

Toward a Translational News Ecology: Covering the 2022 Australian Federal Election on WeChat

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This article examines the coverage of the 2022 Australian federal election on WeChat for Australian audiences. We analyzed 3,462 public articles collected from May 2021 to May 2022 from 135 WeChat news services called WeChat Official Accounts (with 99 still active at the time of this analysis). We found that diasporic Chinese media accounts had a more prominent role in shaping online discourses compared with China-based media accounts, Australia-based business accounts, and Australian politicians' accounts. In reporting the 2022 Australian federal election, COVID-19 policies, the economy, immigration, and international relations, with particular regard to Australia–China relations, were common themes. Our findings reveal the formation of a “translational news ecology” that bridges diasporic media to Australia’s English-speaking, mainstream public sphere, which is primarily shaped by Australian national media and politicians. Notably, for future regulation of election media, we witness domestic political actors featuring paid advertisements or direct contributions on influential news service accounts, including instances of misinformation sitting in a lacuna of active regulation from both Australian and Chinese states in managing platform content and labor in this space.

Keywords: WeChat, Australian elections, political communication, social media, Chinese diaspora, translational news ecology

This article analyzes the coverage of the Australian federal election on WeChat, a major Chinese media platform. Chinese Australians, who constitute about 5.5% of the Australian population, are the largest non-European ethnic group and contribute significantly to 22.3% of Australians who speak a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Additionally, within

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Australia, WeChat fosters a social, economic, and cultural system unique to Chinese communities, providing a range of services, such as news, payment, short videos, and live streaming. This context generates extensive news coverage of issues for Chinese Australians on WeChat. These issues are translated by Chinese Australian “little editors” from Australian media as part of diasporic news businesses for Chinese Australian audiences (Yang, 2023a). A significant proportion of the articles published over our reference period, from May 2021 to May 2022, were political coverage directly focused on Australian electoral politics, forming the subject of our research analysis.

Our study of the 2022 Australian federal election was informed by public debates that shaped the previous election. The 2019 Australian federal election was characterized by significant anti-Chinese sentiment by the major competing political parties. This included accusations that Chinese Australian politicians were under the influence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and statements questioning the national allegiances of Chinese Australians (Sun & Yu, 2020). These narratives were insinuated by historical national media digging up connections between the CCP and local Chinese Australian political staffers and politicians. Finally, media coverage suggested that WeChat was a tool used by the CCP to influence the outcome of the Australian election (Koslowski, 2019).

We see these concerns and debates as manifestations of folk theories (Palmer, Toff, & Nielsen, 2020) shared between Australian journalists and publics around social media, political influence, and Chinese threats to democracy (Australia’s Asia-Pacific location creates tensions between having China as its largest trading partner and the United States as its security partner). These sentiments framed our research questions for the subsequent 2022 election:

RQ1: Who are the public actors reporting the 2022 Australian federal election on WeChat?

RQ2: What themes are prominently featured in this coverage?

RQ3: What are the forms of political communication distributed on WeChat other than the most common news-translation services?

To address these inquiries, we developed a research method called “share-capture” (Fordyce, Yang, & Heemsbergen, forthcoming), which allowed us to gather 3,462 political articles from 135 news media outlets on WeChat (with 99 media accounts active at the time of analysis). Our share-capture project continues, with a database of more than 21,000 articles from WeChat pertaining to Australian political news. This data set remains one of the most extensive compilations of diasporic Chinese-language political news sourced from a Chinese media platform.

That our growing yet meager database is unique and shows a lacuna of knowledge—and research interest—in a topic that has gained much national political attention and feeds tropes of Chinese interference and overt racism. The lack of information on Chinese Australian political social media content contrasts with the extensive research available on English-language social media political content in Australia. Thus, our article’s literature review begins with mapping research on how Australian federal elections have unfolded on major, predominantly American, social media services to highlight the frames and gaps in the literature about political social media content mobilization among ethnic migrant communities. Current literature

shows that the circulation of political information among non-English-speaking migrants remains under-researched, even though its mainstream media coverage is often overemphasized.

The empirical gap in the literature also speaks to a theoretical one. Namely, we introduce the concept of “translational news ecology” to describe and explain what is at stake for diasporic communities and political communication via a case study of the Chinese-speaking Australian community. We suggest that on WeChat, translation serves both as a linguistic practice and a political process, enabling the dissemination of political discourse—intertwined by commercial interests—beyond the well-established English-language mainstream. At the conclusion of our literature review, we outline our research design, followed by qualitative and quantitative analyses of our data set. We conclude our paper by revisiting our proposed concept of “translational news ecology” and underscoring its significance in understanding the ongoing intercultural, interlinguistic, and intercommunal translation of political information.

Literature Review

Social Media and Australian Elections

Social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter/X, Reddit, TikTok, and WeChat, have been prominent in shaping online discourses during major political events. Australian politicians have employed these platforms—because of their cost effectiveness and minimal administrative barriers—to amplify their online publicity and broaden outreach to citizens across diverse demographic groups during electoral cycles.

Historical research on political communications in Australia has been largely centered on Twitter as a result of the transparency and accessibility that used to be provided by the platform itself. Twitter’s previously open API (application programming interface) made the platform an easy subject of “big social data” for academic research (Bruns & Stieglitz, 2015). With systematic scraping, research has focused on how political messages were distributed via hashtags, including “#auspol” or “#Ausvotes” (Bruns & Burgess, 2011; Burgess & Bruns, 2012; McKinnon, Semmens, Moon, Amarasekara, & Bolliet, 2016), the human, nonhuman, and/or organizational actors that shape the discussion of Australian elections and their interactions (Cook, Waugh, Abdipanah, Hashemi, & Rahman, 2014), and politicians’ campaigning strategies targeting English-speaking voters on the platform (Bruns, Angus, & Graham, 2021; Grant, Moon, & Grant, 2010). Based on the studies published between 2010 and 2019 on Australian Twitter, public concerns were centered on the national economy, infrastructural construction, climate change, healthcare, education, gender equity, and humanitarian immigration and border control. These subjects of discussion, mirroring the priorities of English-speaking Twitter users, showed consistency while reflecting the prevailing domestic and international tensions during each electoral period.

Australian politicians use Twitter to broadcast their political influence, keeping their accounts public rather than private (Grant et al., 2010, p. 585). Previous research has identified a “partisan enclosure” in Australian politicians’ communication strategies on Twitter (Bruns et al., 2021). Internal communication among political party members or within sociopolitical clusters is more prevalent than interparty dialogue. That is, Australian politicians’ political communication on Twitter tends to involve selective and strategic management of visibility, primarily engagements with same-party candidates, media, and large organizations, while interactions with ordinary Twitter users are occasional (Bruns et al., 2021, p. 6).

Away from Twitter, Australian conservative parties and candidates use Facebook to establish authenticity and garner populist appeal (McTernan, 2022). Simplified, sensational, and negative campaigning strategies tend to be effective in gaining traction on Facebook, particularly benefiting politically conservative figures. Notably, in Australia, Pauline Hanson, the leader of the right-wing populist party One Nation, boasts the second-largest following on the platform for politicians (Sengul, 2020). Managing a Facebook public page involves party members moderating negative comments, thus incurring higher costs compared with operating a Twitter account (Macnamara, 2016).

Common topics emerge on both Facebook and Twitter in the lead-up to Australian federal elections. Political parties and candidates address public concerns through varied means, including acclamation, criticism, memes, or humor, allowing both intended disinformation and unintended misinformation to proliferate through content distribution (McTernan, 2022, pp. 77–79). For example, in Australia, conservative party members consistently bring issues of gender and race into public discourses on Facebook to reinforce notions of whiteness, heterosexuality, and colonialism (Austin, 2016). The discourses shared on Twitter and Facebook speak to a specific vision of what Australia is—and should be. Absent reflection, political social media engagement primarily occurs in English, catering to voters who have grown accustomed to Australia's parliamentary system and are familiar with colloquial political terms like "democracy sausage" propagated by mass media or memefied on social media platforms. Uhr and Walter (2014) argue that the Australian inclination toward informality and (White) egalitarianism reinforces these discursive frames integral to political discourse while shaping Australian identity, especially during election periods (Brookes, 2017).

