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iPhones and 'African gangs': Everyday racism and ethno-transnational media in Melbourne's Chinese student world¹

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ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnography of young women from China studying in Melbourne, this article explores participants' experiences of living in a super-diverse city, and questions whether extant theoretical accounts of everyday multiculturalism are adequate to understand the experience of these residents. In 2016, Melbourne's Chinese student community was rocked by a prolonged spate of mobile phone thefts that Chinese-language social media framed as ethnically targeted attacks on Chinese people by "African gangs." This article considers participants' responses to these incidents, alongside the racialized reportage of them on the WeChat public accounts that are participants' main source of local news. The article mounts a critique of the media ethics inherent in this form of news delivery. It extends the everyday multiculturalism framework with an example that deals not with a strongly hybrid migrant youth culture, but rather with young migrants socialized into a monocultural society encountering everyday life in super-diversity.

KEYWORDS

Chinese students, everyday multiculturalism, everyday racism, social media, super-diversity, international education

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Figure 1: Poster on Swanston St Melbourne, May 9 2016

In May 2016, an anonymous poster (Figure 1) was attached to a post near the building entrance in inner-northern Melbourne used by the Trinity College Foundation Studies Program, a bridging program to tertiary study for international students, including many from China. With its simplified-character Chinese text reading “Danger. African criminals” accompanied by photographs of hostile-looking African-heritage young men, and assertions that such men target Chinese students to “rob” and “bash” them, the above photograph of the poster was circulated among Chinese international students via WeChat, currently the most popular social media platform in this community. It fed into a stream of posts and news stories that had been running since February concerning the alleged targeting of Chinese students by “African gangs” in a spate of iPhone thefts in the area. In light of its obvious racial vilification, accusation of unidentified people, and doubt cast on the efficacy of the authorities, unsurprisingly, the poster was swiftly removed by police.

This poster points toward hostile engagements (allegedly physical, definitely rhetorical) between two racialized groups within inner Melbourne’s urban multicultural: “African migrants” and “Chinese international students”. In pitting these groups against each other, the poster highlights class as well as “racial” differences. While African-heritage youth in Melbourne may be the children of former refugees

from Sudan, South Sudan, and the Horn of Africa—among the city’s most severely disadvantaged residents on multiple socio-economic indicators (Abur 2012; Olliff and Mohamed 2007; Gatt 2011; Dhanji 2009)—the many Chinese international students studying in the city come mainly from middle-class and elite families in urban China, where tertiary education in a “developed” western country has become a desirable commodity to increase competitiveness in China’s professional job market (Martin 2017b). What is happening here? What led to this poster being produced, displayed, and circulated? Are our current interpretative frameworks adequate for the task of accounting for it, or making scholarly interventions into the situation that produces it? This article attempts to tackle these questions.

I begin, below, by revisiting the frameworks of everyday multiculturalism and everyday racism. I then offer a brief consideration of racial discourses in contemporary China, where the international student participants in the ethnographic study on which this article is based grew up and were socialized. This is followed by a detailed analysis of the phone thefts case study, including critical consideration of the role of new transnational social media in shaping Chinese students’ experiences of race and urban life in Melbourne. The paper concludes with a consideration of the implications of this example for our understandings of everyday multiculturalism in the context of super-diversity.

Revisiting everyday multiculturalism and everyday racism

Since the late 1990s, a thread of critical work from scholars in Australia and Britain has problematized the top-down accounts of “official multiculturalism” prescribed by governments through attention to people’s material practices of living with cultural diversity “on the ground,” in a turn toward what has been called “everyday multiculturalism.” In Jon Stratton’s germinal account in *Race Daze*, he introduces the concept as referring to:

how cultures, produced by individuals in their everyday lives, merge, creolise and transform as people live their lives, adapting to and resisting situations, and (mis)understanding, loving, hating and taking pleasure in other people with whom they come into contact. (Stratton 1998: 15)

In Australia, scholars have taken up this rubric to produce enriched understandings of

the unspectacular daily business of living in diversity, in a cultural climate where multiculturalism has come under renewed attack from the (re)emergence of Hansonism, Islamophobia, and moral panics about “ethnic gangs” (Ang et al 2002; Wise 2005; Stratton 2006; Bloch and Dreher 2009; Wise and Velayutham 2009; Colic-Peisker and Farquharson 2011; Ho 2011; Wise 2011; Collins, Reid and Fabiansson 2011; Harris 2013).

