



# In the Court of Public Opinion: A Zone of Error Shared by Overseas Chinese

Victor N. Shaw

California State University-Northridge, Northridge, USA

WeChat as the most widely used social media in China provides a platform of communication for overseas Chinese to remain connected to their homeland as well as among one another. It enables them to maintain a court of public opinion wherein to express views, engage in debates, and entertain sentiments. This paper focuses on a zone of error shared by overseas Chinese over the court of public opinion afforded through WeChat. It describes what zone of error is, analyzes how overseas Chinese overreact to issues from China while neglecting matters in their present life, and explains why lacks of involvement coincide with assumptive judgments, groundless assumptions with autocratic personalities, and personal autocracy with reality disengagement. A critical finding is this: The zone of error is an inevitable trap for first-generation immigrants. It takes at least a generation to crawl out of the trap when second-generation immigrants perceive their birthplace as home.

*Keywords:* public opinion, social media, immigrant entrenchment, autocratic personality, zone of error, overseas Chinese

## Introduction

Launched in 2011, WeChat has been operating as a multi-purpose vehicle for communication, ecommerce, and social interaction. On a par with Facebook by monthly active users in more than one billion, it makes the Chinese all over the world connected with one another through its social media platform (Ai et al., 2018; Chen, Liang, & Cai, 2018; Li, Sallam, & Ye, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020; Su & Xiao, 2021; Harwit, 2022; Sun & Yu, 2022; Zha, 2022; Liu, 2023; Zhang, 2024; Yan & Schafer, 2025).

Before WeChat, the Chinese follow the grapevines to share their personal views on current affairs in the shadow of the official media. With WeChat, they find a tangible court of public opinion to entertain their thoughts, positions, and sentiments on issues from work, school, and life to politics (Chen et al., 2018; Berinsky, 2020; Xu, Zhao, & Wang, 2025).

This paper studies a zone of error observed among overseas Chinese over the court of public opinion afforded by WeChat. It describes what zone of error is, analyzes how overseas Chinese overreact to issues from their past home of origin while neglecting matters in their present home of life, and explains why lacks of direct involvement coincide with assumptive judgments, impositions of groundless assumptions with autocratic personalities, and exhibitions of personal autocracy with reality disengagement. A critical finding is this: The zone of error is an inevitable trap of discourse for first-generation immigrants. It takes at least a generation to crawl out of the trap when second-generation immigrants begin to perceive their birthplace as home.

---

Victor N. Shaw, Ph.D., Department of Sociology, California State University-Northridge, Northridge, USA.

### Concepts

This paper touches upon a broad issue. To clarify its focus and purpose, some definitional work is in order on three keywords: overseas Chinese, court of public opinion, and zone of error.

Overseas Chinese are Chinese who reside outside Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macau, and Taiwan. By citizenship, they are either Chinese or foreign citizens. Ethnically, they include Hans and non-Hans, such as Mongols, Tibetans, and Uyghurs. In terms of residency, there are both foreign residents with Chinese citizenship and Chinese residents of foreign nationality (Suryadinata, 2017; Liang et al., 2018; Christoff, 2019; Li, 2020).

The court of public opinion refers to a common domain or public sphere in which individuals express views, exchange ideas, debate issues, entertain sentiments, and share experiences. Inwardly, it spreads across the perceptive consciousness of individual attendees. Outwardly, it traverses through the mass media of social mainstreams. A court of public opinion features attitudes toward work and professional careers, tips for relationships and everyday life, viewpoints on government and current events, reflections upon fates and human destiny, and thoughts over everything else between life and nonlife, this world and the otherworld, hell and heaven (Shaw, 2013; Humphreys, 2016; Zha, 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Jordan, 2024).

Before the era of social media, a court of public opinion is more of a perceived common field owned by a group of individuals who communicate through the grapevines or around a teahouse, bulletin board, local newspaper, or radio station. It is sporadic and elusive. With WeChat and other social media platforms, communications become spontaneous and constant. Courts of public opinion turn tangible to their participants. Overseas Chinese now feel they share an actual court of public opinion over distance, across national borders and generational gaps. They navigate the court with their characteristic identity, sharing their unique ideas, outlooks, and experiences (Shaw, 2013; Carrier, 2018; Carrigan, 2020; Yang, Zhang, Cheng, & Zhao, 2023).