However, linguistics and culture are not the only drivers of political communication research in the digital age. The accessibility and collectability of data provided by digital platforms have significantly shaped the focus of research on social media and political communication. We argue that while English platforms in English majority create a necessary sampling strategy, they do not present a sufficient one. Baldwin-Philippi (2019) summarized that the digital allowed political campaigns to experience an "analytical turn," with parties launching targeted negative campaigns or illicit information to online users or different demographics to enhance solidarity with loyal voters and extend coalition to swing voters. This lack of transparency in political advertising on social media has raised concerns about its impact on democracy. In 2017, the United States proposed the Honest Ads Act bill, urging American tech companies to disclose how ads are targeted and their costs. In response to the bill, Facebook launched an ad library of political campaigning materials that disclosed the subject of political advertising, spending, impressions, targeted demographics, and the label of the ad (Meta, n.d.). However, the transparency offered by Facebook had limitations, as aspects like algorithmic distribution, content moderation, scope of political advertising, and ad recipients remained undisclosed. In response to tech companies' domination of the distribution of democratic speech, researchers developed independent auditing systems and computational tools to identify undisclosed political advertising activities. In Australia, researchers adopt "citizen science" approaches to collect election-related content on Facebook donated from citizens (Burgess, Andrejevic, Angus, & Obeid, 2022). Our review of academic and grey literature offered the surprising conclusion that no academic or regulatory body has adequately focused on WeChat despite ongoing public debates surrounding the platform. Australian public institutions, such as the Australian Electoral Commission and the Australian Government, approached this platform in a tokenistic manner, with communications often mechanically translated from English to Chinese

without consideration of linguistic nuances or norms. We, therefore, turn to the growing ecology of news, political communication, and economic markets that exist in WeChat for audiences in Australia.

WeChat Official Accounts as a Translational News Ecology

WeChat is often analogized as the “Chinese Facebook” or held as a dark monolith of Chinese state influence, with its “censorship” and “cybersecurity risks” being iterated by English media and politicians. Here we focus on how Chinese-speaking people in Australia use WeChat to get their news. Australian political news is distributed within WeChat’s own internal news publication platform, known as the “WeChat Official Accounts” system (or WOAs). Launched in August 2012, the WOA system operates as a distinct feed within the WeChat app, separated from the general social feed. Publishers are limited to branded accounts that are linked to business entities registered in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). Except for government-approved accounts, any single WOA can publish up to eight news articles daily in bulletin format. WOAs upload their bulletins in advance of publication, which are then released to users after the platform’s automated censorship.

Compared with news coverage on other social media, such as Facebook, Telegram, Twitter, and many others, the WOA system has a different model of operation. For Facebook and similar, news companies often manage their own accounts and use these platforms to generate traffic to their host sites. Most WOAs have a limited or no presence beyond WeChat and function exclusively within the WeChat ecosystem. While it is possible for a news network to create an account and publish content within the WOA system, this is rare and unlikely. In our study, only a small number of accounts had any non-WeChat presence. At one end of the scale, the very largest accounts had registered websites designed to push users to subscribe to the WOA. At the other end, a few small accounts were linked to Australian politicians who had paid businesses run by Chinese nationals to register accounts on their behalf, yet none had published more than five posts in a 12-month period.

Each WOA functions as a fully-fledged business, independently managing its publications, forming business partnerships, and integrating embedded advertising into content. The WOA exercises control over the content, ensuring alignment with guidelines from WeChat and those set forth by the PRC. Despite this, the Australian WOA context remains a gray zone for WeChat as well as the governments of Australia and the PRC. While formal WOA content is administrated by all of these entities, the Australian WeChat environment appears to be largely ungoverned. Many accounts pride themselves on journalistic integrity and seek to conduct meaningful news and investigative reportage, but the majority of WOA sites routinely publish articles that breach Australia’s journalistic standards (Yang, 2023b). Equally, the PRC’s restriction on political content and advertising does not seem to apply to works published by Australia-based WOAs. WeChat itself has withdrawn all programmatic and targeted advertising from Australia, reducing its Australian-based revenues to commissions on payments made through the app and leading almost all advertising to come from WOAs themselves. The result is a translational news ecosystem featuring a significant volume of advertising where users may encounter misinformation and disinformation through attention-grabbing headlines. The lack of WeChat’s platform intervention in self-managed advertising by WOA-platform news feeds is a notable difference from Western social media.

This translational news ecology on WeChat has created links between otherwise relatively insulated languages and communities. Media accounts, managed by Chinese diasporic media entrepreneurs, select and translate news stories that are of interest to their targeted readership. Translation transcends mere

faithful information reproduction but entails deliberate and conscious acts of selection, assembly, structuring, and even, in certain instances, falsification, information exclusion, and counterfeiting (Tymoczko & Gentzler, 2002). Indeed, our previous empirical research resonated that editorialization and denationalization characterize these translations, presenting ethnically, culturally, and emotionally bound narratives to the readership with less emphasis on linguistically accurate information reproduction as journalistic practice would normally require (Yang, 2023a). This means that translation can diverge significantly from the source while still achieving the intended purpose of communication, thereby potentially leading to the dissemination of inaccurate or even misleading information.

We conceptualize WeChat as a “translational news ecology” to first acknowledge and foreground our analysis of hegemonic power feeding into the practice of cultural translation and the antagonistic/non-aligning power flowing out of translation, as argued in postcolonial and feminist scholarships (Spivak, 2010). Second, we aim to highlight the broader utility of “translation” existing within the same language yet between different languages, or between different paradigms, as noted by Gramscian scholars with well-established interest in the political dimensions of translation (Iveković, 2010; Thomas, 2020). The article further unpacks this translational news ecology on WeChat through the case of the 2022 Australian federal election.

Research Design

We employed a content analysis research methodology that draws on qualitative research methods for the selection of content and social coding, combined with computational methods for systematically evaluating and analyzing data. The full description of our research methodology is detailed in a separate article (Fordyce et al., forthcoming), and the implementation of this method is available as a code repository (Fordyce, 2023). However, the essence of the methodology is a human-centric research process where a person identifies a research-relevant article and engages in qualitative coding of the article at the point of capture. This method allowed continuous daily coding of a large volume of articles at a high rate rather than a high-commitment post-factum analysis of articles at the end of a reference period. As such, this project has continued gathering data after the 2022 Australian election, allowing for a continuous study that is presently in its third year. The present article only reports on the findings related to the 2022 Australian federal election, 3,462 posts over a 12-month period from May 21, 2021, to May 23, 2022.

WOA Selection

In preparation for developing our sample, the research team created a single research WeChat account to subscribe to WOAs that publish stories about Australia, including Australian policies, politicians, and significant events. As such, the selection of target WOAs for the study was informed by groups targeted in earlier projects and further supported based on several rounds of keyword searches for Simplified Chinese terms referring to Australia (“澳大利亚” and “澳”), and its major cities, including Sydney (“悉尼” and “悉”), Melbourne (“墨尔本” and “墨”), Adelaide (“阿德莱德”), Perth (“珀斯”), and Brisbane (“布里斯班”). Following this selection process, snowball sampling was employed based on the suggested WOA groups, increasing the selection to 135 appropriate WOAs by the start of the project in May 2021. By the time of data extraction from our database in January 2023, only 99 WOAs in our database remained active.