An important corollary to this work is a related strand of work by some of the same scholars on everyday racism (Stratton 2006; Bloch and Dreher 2009). Drawing on the earlier work of Philomena Essed (1991), Stratton frames this as:

the day-to-day, common-sense ideological legitimations that [...] people [...] developed to justify their racist practices [...] the formation of attitudes and understandings that are so embedded in the everyday life of a racialized culture [...] that members of that culture [...] don't even recognize themselves as making decisions based in a racialized history. (Stratton 2006: 662)

Everyday racism is at root what this article is about. However, it departs from the classic works in everyday multiculturalism studies in its focus on recently-arrived migrants; on the impact of transnational flows on local-level inter-group relations; and on how racial and class hierarchies in a super-diverse society fuel everyday racism *between* ethnic groups. Many studies of international students and racism in Australia have tended to frame these students exclusively as victims of racist violence from the majority culture (e.g. Dunn et al. 2011). This paper shows that international students are not *only* victims of racism in Australia (although they certainly are that), but also are embedded into complex, transnational racialized hierarchies, and may themselves be complicit in racisms that morph and evolve along with educational mobility.

Referencing Steven Vertovec's (2007) conceptualization of “super-diversity” in Britain, Greg Noble characterizes everyday life in Australian cities with reference to a related kind of “diversification of diversity”:

Australia seems to be evincing an evolving “hyper-diversity”: it wasn't just that people lived hybrid lives, or lived them in polyethnic neighbourhoods, but that complexity and its subsequent forms of interaction were of such a nature that they went beyond typical understandings of multiculturalism and corresponded

to the claim that diversity was becoming more diverse. (Noble 2009: 47)

I wish to underline two elements in this formulation, both because they characterize much recent work on everyday multiculturalism in Australia, and because the case study I address here presents a potential challenge to each of them, which suggests that it may now be useful to extend earlier work on everyday multiculturalism in order to take account of changing social conditions. First, as a precondition for the emergence of hyper-diversity, Noble cites the concept of *hybrid lives*. This concept of hybridity appears often in the work of Australian scholars in their collective emphasis on culturally and ethnically mixed cultures among 1.5- and second- and third-generation migrant youth (e.g. Ang et al. 2002; Wise and Velayutham 2009: 6; Collins, Reid and Fabiansson 2011; Harris 2013). Second, Noble's formulation cites the *polyethnic neighbourhood* as another precondition for Australian hyper-diversity, and a key site for research on everyday multiculturalism. Much work on everyday multiculturalism in Australia has focused on territorially bounded sites relating to local communities: specific neighbourhoods (Bloch and Dreher 2009; Wise 2009, 2005; Harris 2013; Collins, Reid and Fabiansson 2011); schools (Ho 2011); community organizations (Wise 2011), and so on.

Although the extant scholarship's focus on hybrid identities and specific localities certainly identifies productive sites for research on everyday multiculturalism, to do justice to the conditions of social life in cities like Melbourne today, I argue that we need to go further. First, I propose that *we should supplement attention to hybrid identities among permanent migrants with studies of interactions involving more recently arrived first-generation and transient migrants*. Although doubtless, for most migrants, degrees of subjective hybridization develop over time in a non-linear way; nevertheless, as a result of the shorter length of time they have spent in Australia, recently arrived first-generation and temporary migrants are likely to experience their own ethno-cultural identities in significantly different ways from the 1.5+ generations who have been the main focus of the studies cited above. This is certainly the case in the present study, in which the vast majority of participants, when questioned about their ethno-cultural identification, continue to describe themselves as Chinese nationals (*Zhongguoren*: a term that implies citizenship of the People's Republic of China as well as Chinese racial-cultural identity) first and foremost. One of the key points in Vertovec's original conceptualization of super-

diversity is the diversification of migration statuses, with permanent migrants living alongside transient migrants like students and guest workers, and ever-renewing waves of first-generation arrivals (Vertovec 2007). Thus, even while 1.5+ migrant generations undeniably do mix, hybridise, and render problematic the concept of discrete, ethno-bounded cultures, this hybridization is not universal or even across all groups in super-diverse societies. Rather, we see the co-existence of multiple migrant generations, including relatively recently arrived first-generation and transient migrants, some of whom may not have time to mix and hybridise to the same extent as permanent migrants and their succeeding generations and may in fact believe rather strongly in the existence and importance of “categorical ethnic definitions” (Harris 2013: 22). If the point of theorizations of everyday multiculturalism is to develop an understanding of how social life actually works under conditions of diversity, then we must take into account the experiences of the full range of groups that make up that diversity. Under current conditions in the large east coast Australian cities, recent and transient migrants like international students are a group that should not be ignored.

