2018a) published a selective translation of a report by *Domain* headlined ‘Victorian government to co-purchase houses with 400 first-home buyers’ (Worrall, 2018). The Chinese headline reads ‘Good benefits for friends with no property! Victorian government wants to pay 25% of your mortgage in 2018!’. The explicit sensationalism is just one of the ways to stretch the news report into a piece that contains both highlighted practical information such as what suburbs are eligible for Homes Vic Scheme and the underlying message of scepticism for such government policies. In another WeLife (2018b) SA story titled ‘Property in Melbourne auctioned three times in three years! All Owners earned a lot!’, the news article is not a direct or recomposite of the pre-existing English report, but rather ‘original’. The story is written according to the transaction record on realestate.com.au, which shows the property was sold three times from 2015 to 2018 and the price went from AUD785,000 to AUD1,010,000. This unvarnished information is then written into a success story of real estate investments in WeLife article full of exclamation marks, attached with promotional photos presumably uploaded by real estate agents.

Outside the production line of these WeChat press outlets, there are also some more professional SA accounts that specialise on the issue of real estate: step by step legal advices on getting a loan, procedures of property purchase and even ‘academic’ (i.e. original contribution based on research) discussion of the real estate market. The brief glimpse into the formality repeated by various Australian-based WeChat SA demonstrates a vital concern for property investment, housing prices and related issues within the Chinese communities. We are not inclined to argue that the Chinese media played a major role in encouraging this demand, but rather many factors coalesced in the context of transnational rentier capitalism, but they are certainly telling the stories people want to hear.

In the past Chinese migrant media are often divided into those who produce and disseminate content publicly such as migrant newspapers, community radio and websites and those who communicate privately (telephone and online messengers). The private and public media-sphere, while clearly related to each other, hardly co-exist on the same media platform. This is not the case of WeChat as the aforementioned two distinct, yet related, communicative spheres of private chats and semi-public SA converge on the same digital platform. The two universes are intertwining rather than existing in isolation to each other: the topic of one’s private chat and the content shared on and obtained from timeline are increasingly related to those content published by the SAs she or he is following. WeChat SA and private chats constitute a form of inner-mediatisation within the same digital platform that content from both the private and semi-public are overlapped, co-produced and self-enacting each other’s discourses and framings. In other words, rather than reposting content outside of WeChat, SAs are able to provide enough content for individuals to discuss, share and repost in their own timelines and private chats.

Being able to identify the arrangement, relationships and mode of information and representation process helps us understand the relationship between individual and publics, self and togetherness in a highly mobile and fragmented social context such as that of the transnational migrants. In this article, we question, and intend to find, the role, significance and meanings of WeChat in processing Chinese migrants’ property talks in Australia: how has the social media platform WeChat altered, preserved and facilitated a topic that is so traditional to Chinese people within a context that feels unfamiliar to the same conversation (i.e. Australia)?

WeChat as told by real estate agents

Real estate professionals have generally identified the centre role WeChat has played in their everyday works and among the Chinese communities in Australia. Cindy, who is originally from Hong Kong and a marketing specialist in a property investment firm located in Brisbane, states that 'WeChat has become the key tool for communication and promotion properties to the China/ese market...now, even many Australian (non-Chinese) real estate agents are using WeChat to communicate with their clients'. The emphases on non-Chinese agents' use is very interesting and this comment has re-occurred throughout our conversations with multiple Chinese real estate professionals. On the one hand, we can interpret this emphasis as the popularity, or even centrality to a certain extent, of WeChat as being a cross-cultural and transnational medium. Yet, a deeper reading into this observation reveals that Chinese property talk and Chinese buyers themselves are increasingly being 'mainstreamed' in Australia. The perceived cultural embracement of Chinese migrants is often measured by the level of acceptance of the home country's indigenous media platform(s) rather than migrant's ability to access or integrate with the mainstream Australian media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. While by no means our research participants are claiming that every real estate agent in Australia is using WeChat or such choice is necessary, the ubiquitous acceptance of WeChat indicates a widespread sense of cultural embracement in Australia. Our informants' conscious emphasis illustrates an attempt to construct the power and centrality of WeChat within the Chinese migrant community when it comes to learning about Australia and its property markets.