Reference Period

We selected May 21, 2021 as a baseline date, as the next federal election was constitutionally required to be held on or before May 21, 2022. At this point, in 2021, the governing party was a right-wing coalition of the Liberal and National Parties (LNP) led by Prime Minister Scott Morrison. In advance of the 2019 federal election, Morrison had registered his own WOA, but this was barely at the time and was no longer functionally active by early 2021. Our selected start date also coincided with the then Leader of the Opposition, Australian Labor Party (ALP) leader Anthony Albanese, publishing his first article on his WOA as a part of public outreach to the Chinese community. On the same day, several WOAs published articles attempting to predict who would be the next prime minister; however, options were limited to Liberal Party members Peter Dutton and Josh Frydenberg. The anecdotal first day spoke to a pattern we saw across our data set: a pattern where the ALP was barely present on WeChat for the majority of our study, yet it also indicates an early hint of what would later become a common perception that Morrison was unelectable. The reference window ends on May 23, 2022—two days after the election—marking the full confirmation of the election results and the end to speculation about the results of the 2022 Australian federal election.

Each morning over the reference period, a researcher proficient in Simplified Chinese would review the articles pushed to the research WeChat account. Articles would then be selected for relevance based on headlines. The articles would then be read in their entirety, given qualitative codes, with the article URL and qualitative data entered into our tool so data could be extracted for later comparison and analysis.

Analysis

Our analysis began with quantitative content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) to analyze the coverage of the 2022 Australian federal election and the key actors involved in shaping the discussion. This process involved counting, ranking, categorizing the codes, identifying and resolving any data entry errors, and analyzing correlations between variables. Open codes, archived as hashtags in the data collection, were further categorized into axial and thematic codes in the analysis. As a part of the intercoder reliability assessment, codes were selectively checked across team members, with article content translated using browser-based translation tools for those team members who could not read Simplified Chinese. Additionally, the daily practice of article selection contributed ethnographic merit, as researchers embedded themselves in the flows of the discourse.

Findings

Based on the analysis of the 3,462 articles, this section will delineate the actors who engaged in discussing Australian politics, the topics of concern for Chinese Australians, the popularity of a number of selected politicians, and comments on Australian politicians' campaign strategies that were present in WeChat.

Key Actors

Figure 1 demonstrates the composition of the WOAs in our database that produced content relevant to the 2022 election. The majority, constituting 56% of the WOAs in our data set, were commercial Chinese-language media accounts operated by Chinese diasporic entrepreneurs in Australia. Business accounts

managed by immigration, education, and real estate agencies based in both China and Australia accounted for 14% of our data set. Twenty-nine percent of the sampled WOAs were China-based media accounts engaging in discussions about the 2022 Australian federal election at lower frequencies. These China-based media accounts published a single post imposing questions on the election's implications for future China-Australia bilateral relations. Notably, we did not observe coordinated interference from China's state entities influencing public opinions toward one political party over another. In fact, none of the China-based WOAs identified their affiliations with state media outlets, such as People's Daily or Xinhua News Agency. Only 1% of the WOAs ($n = 2$) were managed by Australian politicians and their teams, specifically under the names Sally Sitou (ALP) and Anthony Albanese (later changed to "Labor Leader"). Other WOAs operating under the name of Australian politicians, including Scott Morrison, Dan Andrews, and George Hua, did not report on any matters related to the election during the reference timeframe. We would also like to note that the WOA run by the Chinese embassy in Australia also refrained from covering issues related to the election.

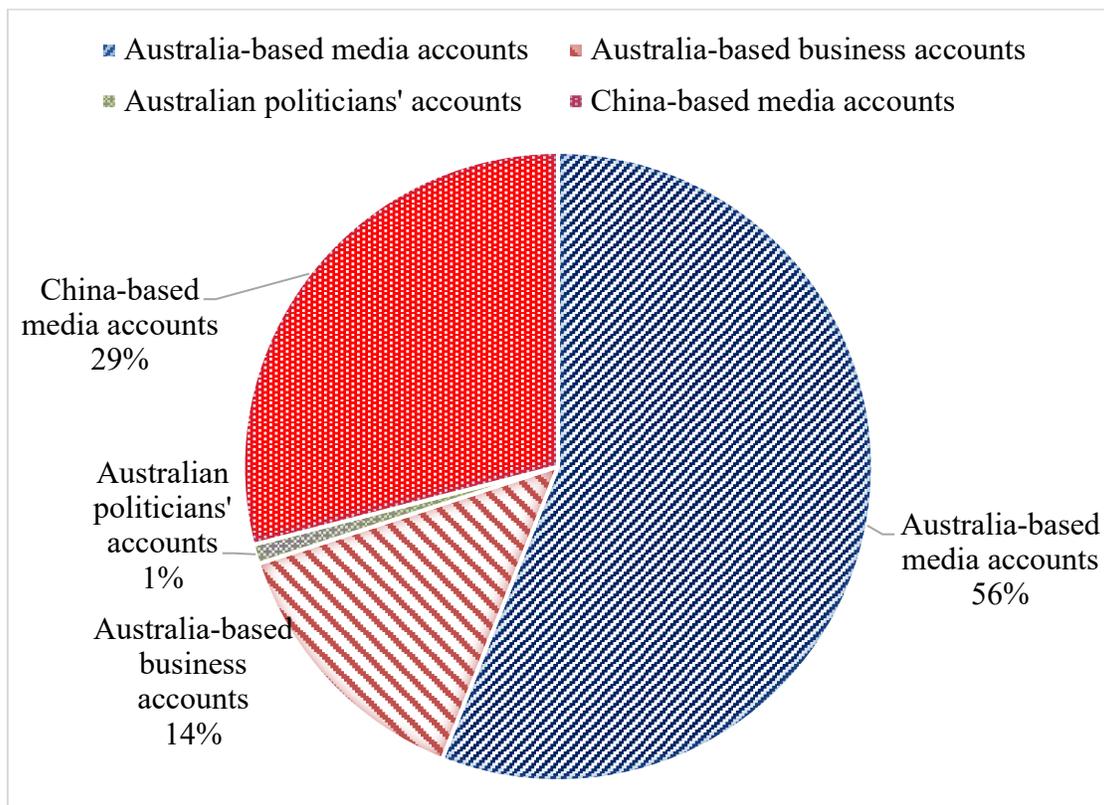


Figure 1. Key actors that shape the discussion of the 2022 Australian federal election.

From across all our selected articles, only 28 did not involve at least some content that was generated by translating articles from other Australian news media outlets. These articles came from two outlets—one being the WOA for a political figure and the other being one of the Chinese diasporic media outlets in Australia. The remaining articles were composed of collated news stories extracted from multiple

media sources or public announcements; despite this, the articles would be tagged as "original" to avoid WeChat's regulations around plagiarism.

The Coverage of the 2022 Australian Federal Election

Among the 209 unique open codes generated from the data collection, we summarized five major themes, including "election" (i.e., related public polls, announcements, and campaigns), "COVID-19," "immigration," "international relations," and "economy," that gained significant popularity during the 2022 electoral cycle (Figure 2). The identified themes were not exclusive to each other. For example, policies of economic recovery, immigration, and international relations can occur in the same post that covers election-related matters.