Second, I propose that *we should supplement existing conceptualizations of multiculturalism with a stronger appreciation of the transnational character of people’s everyday experience*. The extant everyday multiculturalism scholarship’s emphasis on territorially bounded places at times risks the implication that “everydayness” equates to the geographic scale of the locality. Yet today—perhaps especially for migrant communities—the terrain of everyday life is often strongly translocal as much as geo-local, so that to think about everyday multiculturalism is, ipso facto, to think about translocality (Harris 2013: 110-117; Vertovec 2007: 1043; Amin 2002a). Thanks to the quasi-ubiquity of broadband connectivity, the ready availability of mobile communication technologies, the naturalization of online digital communication in everyday life, and the decreased costs of international travel, for the current generations of migrant young people in Australian cities, everyday life is thoroughly shot through with translocal connections (Smith 2001; Martin and Rizvi 2014). For a study like this one, in which the research subject group is intensively networked through media and personal connections to people, texts, and cultures located at a transnational remove from the context of their immediate habitation in Melbourne, I find a translocal approach extremely useful. It enables us to see “the everyday [...] not as a sedentary, nostalgic site of ‘local culture,’ but as a dynamic crossroads of local, national, and transnational place-making practices” (Smith 2001:

185) in ways that do justice to the actual conditions of many people's experiences of everyday life in super-diverse societies.

The material presented in this article is drawn from a five-year longitudinal ethnographic study still in progress at the time of writing, in which I am following a group of 56 female tertiary students from pre-departure from China through several years of study in Australia, and on to their post-graduation destinations. The purpose of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of the social and subjective world of this group of students, including their everyday experiences of living with cultural diversity in Australian cities. In this article, I draw on several data sources, including: discussions with participants, their families, future international students, and commercial international education agents in China during June–July 2015; a series of ongoing informal conversations and formal recorded interviews with participants between July 2015 and October 2018 (both face-to-face and via social media) in which they discuss their everyday experiences in Melbourne; 39 months' informal daily observations of participants' activity on WeChat including the content of the links they shared to local news stories on WeChat public accounts; and my discussions with a number of other informants, including other members of Melbourne's Chinese diasporic community, people involved at various levels in the production of WeChat local news media, and representatives of Victoria Police, the University of Melbourne, and community groups providing services to refugees and multicultural youth in Melbourne.

Race and Africanness in modern Chinese public culture

Before turning to the racialized panic that is this article's main case study, it is necessary first to briefly survey constructions of race (*zhongzu*), and especially of African racial identity, in modern and contemporary China. This complex topic has been treated in depth by a number of major studies (for example Dikötter 1992; Johnson 2007), but a key point to highlight in this brief summary is the lengthy cultural shadow cast by the Chinese adaptation of European scientific racism in the early twentieth century. As Frank Dikötter demonstrates, the Chinese discourse of race that took shape in that period took on aspects of racial biologism, evolutionism and eugenics to (re)produce a racial hierarchy with northern European and Han races at the top and darker-skinned peoples, especially Africans, at the bottom (Dikötter 1992: 61-190). Africans as a "race" were associated in China's Republican era public culture with barbarism, backwardness (*luohou*), uncivility and intellectual inferiority.

The discourse of race was officially abolished with the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. But in a functionally mono-ethnic society with no strong social pressures to develop anti-racist critique, and where national belonging has long been conceptualized in racialized terms, the earlier racist discourse on hierarchized differences between the world's ethnic groups has continued clearly and persistently to shape popular attitudes, through the Maoist era and into the present (Dikötter 1992: 191-195). This can be seen in outbreaks of hostility toward African students on Chinese university campuses during the 1980s, with the Africans stereotyped as uncultured, uncivilized, hypersexualized and sexually predatory (Cheng 2011). A related discourse surfaces in outbursts of anti-African racism online in the contemporary era of increased China-Africa aid, trade, and human mobility (Cheng 2011; Pfafman et al 2015).

