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## DINING 'ON AND OFF': FOOD, WELLBEING AND WECHAT USE AMONG OLDER CHINESE MIGRANTS IN AUSTRALIA

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### Introduction

This study examines how WeChat, one of the most popular Chinese messenger applications installed on smartphone, facilitates the formation of an older Chinese diasporic space that is centered around the self-nurturing diet (*yinshi yangsheng*) cultural discourse in Australia.

In Chinese culture, food is not merely an identity marker but embodies the *yangsheng* (self-nurturing) philosophy, which is underpinned by a 'self-care' (*zi li*) mentality. *Yangsheng* means one applies healthy ageing philosophy and maintain longevity practice by being mindful with their everyday diet. *Yangsheng* refers to both personal wellbeing and collective social wellness. The *yangsheng* discourse is closely related to the Chinese government's gradual retreat from providing aged care service and support (Sun 2016) and the changing family structure due to the now-ended One Child Policy in China (Zeng and Hesketh 2016): there are fewer adult children to look after older parents as there are no siblings to share the social and financial burdens. Therefore, *yangsheng* and related health care industry has become a major industry in the Chinese economy (Wen 2012), reflect a strong desire of independent living and self-reliance among older Chinese.

Media has played a crucial role in disseminating *yangsheng*-related information and knowledge in China (Sun 2016). However, currently literature in older Chinese people's media consumption mainly focuses on experience and processes within China few have paid attention to surging number of older Chinese who are ageing in a transnational context (Zhang 2016). This study examines how older Chinese migrants (OCMs) use WeChat to seek information and exchange advices about self-nurturing food, and

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organise dining gathering and meeting. It is found that WeChat not only facilitates the formation of an older Chinese social space in Australia, but the platform has acted as a self- and mutual-reliance mechanism for OCMs to negotiate the co-processes of ageing and migration.

*Yangsheng* communication have moved to the cyberspace and become accessible via one's online social networks and sources in recent years. The transnational nature of digital/social media such as that of WeChat, has also expanded the geographical scope and availability of *yangsheng* information and communication beyond China and Chinese speaking societies.

### **Redefining migrant media**

The surge of old Chinese migrants in Australia since early 2000s has coincided the global expansion of the PRC (People's Republic of China) media (Kean and Wu 2018), which is particularly visible in Australia (Sun 2019). Unlike traditional migrant/ethnic media, which emphasizes on facilitating migrants to assimilate or integrate into the mainstream society of the host nation (Georgiou 2005), WeChat represents what Yin (2015) coins as *homeland media* that emphasizes on migrants' ability to reconnect with the media content of the homeland/country. Homeland media, hence, reinforces migrant's *dual identities*, who live across and in-between the different social cultural spheres (Yin 2015). As Gao (2006) states, Comparing to their predecessors, recent Chinese migrants from the PRC tend to present a mode of oscillation between Chinese culture and Australian ways of life. The Chinese diasporic identity is dual cultural identity that moves between and overlaps with the two cultural spheres (Leong, 2016).

Such unsettled sense of self and belonging have always embodied in the Chinese migrants' media consumption (Ong and Nonini, 1997) and become more exemplified in a digital era. The sense oscillation and transient nature of OCMs has been exemplified by the fact that one's experience with communication and information is no longer confined to his/her immediate geo-locative place, that social/digital media enable news and information from both home and newly settled places to be available simultaneously (Sun, 2019).

### **WeChat and dining**

Through analysing data collected from eight focused group (12 people each) conducted at a Chinese restaurant in Brisbane, Australia, and examining OCM participants' WeChat use, the study found two interwinding narratives warrant further attention to the mediating role of WeChat online communication in OCMs offline food initiated gathering. First, food experience (cooking and dining) is constantly mediated through WeChat. The online exchange and production of food-related regimen is mainly framed within the discourses of self-care and *yang sheng*. Many OCMs for example, complained lack of traditional Chinese ingredients, which are deemed to have great health benefits, use WeChat to find 'replacements' from the available food ingredients in Australia that carry similar or even better health benefits. The information seeking and verification on WeChat was not merely an expression of self-care but also parental care as many OCMs immigrated to look after their (grand)children in Australia. Being able to find healthy food also forged a sense of self-worth amongst the research participants.

Being able to obtain health receipt on WeChat and hence, care their families indeed mediated OCMs' sense of self in their new migrant lives.

Further, it is also found that OCMs utilize WeChat to organize their own dining events and gathering. The physical meeting reinforces the in-group support mechanism WeChat initiated. However, it is observed that without self-gathering, the level of interpersonal trust and bonds between individual members of the OCMs community would be significantly discounted. While WeChat can play a crucial role in helping the OCMs to seek and verify their needed health related information and resource WeChat plays a lesser role in concretizing the in-group, interpersonal relations of the community. WeChat can, nonetheless, play an active role to initiate the connections between individuals.

By focusing on the social meaning and cultural significance of WeChat, one of the most popular migrant social media amongst the Chinese communities in Australia, the study contributes to the academic conversations on digital media use in later life. The study's findings can potentially contribute to the design framework of migrant age care. There seems to be great potential of incorporating and utilizing ethnically and culturally diverse social media platforms such as WeChat in the delivery and development of senior care services and supports.

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