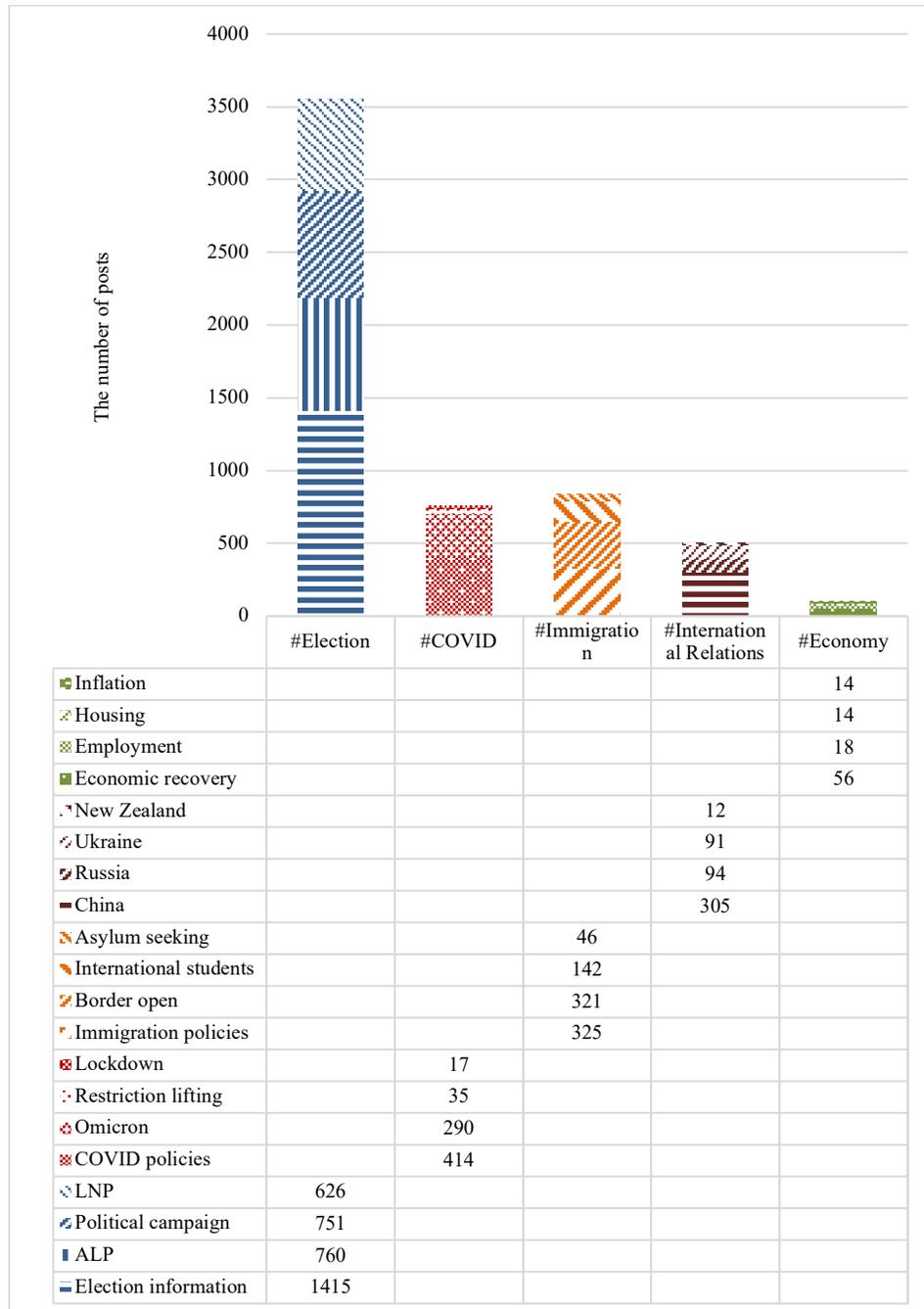


Figure 2. The distribution of popular topics ahead during the 2022 Australian federal electoral cycle.

From our data, WeChat users in Australia share common concerns about the national economy and immigration, in addition to the election and its campaign with users of Twitter (Bruns et al., 2021; Bruns & Burgess, 2011; McKinnon et al., 2016) and Facebook (McTernan, 2022). These shared interests between Chinese Australians and English-speaking communities are contextualized in the above work, which shows that the majority of the content, that is, 99%, were translations of English media into Mandarin. However, gender equity and climate change did not feature very strongly in the agenda of discussions on WeChat. The discourse around gender was largely linked to the 2021 Australian Parliament House sexual misconduct allegations, while discussions on climate change primarily manifested as reports on extreme weather events or advertorials for solar panels. Despite their presence, the impact and direct association of these topics with the election and the politicians running campaigns were comparatively less substantial.

COVID-19 was a novel occurrence as a result of the ongoing pandemic, which was still an important issue in Australia in the lead-up to the 2022 election. Among the 580 entries related to COVID-19, Chinese Australians were concerned about how LNP and ALP would respond to health emergencies differently. The emergence of the Omicron variant in January 2022 once again triggered community-wide panic as Chinese Australians were wary about another wave of imposed lockdowns, coupled with an expectation for a political party that could manage the new variants better than previous national and state reactions to COVID-19, which were described as far from satisfactory. Similar to English-speaking communities (Bruns et al., 2021), WOAs showed a moderate tone in their COVID-19 posts. They expressed the position that a nationwide open-up would be critical for the country's economy and the job market, although they also expected some restrictions, including wearing masks in public.

Amid geopolitical tensions partly induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, discussions among Chinese Australians on WeChat focused on international relations, particularly between Australia and China. Traditionally, the LNP had been favored by Chinese Australian voters because of the party's prioritization of the national economy and small-to-medium enterprises in its policies and political campaigns. This made sense as many Chinese migrants came to Australia under investment, business, and skill visa streams (Department of Home Affairs [DHA], n.d.). However, a change occurred in the 2022 electoral cycle. Chinese Australians, in the comments of WOAs and as commentary inserted in WOA content, weighed parties' approaches toward China against the traditional economic incentives. This was largely because many Chinese business owners worked as brokerages between Australia and China and suffered from the tension between the two countries (Yang, 2021).

Immigration and economy continued to be the main concerns in the 2022 electoral cycle compared with historical patterns of concern for WeChat users in Australia (Yang & Martin, 2020). Although Chinese migrants holding temporary visas or permanent residencies do not obtain the right to vote, WOAs address Chinese migrant communities in general and are thus interested in covering immigration policies to appeal to residents in China, Chinese international students, and temporary visa holders. Discussions of immigration around election time were steered by the LNP's earlier border closure (for COVID measures) and the party's increased discriminatory attitudes toward mainland Chinese Australians. In general, WOA posts welcomed the removal of international border restrictions—a more generous skilled immigration scheme—and showed sympathy to Chinese international students stuck in Australia. They also showed a critical tone toward Australia's humanitarian immigration policies toward Hong Kong's pro-democracy activists and asylum seekers from Ukraine and Afghanistan. Among the 124 posts that discussed Australia's economy, the concerns were distributed among the topics of economic recovery, employment, housing, and inflation.

Partisan Representations

From our sample, 2,196 entries discussed electoral matters, covering educational information, polls, ballots, positive and negative campaigns, and commentary on political candidates. Although the WOA posts had relatively equal coverage of the two political parties, the coverage of political figures was more volatile. The 2022 election was significantly shaped by political figures rather than by parties. As noted earlier, the Liberal Party itself was in disarray, with significant movement by party members, while the Labor Party had shifted to a “personality” based campaign that sought to have extremely low exposure to being challenged on policy.

Because of the significant intraparty changes in political figures in the lead-up to the election, we identified an imbalanced exposure of Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese, which reflected but amplified the patterns of mainstream media coverage in Australia. Figure 3 demonstrates the relative coverage of the leaders of the two major political parties over the reference period. Each line represents a WOA that made 10 or more posts containing a reference to Scott Morrison of the Liberal Party and/or to Anthony Albanese of the ALP. Albanese is noted in red, while Morrison is noted in blue. Compared with the then PM Morrison (in blue), Albanese was not considered “newsworthy” enough for WOAs. Only 1 of 135 analyzed WOAs gave Albanese more coverage than Morrison, representing 1% of all articles in our database. Notably, one of these accounts was managed by the ALP campaign team.