Modern Chinese anti-African racism clearly resonates with racist discourses globally (Pfafman et al 2015). In particular, aspects of the representational patterns outlined above echo those found in contemporary Australian public culture, where moral panics over "Sudanese refugees" have become a media staple over the past decade. News reports persistently represent African-heritage youth in Australian cities as a racially othered "problem group" associated with urban decay, violence, delinquency and gang-related crime (Windle 2008; Nolan et al 2011; Abur 2012). In the events of 2016 in Melbourne's central city area, I suggest, Chinese and Australian (and global) racist frames for interpreting young African-heritage men's presence in the city came together and became mutually amplified.

Phones, gangs, and WeChat

However, despite common stereotypes that construct Chinese international students as insular and not amenable to intra-cultural mixing and exchange, in fact, Australia's multicultural society is one of the nation's major draw-cards as a study destination for these students. In the pre-departure information sessions I attended in 2015 in China, run by Australian universities and commercial education agents, Australia's multiculturalism was regularly cited in the standard list of attractions of the country, both by education industry professionals and by future students and their parents. Specifically, agents led prospective students and their parents to believe that racism would not affect them in Australia, since it was a land of multicultural harmony. Emphasis was placed more on multiculturalism as a safeguard against anti-

Chinese racism specifically than on the intrinsic value of multicultural mixing among a variety of ethnic groups. But the vast majority of my future-student interviewees did express the hope of broadening their horizons by making friends across cultures while studying in Australia. While most expressed the specific hope to befriend “local” (*dangdi*, which in their habitual usage usually means “white”: Martin 2017a)² peers, one future student who introduced herself to me at a university-run pre-departure session said she was especially interested in participating in my study since, as an undergraduate, she herself had conducted a study into the everyday experience of African international students on her campus in Hangzhou.

Following their arrival in Melbourne, while many of my participants have found it difficult to make “local” friends, some have developed friendships and romantic relationships with other east and southeast Asian international students, including people from Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and India. One young woman, finding herself one of just two Chinese students in her course at a campus in Melbourne’s outer north, developed close friendships with a group of Muslim women students: one from Syria, one from Turkey, and an Anglo-Celtic Australian woman who is married to a Muslim man and has converted to Islam. “I often look around and find that I’m the only one not wearing a head scarf!” she joked, seemingly surprised (pleasantly) by this unexpected turn in the ethno-cultural composition of her friendship group. She told me how she enjoyed learning about her Muslim friends’ religion and cultural traditions, and admires their studiousness and ambition. Another participant, already a resident in Melbourne for several years, had a romantic relationship with an international postgraduate student from Ghana (which she did not mention to her parents, as she foresaw they would object to her dating somebody African). Another, more recently arrived and currently enrolled in an English-language class, spoke forthrightly about how her experience of the multicultural classroom and new friendships with Saudi and Indian classmates have changed her former view of certain nationalities, which was influenced by negative discourse from the Chinese state, based largely on current political disputes. Thus not only is multiculturalism a significant draw-card for Chinese students coming to study in Australia, but once they are here, many of them make significant cross-cultural engagements and, as a result, develop varying levels of reflexivity regarding national and cultural identity (Martin 2016). Nonetheless, it is notable that in these engagements, while students may cross lines of ethnicity, culture and “race,” class

lines remain fairly intact, since their socializing habits tend to remain within the orbit of the campus and international student groups in particular.

It was in fact through a reflexive critical engagement with questions of ethnicity and media representation that I first became aware of the unfolding events that constitute my central case study. In early March 2016, at one of my project's regular group activities (an evening film screening), Niuniu, a 24 year-old Masters student from central China, addressed the group: "You know all these stories on WeChat lately, about African gangs attacking Chinese students? Well, I'm wondering whether they're really true, or whether they could be a media beat-up." Niuniu described how she had followed up on a number of stories currently circulating and contacted anyone she could who was connected with the stories, only to find that she couldn't locate any direct eye-witnesses or victims of the reported attacks. She therefore suspected it was a media beat-up, harmful both to inter-ethnic relations and to Chinese students' sense of safety. Other participants were less reflexive and skeptical, simply fearing for their own safety—especially since some WeChat news accounts linked reader reports of muggings with the story of a recent "home invasion" and carjacking by an "African gang" in the Eastern suburbs.

