

# Why banning WeChat would be unthinkable for Chinese - Australians

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On November 24 2022, the Senate resolved to establish a [select committee](#) to inquire into and report on the risk posed to Australia's democracy by foreign interference through social media. Submissions from the public closed in February, and the committee will hand down its final report by early August.

The committee is chaired by Liberal Senator James Paterson, widely [considered](#) to be a 'China hawk who has led the push for a crackdown on Chinese-owned apps'. But Paterson is not alone in thinking Chinese-owned apps should be banned. The Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Fergus Ryan, for instance, believes that banning WeChat should never be '[taken off the table](#)'.

WeChat is the predominant Chinese social media platform, both in China and for first-generation Mandarin-speaking Chinese migrant communities worldwide. This is not the first time there has been a threat to ban it.

## Concerns over social media platforms

In August 2020, then-US president Donald Trump, citing national security concerns, signed executive orders prohibiting TikTok and WeChat in America. Trump's attempted WeChat ban led to a well-organised, large-scale and grassroots civic action by members of the Chinese-American community. Following Trump's announcement, the non-profit organisation [US WeChat Users Alliance](#) (USWUA) was formed, and on August 28 2020, USWUA filed a [motion for preliminary injunction](#) in the San Francisco Federal Court seeking to block the executive orders.

The Trump administration appealed the court's decision in favour of the injunction, but in February 2021, a newly elected Biden administration asked a Federal Appeals Court to place a hold on proceedings. On June 9 2021, [Biden](#) officially revoked Trump's orders.

Clay Zhu, one of the attorneys involved in the lawsuit, said: 'Trump sought to justify a ban on grounds of national security concerns, but the court found no evidence to prove that such concerns were justified.'

Like their Chinese-American counterparts, Chinese-Australian WeChat users are anticipating the Senate committee's report with confusion and anxiety. Other social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook are not permitted in China, and given WeChat is the most important platform Chinese Australians use to stay connected with families, friends and business associates in both China and Australia, it is unimaginable they might wake up one day without WeChat.

Chinese government censorship and propaganda on WeChat are often [cited](#) as reasons for concern. But what is usually missing in this way of thinking is that the vast majority of Australia's WeChat users do not endorse

or support such censorship and propaganda; they simply have to live with it – and within it. Moreover, there is little evidence in the latest [study](#) of Australia’s Chinese-language digital media suggesting WeChat users are easily duped by the Chinese government’s propaganda.

### Who’d be hurt by a WeChat ban?

It is not just everyday WeChat users who are worried about a WeChat ban – academics who conduct research on various aspects of the Chinese-Australian communities are too. For instance, [Bingqin Li](#) (UNSW) has been studying how community organisations such as the Chinese Australian Services Society (CASS) use WeChat to recruit volunteers in aged care and self-help groups. WeChat is particularly useful for community-based service providers to contact hard-to-reach older people. Li reports that some of these older people have been quietly contributing to the shortage of aged care labour in Australia for many years. But now, with the help of WeChat, CASS has recruited many more volunteers, including many new migrants from mainland China.

For older Chinese Australians, WeChat is a lifeline for overcoming social isolation and learning about Australian culture, regulations, social services, events and networks. If it were banned, many of these elders would return to a state of effectively being ‘blind, deaf and mute’.

Similarly, [Tina Du](#) (University of South Australia) [studied](#) the information behaviour of Chinese migrants over the age of 67, and found that WeChat has played a significant and essential role in enabling these senior citizens to live in Australia and remain connected with China.

Some researchers are also urging health professionals to use WeChat to assist their patients. Dr [Ling Zhang](#) (Sydney University) is a nurse practitioner and research fellow specialising in the care of patients with cardiovascular disease. Based on her finding of low levels of eHealth literacy among migrant communities, Zhang argues that WeChat should be used as a platform for GPs and cardiologists to disseminate health information by health care providers, given its wide reach.

But it is not just the aged and healthcare sectors that stand to suffer from a WeChat ban. [Wei Li](#) (Sydney University), who has been studying Chinese-Australian business connections for many years, observes that WeChat enabled migrant entrepreneurs to maintain essential contact with their suppliers and partners in China during the pandemic, when travel was not allowed.

Li has also come across many non-Chinese Australians using WeChat to connect with business partners in China. Indeed, [Austrade](#) urges Australians wishing to do business with China to ‘make sure that you set up your WeChat account ... for network connection and enhancing market reach’.

Australian tourism operators wishing to attract Chinese tourists would stand to lose a crucial – if not the only viable – means of promoting Australia to Chinese tourists, both those already here and those still deciding on their next destination.

The earlier-mentioned [study](#) also found the widespread use of WeChat to promote knowledge about Australia’s political system and electoral procedures during federal and state elections. The current use of WeChat as a platform for debate, education and [polling](#) on issues related to the Voice to Parliament referendum is another case in point.

Given all these factors, a WeChat ban in Australia would almost certainly harm social cohesion in serious ways. Its impact would be extensive, and not just on Chinese-Australian users. It remains to be seen whether the government will realise just how serious the political, social and economic ramifications of a WeChat ban might be.

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## Disclosure:

Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu are the authors of the latest study *Digital Transnationalism: Chinese-Language Media in Australia*. They have recently made a late [submission](#) to the Select Committee on Foreign Interference through Social Media, and their submission was reported in the [media](#). Wanning Sun also provided written testimony as an expert witness in the US legal case discussed in the text.