

# Who leads and brokers opinion on Australia's WeChat

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There is a common misperception that WeChat is a trap for the Chinese diaspora. Yet, this is a simplistic view. While WeChat is essential to political communication and opinion curation among Chinese diasporic communities, the dynamics of opinion curation and user agency both on and off the platform are much more complex.

First-generation migrants from China can access Chinese media produced in China, Chinese-language media produced in Australia as well as English-language media. While this rich media environment is a blessing, it is also potentially confusing, as people are exposed to different – and even conflicting – interpretations and analyses of events. The role of opinion leaders and opinion brokers is crucial.

Most users of WeChat and its Chinese version *Weixin* in Australia are people with ties to mainland China or those associated with them, holding either international WeChat accounts or Chinese *Weixin* accounts. New migrants to Australia from China since 2011 are mostly *Weixin* account users who took their accounts with them to Australia.

Australian WeChat users and Chinese *Weixin* users share similar social media habits – they are active and interactive. WeChat is the main news channel for Chinese living in Australia, mostly through WeChat Subscription Accounts (WSAs). More than half of them check WeChat or *Weixin* (chats, Moments and WSAs) multiple times daily.

Not all Chinese Australians are active on WeChat. The vocal minority dominates public discourse and opinion in the various spaces on WeChat, as is typically the case with social media. The silent majority do not regularly contribute their own voices but stick around to see what the others have to say and occasionally comment or ask questions. The vocal minority is composed of opinion leaders and opinion brokers.

Opinion leaders play active roles in debating and interpreting policy statements of Australian politicians and their parties. They take it upon themselves to introduce topics for discussions, debunk misinformation and repost news stories, op-eds and tweets from English-language media outlets, sometimes with a Chinese content summary. They have played a leadership role in [citizenship education](#) during Australian federal elections.

Opinion leaders have high levels of interactivity with group members. They contribute to the stickiness of WeChat. WeChat is [super-sticky](#) because of its technical features and functions and because of its highly interactive features in semi-closed spaces (including chat groups and Moments). Opinion leaders are receptive to debates in political communication and willing to engage with peers in group chats. They create a sense of belonging that positively influences the strength of usage habit in chat groups.

But opinion brokers do not have a high level of interactions with others on WeChat. They rarely engage in discussions with others in chat groups. They often ‘lurk’ and observe in chat groups and occasionally express their views by either sharing news and information from different news sources or leaving short comments on topics led by opinion leaders. Some of them operate WSAs and brand themselves as self-media operators.

These ‘self-media’ accounts do not aim to attract large followers or financial returns. They are on the platform for self-expression or sometimes public engagement for brick-and-mortar businesses. They serve as translators, curators and commentators of what they regard as useful information on issues relevant to their everyday life, such as health-related information about COVID-19. They often move between different social circles on and beyond WeChat and share diverse views and topics.

One such self-media producer and opinion broker is Qiaoba. He shares experiences and views with fellow Chinese migrants. One of his most popular articles (with 100,000 views), *I regret so much after migrating to Australia!*, for example, is a sarcastic rebuttal of misconceptions among some Chinese migrants about Australia and migrant lives.

Qiaoba advises people not to immigrate to Australia if they just want to enjoy Australia’s ‘good life’ without understanding and contributing to social cohesion, including respecting all people irrespective of their skin colour, religion or sexual preference. The article was reposted by WSAs and widely circulated in WeChat Groups.

Opinion leaders and brokers are active WeChat users in [political communication](#). Thanks to their efforts, Australian WeChat users consume news and information from various sources that are shared in different spaces on the platform. Their exposure to both professionally and user-generated content contributes to the formation of opinions.

Living in a high-choice media environment, Chinese Australians are impacted by multiple media sources and platforms and offline factors such as one’s residency and profession. There is no ‘public opinion’ on WeChat but a [constellation of opinions](#) segmented by social circles across the different spaces of information flow.

Even within a social circle, the vocal minority does not represent the diverse views and perspectives of the silent majority. Those who are not interested in politics are less likely to be in a social circle that is politically oriented. It is well known among Chinese-Australians that WeChat uses algorithmic filters to enforce political censorship and self-censorship, especially during [political events](#). It also uses algorithmic recommendations to push viral content and trending topics in Official Accounts and Channels.

These accounts and channels, including those operated by media organisations, provide news updates, analyses and commentaries which can influence their followers’ opinions. But for non-followers of these accounts and those who have chosen to stay away from WeChat, they have limited impact. To be or not to be on WeChat, or [how to use it](#) – this is a question of personal choice.

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