Over the following days, stories of Chinese students being mugged in the university environs by groups of "tall, fast, black youths" came in thick and fast on WeChat—both in our dedicated chat group for study participants, and via WeChat's Facebook-like 'Moments' feed, where I had around 250 contacts in the wider Chinese student community. A sense of panic set in, with many students stating that they dare not go out alone or at night in the Carlton/ city area, and some reporting that people they knew directly had been robbed, and had underwhelming experiences with reporting thefts to the police, who appeared to "do nothing." This culminated on the night of March 12, when a violent disturbance took place in Federation Square during Moomba celebrations (Melbourne's annual city festival), which was widely reported in local media as involving rival "African" and "Pacific Islander" gangs from Melbourne's disadvantaged outer east (Smith 2016). WeChat Melbourne news accounts picked up the sensationalist stories from the local tabloid press, translated the headlines into Chinese and in many cases exacerbated the racist cast of the reporting, adding photos of injuries sustained by ethnically Chinese people, and referring repeatedly to "black gang members" and "black bandits" "out of control" and targeting "Asians" (*yayi*) or "Chinese people" (*Huaren*). Chinese student groups

encouraged their members to contact the Chinese Consulate in Melbourne to voice concern over whether the police and university were adequately safeguarding their security. Students' families back in China, where stories of the allegedly anti-Chinese crimes in Melbourne circulated freely via online and social media, sent panicked messages. Meanwhile Victoria Police attempted—somewhat ineffectually, given their lack of access to Chinese-language media—to circulate a de-racializing message that the muggings were not targeted at Chinese people specifically, and only one-third of phone theft victims were of Asian heritage (Worrall 2016).

In my discussions with participants over the weeks and months that followed, it was clear that their levels of fear and insecurity in the city and university area had significantly increased as a result of their consumption of WeChat stories about the activities of the “black gang members” supposedly “targeting Chinese students.” Many reported now feeling generically afraid of “black people” and unwilling to encounter them in the street.

The reports that students were reading via WeChat came not only from their personal Moments feed (*pengyou quan*), where users interact directly with friends, but also from their subscription to local news accounts (*gongzhong hao*). Usually, these are produced by commercial companies, and offer a daily digest of Chinese-language news and information about life and events in specific Australian cities. The subscription accounts and individuals' personal WeChat communications exist in a symbiotic relationship. While individuals often post links to stories published in the official accounts, the official accounts in turn rely on user-produced content as a source of stories, presenting screen shots of users' posts or messages as eyewitness accounts of unfolding events. The content of MelToday is organically linked, too, with local Australian media, with a preference for eye-grabbing material gleaned from publications from Rupert Murdoch's News Corp empire and other tabloid media.

Subscription accounts of this type occupy a unique emerging place in both local and transnational media ecologies. WeChat is a Chinese-owned and -run service, developed by China's Tencent Holdings Ltd and regulated almost wholly from the Chinese side. State censorship of content applies, so that even when operating in Australia, content producers self-censor to avoid criticism of China's government and the Chinese Communist Party. On the Australian side, however, these public subscription services tend to be somewhat insulated from Australian Commonwealth media regulation—for example, the enforcement of anti-racial vilification laws,

political campaigning laws, and so on—due to the language barrier to Australian authorities. In terms of content, though, accounts like MelToday, Melbourne WeLife and Mel_life—three of my participants’ most commonly read accounts—present news and information that is almost wholly concerned with local current events in Melbourne. In this sense, WeChat news subscription accounts occupy an emergent grey area between traditional “ethnic” media and new forms of transnational media; hence I dub them “ethno-transnational media.” Like the “ethno-specific mediatized sphericules” analyzed by Stuart Cunningham a decade and a half ago—at that time instantiated in video, television, cinema, music, and Web 1.0 platforms used by diasporic communities in Australia—these new media, too, are probably *most* significant insofar as they provide users with sorely needed spaces of intra-diasporic communication, social support, and a minoritarian public sphere (Cunningham 2001; Martin and Rizvi 2014). However, the new generation of social media services also has a number of new characteristics that, as we will see, arguably make its social effects more complex than the older media analysed by Cunningham.

The importance of WeChat in Chinese international students’ everyday lives cannot be overstated. Most of my participants keep the app open on their phones 24 hours a day, and check their Moments feed and subscription accounts multiple times, and for cumulatively significant periods of time, every day and night. Their preference for sourcing aggregated news via mobile apps reflects a general global trend (Bell 2016; Tang 2016; Taylor 2016). In China, a recent study by Tencent shows that WeChat is among people’s top sources for accessing news, especially via WeChat’s official accounts service (WalkTheChat 2016). Travelling abroad for study, Chinese students continue to practice these news-sourcing habits learned at home.

