

In his 1931 essay “A Short History of Photography,” Walter Benjamin famously suggested that one function of the photograph is that it frequently reveals a side of reality that we see but do not consciously register – a phenomenon that Benjamin dubbed the optical unconscious. One way of approaching Huang’s *Scents of China* would be to see it as doing for scent what Benjamin’s camera does for sight, detailing the underlying significance of the world of scent that we perceive but often do not consciously appreciate. The volume, in other words, seeks to reveal and make sense of modern China’s olfactory unconscious.

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Digital Transnationalism: Chinese-Language Media in Australia

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Digital Transnationalism draws on findings and analysis published by its two authors, Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu, in several earlier journal articles, along with additional data, to present a coherent perspective on the national identity of first-generation mainland Chinese who have arrived in Australia since the 1980s, as seen through their use of networked digital communication media, particularly Weixin.

The authors highlight three factors as the contexts of their book: the global geopolitical reconfiguration that accompanies China’s rise; China’s insistence on inserting itself into the transnational Chinese sphere; and the intensification of anti-Chinese discourses in Australia. They argue that these contexts have fostered a simplistic misconception that overemphasizes media control and censorship in the operation of Chinese digital media in Australia. The book aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the issue.

To do this, the authors analyse the content published on Weixin subscription accounts targeting Mandarin Chinese speakers in Australia. They conducted a case study of the most popular Weixin account in Australia, *Sydney Today*, and observed the flow of content between selected Weixin “self-media” accounts and other social media platforms. The authors also observed, as participants, the role of Weixin for Mandarin-speakers in Australia during the 2019 Australian federal election and COVID-19.

Given the contexts highlighted by the authors, their book makes a timely contribution to this under-researched area by responding to concerns about China’s potential influence among the Chinese diaspora through Weixin. The data reported succeeds in painting a picture of differences in national identification among the Mandarin-speaking community in Australia and a landscape of variation among Weixin subscription accounts targeting them. The authors highlight the agency of Mandarin speakers in Australia, suggesting that their identity is not a matter of either Chinese or Australian, but something in between. They acknowledge censorship and surveillance by the Chinese state but emphasize the profit motive in the operation of Chinese digital media in Australia and stress that their “compliance is more a business decision than a result of political coercion” (p. 70). This argument makes sense, as studies have shown that the Chinese state has found new ways to tame the market, and there are many examples of political distortions of commercial

logic. To shed light on this point, it would be desirable to examine the content on Weixin during periods of concentrated Chinese political propaganda, such as on the anniversary day of the founding of the PRC.

The data presented in the book counters the commonly held view that Weixin is primarily a propaganda tool of the Chinese government (p. 30). However, because of its methodological choices, the book does not provide a comprehensive view of the operation or use of Weixin in Australia. The case of *Sydney Today* provides a valuable insight into the operation of the account, but it cannot be taken as typical. In chapter three, the authors report that some popular Weixin accounts targeting Mandarin speakers in Australia differed in their selection and treatment of news about two events touching on Chinese nationalism. It would provide a more representative view if the book included a case study of one of the popular pro-Beijing accounts. Similarly, the authors acknowledge that there are individuals and companies that promote China's or the CCP's interests on Weixin, but their study excludes their behaviour.

In the areas and topics that the book does cover, some of the data and methods are problematic, undermining the validity of the conclusions. For example, the patterns of media use reported in chapter two are based on two surveys using "convenience sampling ... largely through social media platforms, mainly WeChat and Facebook" (p. 52). The analysis of news content is based on two samples of the most-read posts from the top Weixin subscription accounts. Curiously, it is not explained why two samples instead of one were used in each of these analyses. If participants were recruited through Weixin and Facebook, one would expect them to prefer Weixin and Facebook as their primary sources of news information. And this is exactly what the study found. In the two content samples, the criteria for collection were different, but again without explanation – one was all articles with more than 100,000 reads from the top ten Weixin subscription accounts targeting Australia by 28 September 2019, and the other was the ten most-read articles from each of the top ten Weixin subscription accounts in the week of 19–26 July 2019. Likewise, in the two case studies on Chinese nationalism, no reason is given as to why all news articles on the Sun versus Horton case were examined, but only articles from two months of the Hong Kong protests were studied. I can imagine that the large number of articles on the Hong Kong protests might have been a factor considered in the decision, but articles published in two months are very unlikely to be representative, given the changing dynamics of the protest movement over the many months of its development. Sampling several constructed weeks might have been a better strategy.

The organization of the content of the book facilitates its use by a non-academic readership and as reference reading for students, as the chapters are independent of each other, each containing an introduction to the aims, methods and concepts, and previous studies, before the results of the present study are discussed and concluded. However, when read together, there is much repetition of content across the chapters. While more knowledgeable readers may appreciate the book's extensive references to various concepts, the non-standard use of some terminology may lead to confusion. For example, the authors refer to the accounts of Chinese official media organizations on Western social media as "self-media" (p. 135), and they also refer to a purposive sample they used as a "probability sample" (p. 77). Examples like these are unfortunate, as they echo the methodological problems mentioned above and detract from the overall quality of the work.

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