Relative Coverage of Major Party Leaders per WeChat Official Account 6 November 2021—22 July 2022

Candidate	Party
■ Albanese	Labor
■ Morrison	Liberal

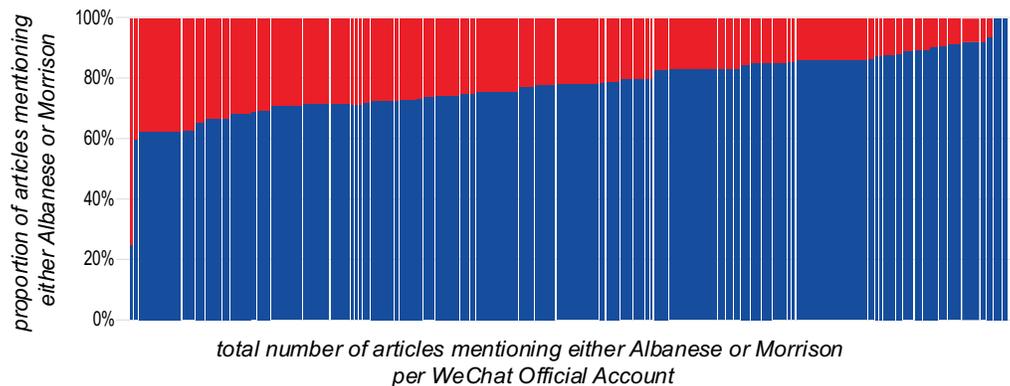


Figure 3. The coverage of Scott Morrison and Anthony Albanese on WOAs.

The ALP had made attempts to publicize the presence of the Party and the leader on WeChat. In June 2021, a month after Albanese opened his own WOA, a couple of political advertorials and advertising banners were published by a selective number of influential WOAs, including *melvlife* (墨尔本微生活) and *sydtoday* (今日悉尼). The advertorial and advertising banners introduced the ALP leader Albanese and aimed

to direct user attention to Albanese’s new account. However, Albanese’s presence on WeChat received significantly less attention compared with Scott Morrison’s (see Figure 4).

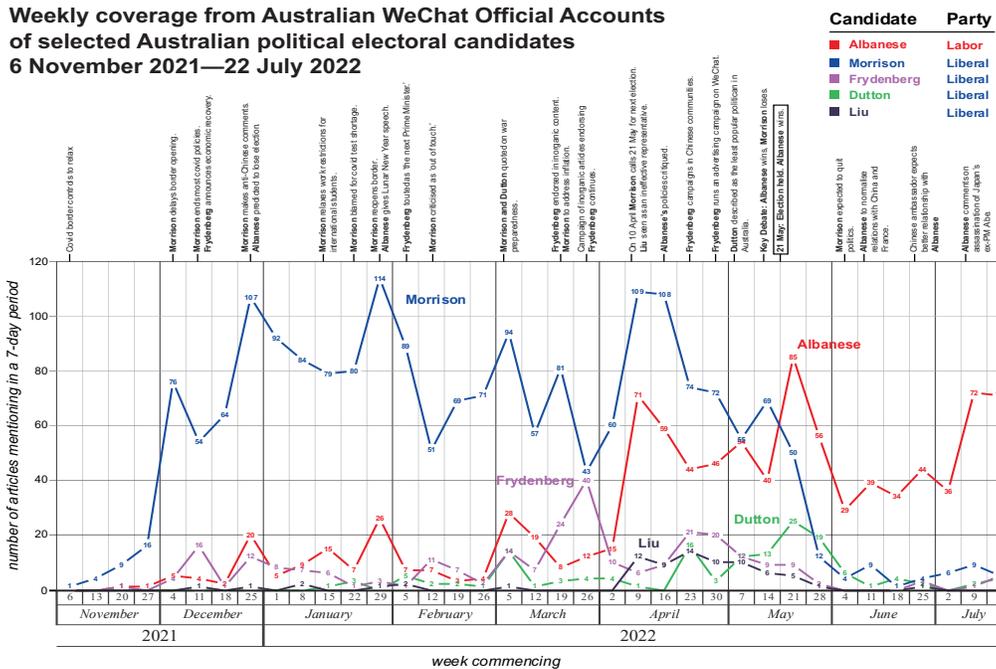


Figure 4. The coverage of Australian politicians on WeChat during the 2022 electoral cycle.

From March 2022, with two months left before the election date of May 21, 2022, the lack of Albanese coverage started to reverse. Figure 4 identifies how the coverage of the topical politicians was correlated with certain events significant to the election news cycle. We noticed a positive correlation between the coverage of Albanese and Morrison. This further indicates that Albanese was barely exclusively covered on WeChat and was mentioned by virtue of being juxtaposed with Morrison in articles discussing the Party’s leadership. The fluctuation of Morrison’s coverage was often linked to significant events. For example, his peak coverage happened when Morrison announced the border reopening, and the decreased media coverage in early March was a result of Morrison testing positive for COVID-19 and taking a pause on his political campaigns. From April 2022, Albanese started receiving positive coverage on WeChat in light of his successful weight loss, with Morrison only doubling Albanese content by the end of April. This micro-trend might have related to reported national sentiment expressed in March via Roy Morgan’s poll that revealed Albanese as the second most trusted politician after Penny Wong and Morrison the most distrusted (Murray, 2022).

Campaign Strategies

Our analysis of WOAs as platforms enables us to provide insights into the campaigning strategies adopted by Australian politicians. That there are political campaigns on WeChat at all raises interesting observations around censorship and regulation. WeChat’s official policy is to not accept political advertisements

(see WeChat's User Agreement updated in 2023 [in Mandarin]). Yet such political ads hosted by media accounts on WeChat persist in Australia and other national contexts, including the United States and Canada (Government of Canada, 2023; Zhang, 2018). On WeChat, the definitions of political advertising and politics are volatile. While discussions of Chinese politics and leadership are banned from non-state media accounts for infringing on the platform's terms of use, reports on politics outside China or non-Chinese politicians are able to safely circumvent the platform's discipline. WeChat, as a platform, does not accommodate any form of political advertisement or campaign. The platform, however, offers a certain level of autonomy for its official accounts to monetize their own advertising space, limiting central control of content.

Among the subscribed WOAs in our database, each WOA functions as its own platform to produce and circulate translated news stories from Australian English media, creating a market of ideas to monetize. In our database, we identified 1,501 articles on WeChat containing political campaigns or advertising. While the majority of the political campaigns were derived from the translation of English media reports, 133 articles on WeChat hosted political advertisements for particular political candidates. Our data suggested two major types of political advertising on WeChat. They included announcement updates on the WOAs registered under their own names and paid political advertisements and negative campaigns distributed across influential WOAs.

Self-Organized Political Campaigns

During the reference time, the Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese and MP Sally Sitou set up their own WOAs to communicate their policy proposals and campaigns directly to their subscribers. Official accounts, within or outside China, are operated under the governance of the Cyberspace Administration of China, which requires users to register with their real names and valid Chinese national IDs. For the WOAs established by Australian politicians, Chinese nationals would normally be involved in the process of account registration where a valid Chinese ID card and number are mandatory. Local candidates of Chinese cultural heritage, including Sally Sitou, produced their own content for their audiences on WeChat by telling their immigration stories and sharing concerns of migrant families, healthcare, and the local infrastructural construction.

Non-Chinese-speaking major party leaders assigned their teams or third-party agencies to manage their WOAs on a day-to-day basis. From May 2021 to May 2022, we identified 23 announcements published by Albanese's WOA. Any updates ceased after the election. There were nine posts from Morrison's WOA (set up in 2019). Morrison's and Albanese's WOAs tended to translate English announcements from their Party's websites. Content tended to be selected to, on the one hand, circumvent WeChat's censorship and, on the other, appeal to the shared interests of Chinese Australians. Politicians' comments on Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China's violations of human rights were not published on WeChat. Compared with the 2019 electoral cycle, Morrison was less active on WeChat in light of LNP's stated cybersecurity concerns about WeChat and Morrison's team's mismanagement of his public account. In October 2021, Morrison's WOA was sold to a company based in Fujian province after a period of nonuse but relatively high follower count. The business transaction was subsequently enunciated as a cybersecurity breach by LNP members in January 2022.