Each of the Melbourne-based official accounts to which my research participants and I subscribe covered the incidents outlined above to some extent. While some made an effort to disentangle fact from fiction, one account stands out for its extensive and sensationalist coverage of “African gangs” stories both before the Moomba events and since. MelToday (*Jinri Moerben*, web version available at: <http://www.meltoday.com>) is among the largest and most widely read of the Melbourne-based accounts, operating across Weibo, WeChat, its own webpage, and a dedicated phone app. Its top WeChat headline stories attract between 10,000 and 100,000 views; around 35,000 views at a rough average (for context, currently around 50,000 students from China are studying in Victoria; Herbert 2016). In 2015,

MelToday reported that it had over 150,000 followers on Weibo, over 50,000 on WeChat with 7,000–8,000 ongoing monthly growth, and over 1 million monthly views from 250,000 unique visitors to its webpage (Jinri Chuanmei Jituan 2015: 18; 21). MelToday, registered as a share limited company in 2014, is part of the Media Today Group founded and directed by young entrepreneur Dapeng ‘Roc’ Zhang, a graduate of the University of Technology Sydney (UTS), following his establishment of the similar SydneyToday service in 2010. MelToday, a successful commercial enterprise employing 10 staff, including five reporters, uses tabloid-style headlines and images soliciting attention-grabbing emotional responses—shock, astonishment, fear, outrage, (Chinese) patriotism, pathos, intrigue, and so on—to draw readers in to click on stories on a range of topics deemed to be of interest to the Chinese community, especially immigration, investment, real estate, education, entertainment, and crime.

In mid-2016, I met with one of the partners in MelToday, Mr A.—a young finance graduate from an Australian university—and spoke with him about the company’s approach to news reporting. Young people today, he explained, want news fast, conveniently, cheaply, and in few words; and Chinese people prefer it in Chinese. And they need news media that will represent issues of particular concern for Chinese people (*Huaren*), to which the local media do not give a lot of attention. Mr A. told me that whereas traditional news’s higher budget gives it the advantage of in-depth reporting and systematic fact checking, the advantage of social media news lies in its speed. MelToday’s fact checking is minimal, often confined to a simple Internet search to ascertain whether reported events actually occurred. Its editors choose news topics based on an evaluation of their likely popularity: the goal is to keep up traffic to the account since the operational model is wholly commercial, relying on the sale of space, whose value is based on traffic volume, to advertisers. Echoing other WeChat news account workers I have spoken with, Mr A. observed candidly that to keep the traffic up, writers routinely take stories from the local press and “just, you know, exaggerate things a *little* bit, for the headline.” As well as this commercially driven sensationalism, MelToday’s copy is also marked by its insistent use of the term “Chinese people” (*Huaren*: a term that indicates Chinese ethnic or racial identity as well as cultural affiliation), constructing *Huaren* heroes, *Huaren* crime victims, *Huaren* concerns, and *Huaren* responses to current affairs, thus continually

reinforcing “Chinese” ethnic identity as both the lynchpin of reader engagement and the lens through which local events are evaluated.

It was very clear from our conversation that Mr A.’s first priority was profit: delivering news content with high clickability to guarantee advertising revenue. Of course, this is not idiosyncratic, but part of a broader trend toward the tabloidization and “infotainment-ization” of journalism in deregulating, commercial digital media environments the world over (Bennett 2004; Fenton 2010). Here, however, we see a new permutation of this trend: sensationalized local news delivered through a highly popular form of commercial ethno-transnational media that is somewhat insulated from content regulation in the jurisdiction where it operates—with concrete ramifications for that city’s multicultural livability. This particular example of ethno-transnational tabloid news media tends to reinforce categorical ethnic definitions, encouraging readers to understand themselves as part of, and loyal to, a specific and rather non-hybrid group (*Huaren*), understood *in distinction and often opposition to* other groups including “refugees” and “Africans.”