The zone of error is a range of space where one falls in error with respect to one's view, judgment, or choice. It is relative because it depends upon issue, time, space, and a combination thereof. A view is erroneous on one issue yet being true on another. A judgment proves wrong at one time while turning right at another. A choice appears to be a mistake under one circumstance but seeming to be a correct option under another. There is, of course, an absolute aspect in the zone of error as well. One makes the same mistake again and again regardless of the occasion. People commit the same error collectively irrespective of the time. A zone of error is characterized as shared by overseas Chinese because it is where they tend to err on issues concerning China, Chinese, and their respective places of sojourn, residency, or citizenship (Wang & Zhou, 2013; Zhou, Cavazos, & Sohn-McCormick, 2018; Shaw, 2019; Levy & Wright, 2020; Xu et al., 2025).

### Methods

This paper follows three WeChat groups of overseas Chinese in the United States in the past five years to study how each group serves as a virtual yet tangible court of public opinion and what zone of error each group falls in as shared by its membership. The author belongs to each WeChat group. He observes member communications by an average level of participation.

Group 1 consists of members who claim a province of China as their common place of origin. Group 2 includes members who call a university of China as their joint alma mater. Group 3 is composed of members who all connect to a university of the United States as its faculty, staff, students, or communal residents.

All three groups are at the official maximum of 500 members. Membership composition seems to be comparable. Age runs a spectrum of 20 to 70. Gender remains balanced between men and women. Education ranges from high school, undergraduate learning, and graduate study to professional training such as medicine and law. Length of stay in the United States varies from year 1 for young students to year 40 for longtime residents. Residency or citizenship involves permanent U.S. residents, non-U.S. residents, Chinese citizens, and U.S. citizens (Lee & Chun, 2016; Russell & Klassen, 2019; Sandel et al., 2019; Yan & Schafer, 2025).

### **Findings**

Members come and go. Postings appear and disappear. Exchanges accelerate and decelerate. Atmospheres fire up and calm down. Indeed, things take place on WeChat both instantly and constantly (Zhou et al., 2018; Tran & Chuang, 2020; Ruan et al., 2020; Harwit, 2022; Liu, 2023; Wang et al., 2023; Jordan, 2024; Zhang, 2024; Yan & Schafer, 2025).

#### **A Virtual Yet Tangible Court of Public Opinion**

On WeChat, a group appears real in physical existence. Members literally utter and hear voices across a group-owned collective field. Communications run real as objective phenomena. Participants straightforwardly make and take words over a community-shared common platform.

It is virtual. WeChat gathers individuals in cyberspace. A group consists of hundreds of members under a title with which they become identified. For example, XX university alumni association serves as a sign under which graduates from XX university come for exchange of ideas, feelings, and experiences. One enters a group with one's WeChat name, such as clear water and blue sky, which offers no clue as to who one is. A group hence usually requires its members to identify themselves by real name with information pertinent to the group, including major and year of class in the case of an alumni association. Members obviously do not meet face to face across any concrete space. Nor do they interact in person during any specific time. Yet, they describe things, tell stories, and create meanings as if they were at a definite locality, staying committed to symbolic interaction. They explain events, debate issues, and make senses as if they were in an exact period, remaining immersed in a public discourse.

It is tangible. WeChat connects people to a viewable stage. Unlike printed media serving as a court of certain conservative ideas, it does not make users search a pile of newspapers, magazines, and books for inputs and inspirations. WeChat links people to a perceptible platform. Different from broadcasting channels functioning as a field of some liberal thoughts, it does not force members to tune to a set of radios, televisions, and films for expressions and outputs. WeChat engages people in a feelable circle. As social media featuring exchange of opinions, it gives participants a consciousness that they are in a touchable place, uttering and hearing voices to and from a resonating audience, a feeling that they are at a conceivable time, making and taking words to and from relatable actors, and an experience that they engage in meaningful communications with palpable players over ongoing social affairs. Indeed, a WeChat group, each member hereof, and everything therein are real, constituting a complete court of public opinion with all necessary elements, from live persons, concrete things, and a peculiar time to a specific place.