Cybersecurity rhetoric about WeChat was shared by both the LNP and the ALP. With the LNP members politicizing WeChat in January 2022, ALP politicians cautiously mobilized their campaigns on the platform. From early December 2021 to late January 2022, Albanese temporarily suspended his updates on his WOA and then resumed his updates with less frequency. On April 11, 2022, Albanese's WOA ceased publication.

Distributed Political Advertising on WeChat

For Chinese Australians, WOAs form a competitive media business with media accounts contending for users’ attention and engagement in the platform economy (Yang, 2023a). Gaining visibility and consistent exposure in these media requires substantial time and effort. Albanese’s WOA only managed to gain 1,343 views—the highest exposure across his publications—in a post addressing Morrison’s voter ID plan and how the bill could overwhelm non-English-speaking communities and those who were financially disadvantaged. Compared with the directly translated posts, the popularity of this commentary post seemed to be linked to its tailored communication strategy targeting non-English-speaking Chinese communities.

As gaining substantial exposure and followings on newly established WOAs presents a challenge, other politicians leveraged existing WOA media influence to spread their messaging. Josh Frydenberg (LNP), Paul Fletcher (LNP), Kylea Tink (Independent), Anthony Albanese (ALP), and Fuxin Li (Independent) used well-established influential WOAs to distribute their political campaigns and buy advertisements. Figure 5 identifies the distribution of political advertisements across influential WOAs.

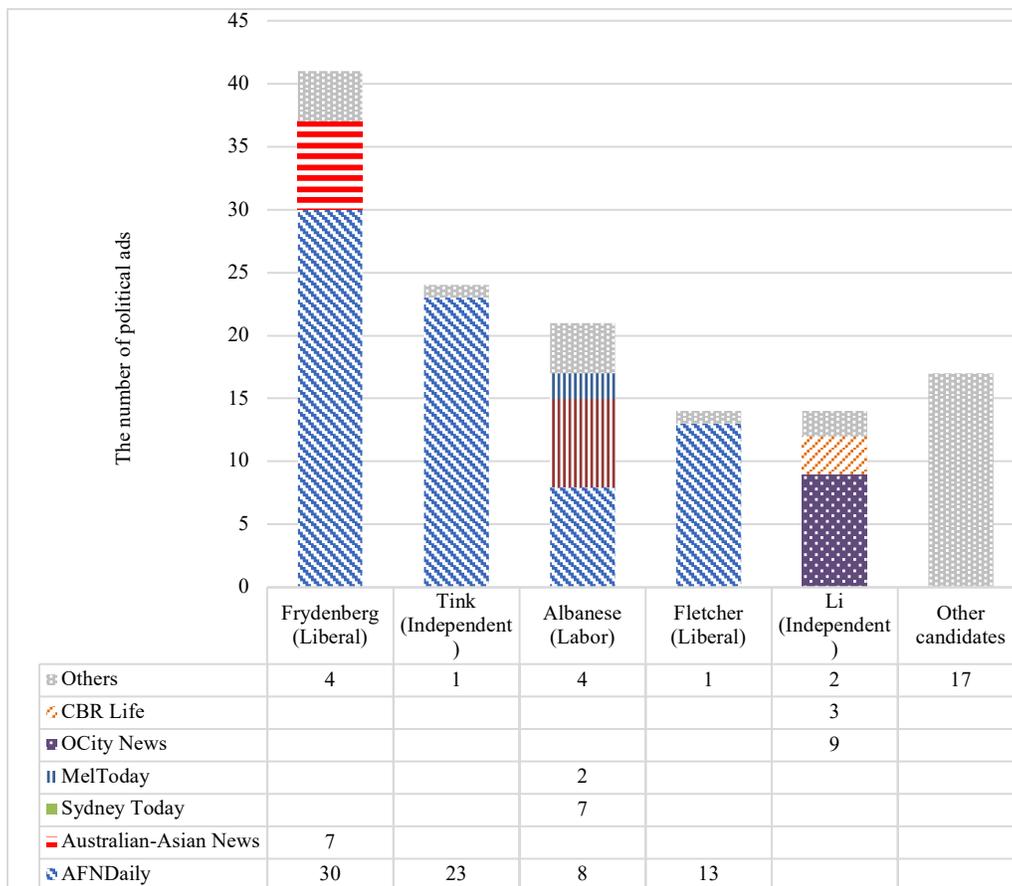


Figure 5. Australian politicians’ distribution of political advertisements across major WOAs.

We identified a division within the LNP in terms of party members' engagements with Chinese Australians on WeChat. A side of the LNP represented by MPs Gladys Liu and James Paterson aligned with Morrison's warning against WeChat. Gladys Liu, in particular, attempted to divert her Chinese-speaking supporters and volunteers from WeChat to WhatsApp. Her actions, however, gained backlash from Chinese Australian voters who favored WeChat and accused Liu of not speaking up for Chinese communities when the LNP's unfair politicization of WeChat happened. Another side of the LNP, represented by MPs Josh Frydenberg and Paul Fletcher, actively invested in mobilizing their political campaigns on WeChat regardless of the stance of their leader, Morrison. Of note, Frydenberg and Fletcher were quite well-known in Australia and powerful in the Party, both being ministers, which might have allowed them agency against party rhetoric. Gladys Liu, on the other hand, was a Liberal's backbencher and offered a more compliant take on the leadership's rhetoric on WeChat.

AFNDaily (澳洲财经见闻), a Sydney-based WOA targeting Chinese business elites, received the highest number of political advertisements from Frydenberg, Tink, Fletcher, and Albanese in the lead-up to the 2022 election. The advertising formats involved an image advertising banner attached to the article (Figure 6, left), an advertising poster attached at the end of the article (Figure 6, middle), and sponsored posts (Figure 6, right).



Figure 6. Examples of political advertisements on AFNDaily (2022a, 2022b). Advertisements were marked with squares.

Unlike more regulated and centralized platforms like Facebook and Twitter, WOAs demonstrate autonomy to rent out their advertising space within their accounts without Tencent’s corporate oversight. The rate of advertising space is largely determined by the number of followers that one WOA obtains and the estimated traffic that can be gained from different sections within the article (see Figure 7). The media kit sourced from *AFNDaily* (2021) would provide a reference for Australian politicians’ spendings on their WeChat campaigns. Our calculations indicated that Frydenberg’s average spending on WeChat might range from 9–10,000 and Albanese spent more than 10,000 on WeChat during the electoral cycle. However, the negotiation process pertaining to business agreements between a WOA and the advertiser remained confidential.