As noted above, overall I observed that continued exposure to sensationalist reporting on “African gangs” by MelToday and other WeChat local news accounts tended to have the net effect of increasing Chinese students’ mistrust of people they thought were African, and eroding their sense of safety in the public spaces of the city. Nevertheless, if we examine their responses to these events in greater depth, a more complex picture emerges. Many participants revealed a high degree of reflexivity in their consumption of media like MelToday: it is known among readers as a deeply sensationalist platform, and many—as we saw above with Niuniu—tend to approach its stories with significant skepticism. A couple of months after the main wave of reports on phone thefts, one participant, Jiale (18), took a very calm, pragmatic approach to the issue, observing that in big cities like Guangzhou—her hometown—such thefts occur all the time and yet are seldom reported (indeed, over the course of this study quite a few participants have returned from trips back to China reporting quite blandly that their phones were stolen while they were there). In Melbourne, by contrast, Jiale thought that because the Chinese community was so much smaller and so intensely networked, minor incidents quickly become known to everyone and panic readily sets in. Another participant, Mingxi (19), was studying at a university located in Melbourne’s inner-western suburb of Footscray. When I interviewed Mingxi in Kaifeng, pre-departure, she expressed some unease about stories she had

heard that social order was lacking in Footscray, connecting this to that suburb being home to “many Africans and Vietnamese people.” However, when, after several months living and studying there, and following the wave of reports about phone thefts by “African gangs,” I asked Mingxi whether she was now more worried than before about her personal safety, Mingxi said that she was not. “I’m not scared of Africans,” she said. “I mean, you see them in the street in Footscray all the time, but they’re fine, they don’t do any harm.” Such a statement is hardly a shining example of deep inter-cultural exchange and multi-ethnic harmony. However, as Christina Ho observes, the more modest goal of “respecting the presence of others” or “recognition of the other’s legitimate presence in a shared social space” can also be seen as an indicator of workable everyday multiculturalism, and may in some cases be a more realistic goal than “harmony” (Ho 2011: 614). Like most media consumers, then, the Chinese students are no cultural dupes: they actively weigh reportage against the evidence of their own experience, and accordingly temper their understanding of and response to social media news and the groups it represents.

Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to show that current conditions of super-diversity in cities like Melbourne mean that we must tailor our approaches to everyday multiculturalism with attention not only to permanent migrants but also to the numerous transient and first-generation migrants ever-present in the city. It is clear that the recently arrived educational migrants who are my focus in this project do not exemplify the deeply hybrid youth cultures found in the 1.5+ generations. Instead, they tend to self-identify as members of a discrete ethnic/ racial, cultural and national group (“Chinese”: *Zhongguoren*, *Huaren*), and in the events I have dealt with here, they tended to figure other groups in a similar way (young men who may have been 1.5 and second-generation African-Australian youth were referred to, often, as “Africans”: *Feizhouren* / *Feiyi* or “black people”: *heiren*, while “locals”: *dangdiren* was generally reserved for people perceived as white). In the case study above, we have seen class and race working intersectionally to produce particular hostility on the part of the Chinese student community, and its WeChat avatars, toward those perceived to be both “African” and “refugees.” Despite the geographic proximity of Chinese and African youth in the CBD and Carlton, the quotidian mixing described in many of the neighbourhood-based everyday multiculturalism studies largely does not

occur between these groups. Instead, in the majority of cases, the Chinese students' main encounters with African-heritage youth were via the mediated alarmism of WeChat, while cross-cultural mixing for them occurred primarily with other student groups on university campuses. This stubborn (re)production of social antagonisms based simultaneously in racial and class differentials challenges the assumption that positive urban multicultures can be produced simply by urban proximity.

However, "even" in this case, where arguments based on hybrid ethnic identities cannot gain much purchase, the conflict in question still cannot be seen as the result of ineluctable "ethnic" or "cultural" differences between groups. Rather, it results from the material situation of the communities in question vis-à-vis multiple historico-cultural, socio-economic, micro-political, and media-related factors that (re)produce and exacerbate the Chinese students' tendency to interpret urban space along racialized lines (Park 1996; Mankekar 2015: 93-104; Amin 2002b). Despite the reports from MelToday and other WeChat news accounts repeatedly stating that the phone thefts were principally a case of "African gangs" running rampant, in fact Victoria Police revealed that of 35 arrests made in connection with these crimes, the largest group of arrestees (49%) were white, with only eight "African" and three "African/ Middle East" (together 31% of the total; information released to the author by Victoria Police under the Freedom of Information Act, October 2016). In the case of the tall, dark-skinned youth alleged to have stolen phones from Chinese students, it is not clear which ethnic groups the accused belong to (although it is now clear that, if involved, they formed a minority of offenders). But taking into account the demographic history of African-heritage youth in Melbourne, it is possible that they may have been teenage children of migrants who arrived in Australia through the nation's refugee and humanitarian programme. If so, then it is clear that their involvement in petty crime will relate to their material situation of social deprivation rather than to essential ethno-cultural characteristics. With regard to responses to the incidents from Melbourne's Chinese student community, although these clearly build on a pre-existing kernel of anti-African racism endemic to modern Chinese culture (Dikötter 1992; Cheng 2011), they, too, were decisively shaped less by ineluctable cultural factors than by economic ones: specifically, the exigencies of minimally regulated ethno-transnational commercial media (Sun 2016).