#### **Messages**

In a WeChat group, messages come and go by a variety of types. Entertained throughout the WeChat court of public opinion are news, stories, advertisements, reflections, commentaries, moral directives, religious teachings, political ideologies, and social advocacies.

WeChat messages vary in terms of content objectivity. Objective messages include diaries to record daily routines, news to report current events, accounts to describe trips, documentaries to feature incidents, commercials to present products, brochures to introduce places, briefs to summarize projects, or stories to cover people and things across a territory or over a period. In comparison, subjective messages involve morality as to what actions and ways of life are moral or immoral, religiosity as to how Allah, Buddha, or God create and guide humans toward their destinies, ideology as to why one type of political economy or system of civilizations is more advantageous than another, and advocacy as to when or where particular social groupings or movements are in order to rise to occasion for promotion or resistance. Obviously, objectivity or subjectivity is not something absolute on its own. It runs a whole gamut from objectivity to subjectivity. In between lies just more or less objectivity relative to subjectivity, vice versa. For example, news report events with both objective facts, such as time, place, persons, and things, and subjective elements, including praises, criticisms, wishes, and damnations.

WeChat messages exhibit different intents with a changing degree of intentionality. Messages of strong intents either advance something or attack someone. Negative messages to attack China, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and the Chinese government or vilify Chinese, Chinese bureaucrats, and Chinese leaders top the list with the strongest intent to achieve the highest effect of negativity. To an extent, there are natural motivating factors in the court of public opinion that glorify exposers, criticizers, and attackers as brave, sharp, and critical individuals. Then come positive messages to advance capitalism, democracy, and Western ways of life or celebrate renowned scientists, politicians, or industrialists. To some degree, there are automatic restraining forces in public consciousness that hold admiration and flattery in check because excess makes admirers and flatters look awkwardly uncritical or embarrassingly out of character. In between are regular messages to present individuals, describe things, explain events, or justify actions by varying levels of positive overtones or negative overtures. For example, an album is featured with a positive intent to show how beautiful an artist is in his or her voice. A debate is launched over an incident with a negative intent to show how corrupt officials are across governments in China.

### **Functions**

A WeChat group as a court of public opinion is for members to send and receive information, present and hear ideas, express and entertain feelings. Functions hence range from connecting, sharing, promoting, fundraising, and assistance-seeking to identity-maintaining.

Connecting is basic. Members form a group for connection. They initiate a conversation, respond to an appeal, or remain silent. They may also opt to subgroup communications by forming a smaller cluster or to private dialogues by engaging in one-on-one contacts. Sharing is a norm. Members attend the group so that they know what succeeds or fails, understand why someone gains attention or loses credibility, and witness how something materializes or turns from positive to negative. They visit the court of opinion to befriend people, gather inputs, and embrace a community while facing challenges, contributing outputs, and cultivating their unique characters. Identity-maintaining is part of any group. The sense of belonging defines who one is, how one compares to others, or why one feels proud of one's identity. In voluntary terms, one jumps onto a group wagon simply because one finds an avenue to enhance one's social standing.

Promoting is purposeful. One puts out an advertisement to sell a product or service. One sends an announcement to introduce some religious practice, a moral way of life, or a module of physical exercise. One spreads propaganda to galvanize individuals around an ideology, a political party, or a social movement. One takes a series of steps to make people commit to an adventure, a cause, or a pursuit. Fundraising goes after money.

One pleads for donations with a moving message that someone is struggling upon a surgery. A subgroup organizes a fundraiser for money needed to defrost a fieldtrip or for supply necessary to aid participants of difficulty in an activity. The whole group initiates a campaign to collect funds and materials in a disaster or pandemic relief effort. Assistance-seeking is specific. One asks for information as how to reset a smartphone, where to get a cheap haircut, or when to see a full blossom. One seeks professional advice on work permit application or tax preparation. One solicits ad hoc assistance such as finding an apartment before arrival or looking for sponsorship of an academic visit to a university.

### **Subjects**

In the WeChat court of public opinion, attendees make their exchanges on various subjects. Illustrative of their opposing positions and sentiments are these subjective topics: China, Chinese, East, Eastern civilizations, the United States, Americans, West, and Western development.