Property talk is not just a communicative process that leads to purchase and settlement of real estate properties, but a culturally ritualised experience embedded within the transnational and cross-border journey migrants have been through. When asked about their impressions of a typical Chinese buyer, the industry practitioners we interviewed point to some commonalities, which we believe are the conversational rituals of Chinese property talk: the directional facing of the property (*chaoxiang*), the internal air flow (*duiliu*), school zone (regardless if they have children or not), potential investment returns and, most importantly, according to the interviewees, the most common expression that Chinese buyers used was to always indirectly present their questions or queries with 'I heard that ...' (*tingshuo*). These conversational rituals are also increasingly enacted on WeChat and other forms of digital media platforms. Take the practice of *tingshuo* as an example. According to Jenny, who is originally from China and a real estate agent in Melbourne, whenever clients cite some property-related news and information, they claim that they 'heard from someone else', they actually mean something they either read off from their Moments timeline, or directly received from those SAs they followed. However, some of the above conversational rituals are 'not necessarily applicable' in Australia practically speaking: the directional facing in Australia, for example, is opposite to that of China and the airflow-related planning layouts cannot be entirely met in Australia due to the different architectural designs between Chinese and Western living styles. Many of their Chinese clients have either ended up accepting these differences or some had prior knowledge about these differences before engaging with the real estate agents. These factors are nonetheless included to reproduce the conversational ritual of the Chinese property talk culture.

For Chinese real estate practitioners, dealing with their clients is as much a social and cultural experience as a commercial encounter. While this might be true to real estate business around the world and across different cultural and social contexts, the collapsing and merging between different social and cultural spheres make the processes a lot more dynamic and complex. We can understand WeChat's roles as informational, interpersonal and instrumental to both property buyers and agents. These aspects often appear simultaneously and are experienced interchangeably depending on the purpose, progress and status of the property talk.

Contesting informational-scape

Buying property often require one's considerations beyond the property itself; as Jenny puts it, buying a property requires great deals of research and learning about social conditions, culture and even natural environments of the location. However, due to the nature of WeChat and the distinction between private chats among individuals who are connected with each other, and those news and information provided by SAs, WeChat information can often be contradicting, confusing, or simply 'overloaded' when it comes to real-estate news. As shown by examples earlier, real-estate news and information often appeared in-between and within SA accounts in Australia that focus on migrant lifestyles. Equally, individual real-estate agent and agency either have their own professional WeChat account (registered by individual agents) or company SAs (set up by the company). Jane, who came from China and used to work as a real estate agent in Melbourne, told us that 'real estate agents now generally have two WeChat accounts, one for work and one for personal use' (while previously it was the same case for phone numbers). This is even true for some 'local Australian' real estate/property investment firms. For instance, the property investment firm where Cindy works is not owned nor operated by Australian Chinese. When asked why her company decided to register a WeChat account, Cindy replied this is the only way they can tap into the Chinese market both within Australia and back in China.

In order to gain a better insight into how WeChat has tapped into the Chinese markets in Australia and China, we cross-examined real estate information provided by SA media and real estate companies' SAs. We then further compared them against our interview data, in which we asked the sector's practitioners about the patterns of these property-related contents on WeChat. We observed two types of information: technical and social. The former includes those news and information about stamp duties, interest rates and home loan application procedures. The latter are social- and cultural-orientated information which touches on topics such as lifestyle, crime and safety, schooling and education, the size of Chinese population in a given city or suburb, infrastructural development and the overall economic outlook of Australia. This information is often shared across WeChat's private chats and Moments and semi-public SA spheres. The close proximity between the two WeChat spheres are important to those industry practitioners we interviewed. David, who is a former real estate agent and now running his own real estate academy in Melbourne, believes that there are so many false or inaccurate information shared on WeChat that he needs to intervene. Jenny and David both attribute the circulation of false information within a diasporic experience to the general lack of knowledge on Australian cities/suburbs. David confessed that he became quite frustrated lately due to some false reports about a Melbourne suburb's past and he felt a strong need to rectify this kind of misinformation through his own SA posts. Jenny relies more on her own (work) WeChat account and moments to 'counter' what she perceived as exaggerated and inaccurate reports about crimes and safety circumstances in Melbourne because she has already received many enquiries and questions from her clients.