I have also been arguing that our approaches to everyday multiculturalism need to be enhanced by an appreciation of how people's everyday lives are

increasingly shaped by translocal media connections. The ethno-transnational media available to diasporic communities today is qualitatively different to what was available just a decade or so ago and, as I hope my case study has demonstrated, this makes a material difference to the affordances of the media and hence its social impacts, including its impact on how people live with cultural diversity in urban communities. First, new social media like WeChat news accounts are even *more transnational* than older media, insofar as they are accessed from a Chinese platform that allows seamless continuity of use when users travel to Australia. They provide instantaneous, real-time links to people and social life overseas and, as we have seen, their content is also regulated largely from the China end. Second, thanks to mobile-networked technologies, this type of social media is far *more ubiquitous* than older media in everyday life. Eight years ago, Noble suggested that “unpanicked multiculturalism” may flourish in those parts of everyday life that are located “away from the heat of moral panic and [...] media-driven anxieties” (Noble 2009: 51). Yet in the case I have addressed here, where ubiquitous social media became host to a racist moral panic, it seemed at times that for the students involved there *was* no, or precious little, such unmediated part of everyday life where the panic could be avoided (McRobbie and Thornton 1995). Third, these new types of media operate in the wider global context of *intensified deregulation, commercialization, and digital networking of news media*, with attendant risks for the quality of content vis-à-vis journalism’s civic function (Fenton 2010; Taylor 2016). Fourth, as a result of a combination of the above factors, this type of media is much more readily able to *evade legal regulation in the host nation*, including evading laws that are aimed at the enhancement of shared social life in multicultural society. Finally, therefore, the example I have addressed highlights the capacity for some forms of new ethno-transnational media, paradoxically, to *undercut multiculturalist values*, as much as to enhance them (Sun 2016). Miyase Christensen and André Jansson propose that “the concept of communication, literally meaning ‘making something common,’ provides us with a stepping stone for thinking about the relationship between media and cosmopolitanism” (2015: 8). Yet the above examples of WeChat news accounts as a communicative platform encourage what amounts to the opposite effect: not a cosmopolitan engagement, but a hostile turning-away from the (African, refugee) “other” and self-encapsulation within a Chinese (*Huaren*) community that is performatively enacted in repeated references to its self-evident unity of interest.

Increased scholarly attention to the role of such new ethno-transnational media in shaping migrants' experiences of cultural diversity—an issue of which this article has only been able to scratch the surface—has the potential to enrich our understanding of how everyday multiculturalism is actually working in Australian (and other) cities under current conditions of intensifying human and media mobility.

It would be unproductive as well as inaccurate to fall back on simplistic arguments that ethno-transnational media like WeChat, as used in Melbourne, are unilaterally harmful to multicultural life, contributing to a “shattered” national public sphere or the erosion of “social cohesion.” (Gitlin 1998; Harris 2013; Martin 2016) However, in some limited cases like the one I have presented here, these new media ecologies may throw up new challenges to multicultural living. Our task as scholars of everyday multiculturalism under current conditions of social super-diversity and intensifying transnational connectivity is to tease out how such conflicts are driven by complex underlying webs of material and institutional factors. As the example considered here illustrates, these include, among others, the social and economic distribution of resources and power in the site in question; interplays of commerce and culture shaping available ideological frameworks for people's understandings of cultural difference; and the strain on nation-based civic governance structures in an era when both media and everyday life have become increasingly transnational.

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² This conflation draws on a Chinese racialized imaginary of “the west” as the location of idealized whiteness, which is itself part of the same racialized global imaginary, reaching back to the late nineteenth century, that positions Africanness as “primitive”: see discussion above and Dikötter 1992.



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