Attendees are all Chinese, claiming China in the East as their homeland and the Chinese culture of Eastern civilizations as their heritages. China becomes a natural center of concern. One side embraces China, attributing their rearing to China, feeling excited about good news from China, and taking actions to benefit China. The other side opposes China, attacking the Chinese government as a one party-dictatorship, exposing Chinese officials for abuse or corruption, criticizing China over a range of issues. The “Chinese” automatically falls under the limelight of scrutiny. There are members who regard Chinese as intelligent, diligent, and law-abiding, celebrate Chinese achievements and contributions, and promote Chinese reputations and positions in larger society. There are also members who compare Chinese to other ethnic groups as being less conscientious or contributive, spread news implicating Chinese in thoughtlessness or materialistic greed, or tell stories blaming Chinese for disunity and political apathy. The same holds true to the East and Eastern civilizations.

WeChat members live in America. The United States appears as a central subject. Members in support of it love everything about the country. They admire its political system, from freedom of speech, democracy, and open media to rule of law. They enjoy its economic affluence, reflected in consumer markets, recreational amenities, and sociocultural infrastructures. They feel proud of its leading position in the world, as either the forefront of science or the playground of international relations. Members critical of it point to economic disparity and racial division faced at home as well as aggression and sabotage committed around the globe by the United States. They spread news about violence, political corruption, and homelessness in their jurisdiction. They tell stories documenting their own experiences with racial biases, discriminations against people of foreign origin, or even hate crimes. They blame the United States for wars in countries like Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen. “American” arises as a subjective topic for heated discussion and animated debate. There are feelings of like and admiration. Members like Americans to be open and generous. They love Americans being fair and serious about rules. They admire Americans for their creativity, spirit of adventure, and strive for self-actualization. There are also sentiments of fear or dislike. Some fear Americans to be manipulative, exploitative, or discriminative. Some hold an unfavorable view of Americans as lazy, talkative, and discursive. Some dislike Americans for their arrogance, indulgence, and materialism. The same applies to the West and Western ways of life.

### **Objects**

Within a WeChat group, members engage in communications over different objects. Featured in their contrasting approaches and attitudes toward objective issues are work, job duties, organizations, life, foods, medicines, and communities.

Working overseas, WeChat members do not usually talk much about their current work, job duties, and affiliated organizations. There are natural concerns that general complaints cause real troubles or unnecessary worries. There are instinctual fears that exposure of specific persons or incidents comes with immediate legal effects or unexpected economic repercussions. There is further a consciousness that an account of negative experiences reflects unfavorably on one as incapable of doing one's job, adapting to one's work environment, and steering one's professional career. The safe take on the matter is to remain silent, even when one excels on job and achieves known successes in one's area of business for just a normal show of personal achievements can be assigned to self-promotion. On the other hand, WeChat members tend to be vocal, critical, and cynical toward their past work in China. Reasons are apparent in terms of time, distance, and substance: It is in the past, with no connection to the present; it is far away in China, with no effect on what goes on in the United States; we know it is bad there, that is why we are here; we understand it is low then because we experience high now. Indeed, it is sufficient to keep a feel of growth and progress at present by looking down upon the past just as it is necessary to maintain a sense of advantage or supremacy overseas by downplaying and denigrating everything back home.

Living in the United States, players over the WeChat court of opinion like to show foods, exchange information about health, and spread news on communities. Compared to work that has to do with an employment organization, life is in one's own hands. Food is a multidimensional object. It reflects a set of living skills and a type of lifestyles. Cooking foods at home reveals one as an able spouse. Dining in restaurants links one to certain social classes. Health draws broad interests. It is about loving, respecting, and promoting life. Loving life, one exercises, engages in recreational activities, balances diets, and maintains positive outlooks. Respecting life, one moderates drinking, refrains from smoking, resists drugs, and keeps self-discipline. Community showcases one's standing in the new society. What neighborhood does one reside in? Does one get along with neighbors? Is one familiar with amenities and opportunities available in one's community? All these speak of one's economic conditions and cultural assimilations to the social mosaic of America. Regarding the past life in China, WeChat participants are overall quite reticent. Obviously, one would not like to revisit one's old living experience if one lives now under a situation not so much better than before. One could not make any difference in one's current living by either romanticizing or demonizing one's life back in China. The best is then to forget about the past back over homeland and focus on the present right here in America.