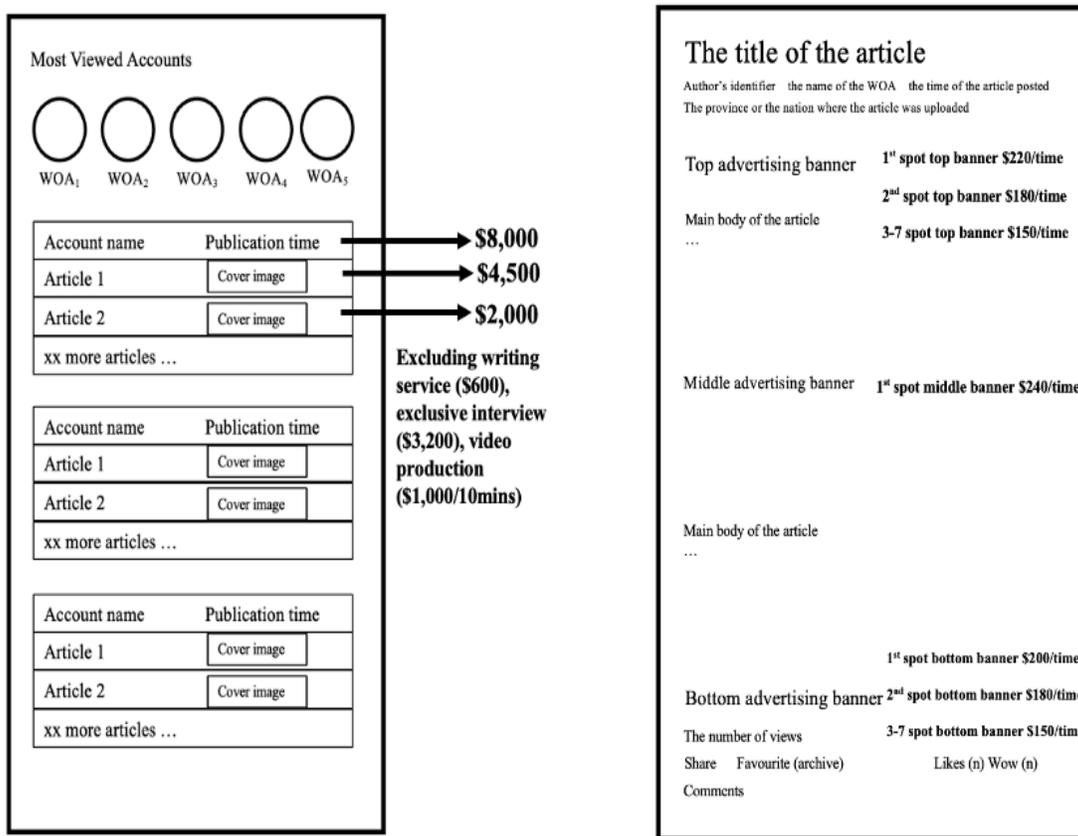


Figure 7. Advertising fees of AFNDaily (2021).

WOAs may seem to demonstrate their partisan preference, but the advertising model adds complexity to the assumed editorial choices. We found that WOAs can be less selective with political advertising. Our research showed that while it might be able to infer a Liberal-leaning stance to *AFNDaily* from the outlet’s emphasis on property, finance, and investment in its publications, it accepted political advertising from LNP, ALP, and independent party candidates. Furthermore, among the WOAs, the curation of political advertisements exhibited a low degree of organization or consistency. We identified instances

where Albanese's political advertisements were simultaneously presented with Frydenberg's and pro-Albanese's campaign was in juxtaposition with an anti-Albanese campaign in one WeChat post.

Figure 8 shows that in an article published on May 10, 2022, 11 days before the release of the election results, *AFNDaily* anticipates a significant transformation in Australia's governance upon the assumption of power by the Labor government. The headline of the article conveys an ambiguous yet predominantly negative tone toward the Labor Party, aligning with the targeted readership of the outlet comprising upper-middle-class Chinese migrants with vested interests in Australia's neoliberal economy. Despite this initial tone, the content of the article systematically introduces various ALP policies across sectors, such as healthcare, infrastructure, international relations, education, and the economy. Advertisements from independent candidate Kylea Tink and Liberal politician Josh Frydenberg are placed within the middle and at the conclusion of this pro-ALP narrative. Positioned above Frydenberg's advertisement, a poll conducted by *AFNDaily* prompts the reader to contemplate whether Australia would witness improvements with the Labor Party assuming power. The outcomes reveal that 49.06% expressed a positive sentiment, 37.75% conveyed a negative perspective, and 13.19% remained uncertain.

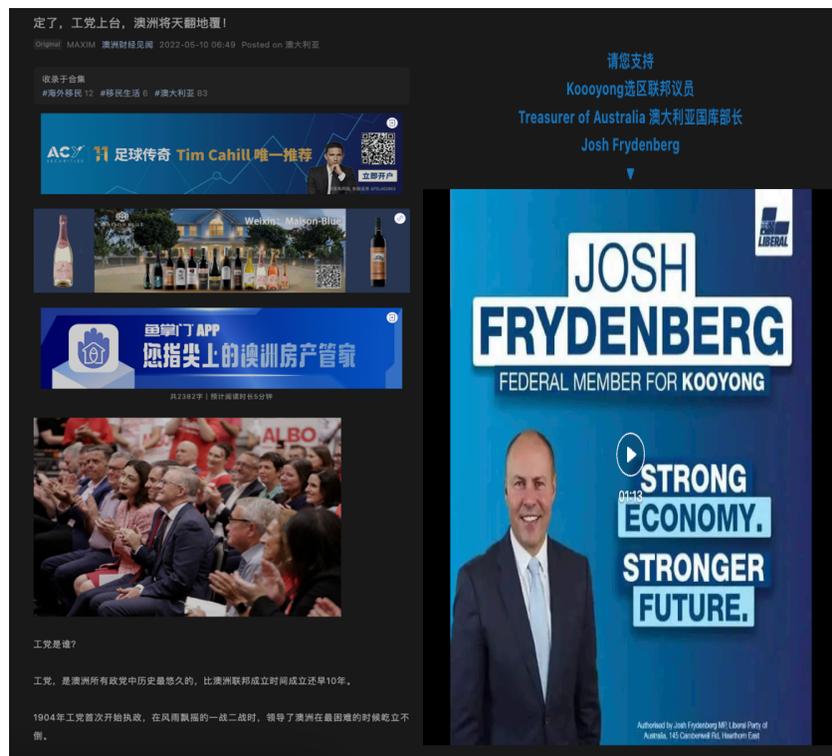


Figure 8. Example 1—incongruous political advertising.

Left image (translation): It's done, Labor will be in power, Australia is to be turned over.
Right image (translation): Please support the MP for Kooyong, the Treasurer of Australia, Josh Frydenberg (AFNDaily, 2022c).

Likewise, in Figure 9, we observed an instance of both pro-ALP and anti-ALP advertisements. Both advertisements are incorporated within a post that summarizes proposed policies by the two major political parties in juxtaposition of topics such as interest rates and purported herbal remedies for COVID-19. The anti-ALP ad is authorized by “C. McQuestin”—the former Victorian Liberal Party director, Charles David McQuestin, also known as Sam McQuestin. In March 2024, McQuestin was sued by the Australian Electoral Commission for breaching electoral laws by failing to properly declare four political ads placed in the *Geelong Advertiser* before the 2022 federal election. McQuestin was fined \$40,000 AUD for this violation (Australian Associated Press [APA], 2024). However, the charge did not extend to political ads on WeChat.

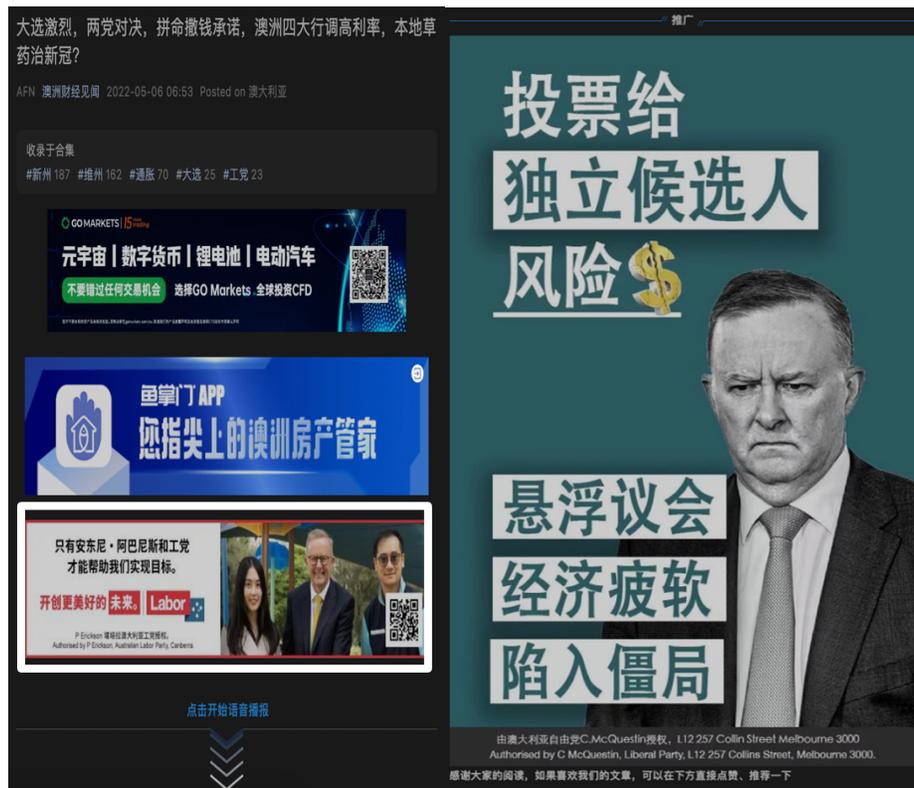


Figure 9. Example #2—incongruous political advertising.