In terms of the informational, WeChat is not merely there to process or delineate news and information about Australian property to members of the Chinese communities in Australia; instead, WeChat provides both the resources and tools for both Chinese buyers and Chinese real estate practitioners to negotiate and co-produce the knowledge about Australia, which is not merely about Australia's property market. This is similar to those mediated spatial navigation as discussed in diasporic media literature (see for example, Cassidy and Wang, 2018). The diasporic space is, thus, built on the transnational flow and exchange of information, news and ideas between Australia and China. WeChat's communicative spheres also co-produce the Chinese migrants' imagination about Australian places, culture and social conditions, which would have contributed to their experience of migration and even the decision to immigrate. More importantly, our

participants' accounts reveal that the Chinese diasporic space undergoes constant reproduction and negotiation. Jenny and David's attempts to redress some of the 'misconceptions' about Australian suburbs presented by other SAs clearly show the many and sometimes contesting imaginations of Australia. Rather than settling the Chinese immigrants' sense of self and belonging to Australia, WeChat has complicated the process of forging sense of belonging and even unsettled the experience of acculturation. Chinese language media, then, do not simply produce a stable and homogeneous sense of community, but such diasporic space engendered by the WeChat mediasphere is a constantly contested terrain.

While we cannot be as certain if such experience is exclusive to those newly arrived or aspired migrants who still live in China at the time when they are inquiring about Australian properties, or if it were some 'common themes' among members of the Australian Chinese communities in general, it is clear that the informational aspect of Chinese migrants' property talks is increasingly mediated, processed and reinvented through WeChat's informational and communicative ecologies.

Building networks and negotiating interpersonal 'trust'

Although a WeChat-facilitated diasporic space is somewhat fragmented with the vigorous informational exchange, the perceived 'information overload' also provides opportunities to negotiate new interpersonal networks in a transnational environment. According to our participants, adding potential clients to their own WeChat (personal or professional) account is becoming a common practice among Chinese real estate agents in Australia. Adding clients' WeChat is a tactical calculation to some because real estate is a very personal business. Jane, who used to work at one of the largest real estate companies in Australia, believes WeChat's private chat messaging is vital for the business because it 'allows agents to create a more personalised relationship with potential client'. This is then reinforced by WeChat's build-in privacy filtering process in which one must approve other's friend request in order to be connected. Getting approved as a personal WeChat contact, in addition to retrieving information such as phone number and email address via official means (i.e. application forms), is an important first step for these real estate agents.

Moreover, it illustrates a clear pattern of personalised communication among Chinese migrants when it comes to property search. When asked further regarding the importance of personalised modes of address, Jane explained that personalisation is all about building a trusting interpersonal relationship with clients because buying a property is such a significant part of Chinese ways of life, and hence, many Chinese buyers will consider the personal credibility of the agent rather than merely the product (i.e. the house) itself. While this might sound like a salesman tactic, it unearths an important cultural aspect of real estate business among Chinese migrants in Australia. James, who is from China and works as a mortgage broker/investor in Melbourne, shares a similar view with Jane because, as he puts it, buying a property as well as getting a home loan requires one to fully disclose their wealth and income streams to the relevant industry practitioners. James believes that interpersonal trusts between the involved parties are crucial and even central to the entire process of buying a home. Yet, the notion of trustworthiness and credibility is increasingly constructed and reinforced through the informational processing of WeChat. As Jenny and James both point out, regular WeChat presence is crucial to build a personal relation and reputation with Chinese clients. James positions WeChat in the broader socio-cultural condition of selling Australian properties back in China:

selling a house requires a lot of 'preparation works' in China, a sales agent needs to get along with the potential clients fairly well by going to dinner or having a drink with them, telling them about your life stories so they know you are a "real person" (rather than just a salesperson who just want to close a deal).

I have even shown images and shared location details of my house in Melbourne, to say I am credible. Without all these, people just don't trust you.