### **Participants**

Members of each WeChat group do not roam just individually in the court of opinion. They gather around topics and issues. They cluster over positions and arguments. When clashes intensify, neutral information is poured in to put out fires. Where subgroups point fingers at one another, a few onlookers only need to crack a joke or yell out a reminder as to what the group is to prevent the situation from further escalation.

Attendees line up to form an army to attack Chinese, China, and things related to both. They usually begin with a lone Chinese, a shopper sorting through a whole box of fruits just to buy one, a housewife stockpiling masks on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic, or an old man accusing a bystander of pushing him down to the ground who assisted him on the street. A barrage of criticisms and condemnations ensue, creating a narrative of Chinese as if they were all selfish, greedy, and unconscientious. Attackers sometimes kick off by a hearsay or news headline that a factory releases untreated wastes to a river, a group of market inspectors force merchants out of business, or a local government conspired with gangsters to extort peasants within its jurisdiction. Upon a real or fake incident, a wave of debating or bickering expands, engendering a portrayal of China as a backward,

lawless, or repressive country. The CCP is certainly both starting and ending points of any negative exchange in the WeChat court of opinion. It is always dealt with the full power of bombardment, especially for its systematic censorship of mass media, all-way surveillance of people, and exclusive control of government. Interestingly, neither a blaze of cursing Chinese nor a burst of attacking China subsides or goes extinct because it meets with opposition by defenders of Chinese or supporters of China. It often takes merely a series of neutral messages on arts, travels, or cuisines to push a tense fight off the court at WeChat.

Participants stand out in rally after rally to glorify Americans, the United States, and issues regarding both. They tend to start off abstractly, by the stereotypical image of the United States as a land of individual freedom, open press, representative democracy, and market economy. When positive events happen, from scientific breakthroughs, technological innovations, and cutting-edge products to state-of-the-art facilities, they are attributed to the institutional supremacy of U.S. civil society, political economy, and cultural framework. Where negative things exist, including racial discrimination, drug abuse, and gang activity, they are brushed off as incidents common to all free societies. About Americans, WeChat members are inclined to tell stories from everyday life. A couple who already have their own biological son and daughter adopt a baby from an orphanage in China. A family serves as a host for Chinese students year after year for free. A stranger helps a Chinese newcomer change a flat tire on a freeway. Case by case, Americans are portrayed to be nice and noble. Incident after incident, Americans are looked upon as law-abiding and responsible. Abusers and criminals seem to be living only in movies. Prejudice and discrimination appear to be of fiction than reality. Noticeably, either beautifying Americans or glorifying the United States does not fade or die as it faces challenges by opposing viewpoints. It usually needs only a sequence of factual postings such as breaking news and event announcements to blow a heatwave of admiration or worship from the WeChat sphere of opinion.

### **Analyses**

Inherent in phenomenon, there is logic or a logical connection from place to place and from time to time. Underlying existence, there is truth or a truthful chain of cause and effect. As far as this article is concerned, are there reasons and reasonable themes or pattern above and beyond findings (Shaw, 2019; R. H. Zhao, Zhang, J. H. S. Zhao, & Wang, 2019; Kareem & Amjad, 2020; Ruan et al., 2020; Su & Xiao, 2021; Harwit, 2022; Zha, 2022; Liu, 2023; Yang et al., 2023; Jordan, 2024; Zhang, 2024; Xu et al., 2025; Yan & Schafer, 2025)?

### **Participants**

WeChat members differ in their expressions over the court of public opinion. They clash on ideas, sentiments, and attitudes within the communicational sphere of their own group. Analysis therefore is in order regarding membership backgrounds.

Here in the United States, WeChat attendees break down into newcomers vs. old timers, students vs. non-students, business owner vs. non-business owners, employed vs. unemployed, well-off vs. struggling, and other contrasting categories. Newcomers feel excited about what they see on the surface in their new environment. Greeted warmly, they develop generally positive impressions about Americans. Floating over reality, they embrace a period of honeymoon romance with the United States. Old timers, in comparison, live long enough to know Americans as classmates, workmates, business competitors, or neighbors. They experience things in a sufficient variety, frequency, and duration to understand the United States as a country of prosperity and poverty, freedom and control, generosity and greed, or commonly, positives and negatives. Another important contrast is between

well-off and struggling members. Well-off ones have stable sources of income, secure fields of professional activity, familiar networks of social engagement, proper channels of communication, and applaudable styles of life. Their struggling counterparts, on the other hand, rush between job and school, stay on and off work, move in and out of places, or constantly face the challenge of making ends meet or just staying afloat in life.