Left image in the white-color square (translation): Only Anthony Albanese and the Labor Party can help us achieve our goals. To build a better future.

Right image (translation): Vote for independent candidates, risks \$. Suspended parliament, economic weakness, deadlock (AFNDaily, 2022d).

Discussion

News translation is key to uncovering the connections forged among communities at specific times. Built on thematic and content analysis, our findings further reveal the codependence of translation, capital, and political hegemony on WeChat and how this relationship shapes migrants’ understanding of Australian

political systems and thus informs their political participation. Specifically, diasporic media accounts translate Australian English news coverage to contextualize Australian politics for their readership—migrants from the PRC authoritarian regime—who come from a political background distinctly different from Australia’s parliamentary system. This news translation is driven more by topic popularity than by genuine civic engagement and education, potentially exploiting the readership for media accounts’ business gains. Minimal antagonism was involved during news translation, contrary to what postcolonial studies or the Gramscian notion of “translation” would often suggest. In fact, diasporic media exist by depending on hegemony and “translating” such power into financial gain (Yang, 2023b). Since 2019, our research has identified recurring right-wing conservative narratives against immigration, particularly humanitarian immigration, following conservative English media coverage, despite the media producers and target audiences being migrants themselves.

We see Australian politicians’ presence on WeChat and within Official Accounts as their hegemonic translation of Australian politics to Chinese migrants. This hegemonic politics is performed through a top-down, less ethnically or culturally nuanced translation and is structured by one’s race, class, and social prestige, while crudely reflecting assumed readership demographics per WOA. Yet, political advertisements often become awkward insertions into public posts on WeChat, creating content-consumption dissonance, compared with the algorithmically crafted English social media ads, even if the overall structure further develops hegemonic political understanding. Political ads primarily appeal to the interests of diasporic media businesses, yet they often struggle to resonate with the readership.

Furthermore, Australian politicians were less socially engaged in Chinese social media. They leveraged the WeChat platform as a more convenient but influential channel to broadcast to Chinese Australian voters. Or more pointedly, even expectations within English-speaking constituents and social media to have of their representatives being among the people, offering selfies, and increasing accessibility were not transposed to WeChat. For example, ahead of the 2022 election, Morrison and Albanese posted seemingly casual content based on domestic scenarios, aiming to establish the image of friendliness and accessibility on Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter. However, such content was only translated and republished by WOAs; similarly, politicians themselves did not engage there, nor did they post other novel WeChat-centric forms of engagement. Their work remained translatory of campaign talking points or was channeled through ads, as discussed.

For Chinese diasporic media, despite translation somewhat connecting Chinese migrants to Australian politics, the lack of real critique of dominant discourses and Australian political structures, along with the absence of genuine engagement from Australian institutions and politicians, forces migrants to remain on the periphery of the social system from which they are excluded, especially when WeChat remains dominant in political advertising and information consumption.

Our analysis also showed a nascent Chinese Australian public being constructed in WOA media. First, WOAs and their audience groups’ comments exhibited a degree of political heterogeneity and uncertainty. During the 2022 electoral cycle, we identified that the COVID-19 pandemic and Australia–China bilateral relations increased the unpredictability of Chinese Australian voters’ political preferences. The heightened unpredictability disrupted the previously established patterns of Chinese Australian public

opinions and thus diverted the focus away from traditional political inclinations, that is, the LNP, to the ALP. We observed that not only WOAs reported the results of national polls conducted by the English media, but some of them also independently organized polls to capture the political preference of their own readership. Interestingly, the poll results were incorporated into their content to align with the interests of their audiences as well as merely being reported on. However, the identified WOAs' conflicting actions in organizing political advertisements showed how the strategic lack of coordination between content and advertising can adapt to the diverse and unpredictable interests of their readership.

Censorship on WeChat is built both culturally and technically in ways that oppress freedom of speech within and outside China. However, in general, the Australian election was not presented as a politically sensitive topic. Politicians did discuss "sensitive" topics in the election cycle, from China's human rights abuse in Xinjiang and Hong Kong to China's detention of Australian citizens and China's censorship of LGBTQ+ communities. Such issues were excluded from WOAs' coverage and translation of the election and were not mentioned in politicians' own WeChat posts and advertisements. WOAs and party members internalized self-censorship as a way to prioritize their financial or political gains over their political stance. Moreover, the absence of explicit pro-Beijing narratives in WOA content did not mean that the content was not framed as such. Across WOAs, a pro-Beijing narrative was presented through portraying the governing LNP as unreasonable in addressing the international relations between Australia, China, and the United States. However, we also did not identify excessive resentment against Australia or mimicking of PRC rhetoric found in official Chinese news organizations. Excessive patriotism would situate WOAs as subject to concerns about foreign interference in the Australian election, so a moderate framing served broader groups of stakeholders involved.

Finally, the audience on WeChat was publicly critical about the credibility of WOAs' own coverage of Australian politics during the election. We identified WeChat users who commented on and complained about misleading information, brash political endorsements, or less-than-persuasive advertorials under the posts of WOAs. WeChat users demonstrated increasing degrees of digital literacy to understand that traffic translates into advertising revenue as they discussed the political stories being posted. We understand WeChat as a relatively open space where Chinese Australians engaged with Australian politics despite living under the shadow of potential censorship from the PRC and the watchful eye of Australian cybersecurity and foreign influence rhetoric (Sun & Yu, 2020).

During the data collection period, our research did not identify China's state-affiliated WOAs shaping the discussion of Australian politics. This lack of interference was striking, considering the election in Hong Kong in September 2021, where the PRC preferred political candidate was explicitly promoted by the WOAs operated by China's state media *China Daily* and *Xinhua News Agency*. For the 2022 election cycle in Australia, although China-based media accounts participated in publishing news information on the election, the updates were occasional, non-subsequential, and referred to English media outlets. China's official mouthpieces did not attempt to participate in WeChat conversations about Australian politics during the election cycle.

While the coverage of Australian political matters remained relatively static on WeChat during the 2022 election, we expect that the 2025 Australian federal election will be different. We have observed the

heightened popularity of the WOA for the Chinese Embassy of Australia. Their WOA has existed for some time, first created in July 2018, with posts uniformly covering the international relations of the PRC, Taiwan's election, and events of Chinese embassies and consulates in Australia.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we note that as with other platforms (cf. Facebook), the absence of official information leaves a gap that can be filled with misinformation, disinformation, and other problematic content. Worse, non-English misinformation largely remains beyond the purview of Australian public institutions' scrutiny (see the Communications Legislation Amendment [Combating Misinformation and Disinformation] Bill 2024). Our research will continue to capture political discourses on WeChat and emerging Chinese-language social media platform such as Red/Xiaohongshu, not only to monitor misinformation engineered by generative AI or through news translation and other trends of import to Australians but also to hold national politicians to account for how they use segments of Australian society for their own gain.

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