While James was referring to his experience with his clients in China, we can still extend this complex social negotiation and emotional labour of property talk in a Chinese cultural context. This form of social negotiation is increasingly done through WeChat. WeChat is not simply an instrument to organise meetings between real estate agents and aspired Chinese property buyers in Australia; but the imperative remains as buyers are increasingly relying on their WeChat connections with the real estate agent to determine the 'personal characters' of the agent. This is why sales agents like Cindy, Jenny and James all emphasise on the idea of regular posting and presence on the WeChat Moments timeline. Jenny said she constantly provided property information via her WeChat Moments post not only because those were the relevant information to the Australian property market, but accumulatively those posts built her 'credibility' and 'authorities' among those clients who befriended her on WeChat. In Cindy's words, 'no one will trust an agent who hardly post (on WeChat)', WeChat posts are the most basic form of social practice to build one's professional authenticity. James, for example, complained that while WeChat is convenient, it can be also very 'troublesome':

'Being connected with my clients on WeChat literally means I need to be on stand-by all the time; Chinese people do not like to wait, they have little sense of what "business hours" means. I often have inquiries sent via WeChat at midnight and I just have to respond to them and also do it quickly. Another wise, slow or non-response can build a poor reputation amongst clients – they will think we are not trustworthy or not being professional. We do not want that'.

The emotional labour of being on stand-by on WeChat is very intriguing. We recognise the mode of communication and interpersonal network buildings within a strictly Chinese diasporic cultural context. Migration means being removed from one's familiar social space and the previously established social networks and relations require either to be re-built or carefully maintained. Chinese buyers' lack of trust towards real estate agents during the phase of relation building is a gradual process of learning to navigate and rationalise the new social space in Australia. The communicative practices of building and assessing interpersonal creditability lead us to understand a peculiar mediated structure of the Chinese diasporic space. In the case of property talks, real estate practitioners' roles are not just perpetuating business transactions, but gradually building themselves up, through a consistent WeChat presence and other public communication devices, as the opinion leader on the subject matter (not simply properties but migration-related issues in general). However, their efforts to negotiate with the potential buyers also show us that the status of being an opinion leader is not taken for granted, but a carefully cultivated and maintained role. And with WeChat, the longevity of such 'status' (and the power of being an opinion leader) is much more spontaneous (i.e. failing to provide constant updates or timely reply to clients' online inquiries). This posits the formation of a Chinese diasporic space in a digital, transnational context where the sense of 'community leadership' is no longer determined by the pre-existing structures and networks, nor is it stable. The authority is, however, continuously reproduced and maintained through digital media platforms like WeChat.

Conclusion

In this article, through interviewing real estate and media practitioners, we have described and examined WeChat SA contents on real estate as a representative of contemporary Chinese diasporic

mediasphere in Australia and various forms of communication rituals and emotional labour of maintaining a WeChat profile. The intersecting Chinese diasporic social space and WeChat's mediascape constitute the processes and practices of spatial navigation, negotiations and building of social relations and interactions between Australia and China across multiple scales of the economic, social and cultural. Our pivotal argument is that WeChat does not merely provide or enact an alternative or parallel diasporic space that is outside of the English mainstream mediascape in Australia; more than that, WeChat-facilitated diasporic space is supported by WeChat's internally mediated structure between its private chat, timeline content and its semi-public SA content. The stories published by SA often become fuels of conversations in private messages, group chats and timeline comments, which suggest an interesting form of media ecology between the SA content producers and their 'followers'.

The transnationality of aspired property buyers in conjunction with the cross-border nature of WeChat has produced the very specific social narratives and cultural expectations of the property talk in Australia. Unlike the mainstream social discourse of framing Australia's property price boom strictly in a socioeconomic sense, our research suggests that Chinese migrants' discourse is more spatially termed and culturally coded. WeChat, as a digital media platform, does not merely provide an alternative diasporic space, but codify the performance of spatiality and facilitate the reinvigoration of communicational rituals of 'Chinese property talks' in Australia. WeChat does not simply disseminate news and practical information about Australia's property market; it also provides a context through which migrants navigate the Australian property market and even the Australian social and cultural spheres at large.

Author's Note

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