There out of China, WeChat participants originate from anti- vs. pro-China, Chinese, CCP, leadership, and other opposing groups. China antagonists include ethnic separatists who hate China for its rule over their home territories such as Tibet and Uighur, Hong Kong aspirants for autonomy who lament about China's exercise of sovereignty over Britain's former colony, and Taiwan independence elements who advocate for international recognition of China's self-claimed renegade island as a nation-state. CCP opposers go back as far as former members of Kuomintang who lost the rule of Mainland China in 1949 and come as recently as current practitioners of Falun Gong who failed to gain legitimacy in their home country. Foes of specific Chinese leaderships gather opponents from Mao's, Deng's, and Jiang's to Xi's. For example, exiles from Tiananmen Incident on June 4, 1989 remain critical of Deng and Jiang while holding their remembrance to then CCP Secretary General Hu and Premier Zhao. On the side of support, WeChat members love China because it is where they were born and raised. They defend China out of the simple reason that they have parents, relatives, and friends living there. In a similar line, WeChat partakers like Chinese for they themselves are Chinese sharing so many things from language, ways of thinking, and culture to approaches to life. They rally around Chinese as one people due to the basic fact that negative publicity and malicious vilification forced onto Chinese either shower upon or trickle down to themselves as individual Chinese.

### **Ideological Divides**

Players in the WeChat court of opinion cross ideological divides from childhood socialization to youth exploration to adulthood stabilization. On the one hand, they learn and practice communism, socialism, Marxism, Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, and Deng Xiaoping Theory. On the other, they read and experience capitalism, civil liberties, democratic processes, and market dynamics.

Ideology divides WeChat memberships as it does so among other crowds. Individuals who believe in Marxism are critical of the American society. They eye on America's rampant drug abuse, widening gap between the rich and the poor, and various other social problems such as racial tension and gang activity. With no sight of a U.S. solution to these societal diseases, they solidify their view of China, its pursuit of socialism and ultimate strive toward communism, as not just a viable alternative, but a realistic path toward social order, world peace, and human progress. As far as Mao Zedong Thought is concerned, followers seem to focus more on Mao's hardline yet strategic stand against the United States as an imperialist power than his specific ideas, especially in the present duel between the two countries. The same holds true of Deng Xiaoping Theory. Whenever U.S.-China relations turn confrontational, with confrontation escalating in particular, a considerable number of WeChat members begin to blame China and its current leadership for failing to adhere to Deng's pragmatism of hiding one's capacities and biding one's time. Interestingly, few stay in the middle ground to reconcile communist ideology with capitalism.

Members who advocate for Western ideology spare no effort to criticize China for its aversion of civil liberty and democracy. They point to the CCP as the culprit in misleading the Chinese with a hollow dream of utopia at the expense of individual needs and rights in the real world. They target the Chinese government over its abuse of power, corruption, and negligence of public welfare to the benefit of social control and bureaucratic

sustainability. Pertaining to the core of Western ideology, participants in the WeChat court of opinion cite cases of censorship in which foreign journalists are kept from reporting sensitive events, news briefs are surveyed to weed out unfavorable contents, or investigative journalism is tamed to stay off certain circles of power. They expose incidents of civil rights violations where city residents are forced out of their homesteads to make way for new development projects, peasant workers are given no pays for months of labor on construction sites run by state enterprises, or civilian petitioners are prevented from presenting their complaints to higher levels of government. They even make accusations of abusive, corruptive, or negligent conducts against specific agencies and officials. For example, a county bureau of environmental protection opens one eye and closes one eye to local restaurants using low-quality ingredients or a ranking official engages in love affairs with his unchecked power. Noticeably, almost none likes going between Western ideals and socialism or authoritarianism to please both sides or just not to irritate either one.

### **Cultural Clashes**

Across the WeChat court of opinion, some members express their favors for Western ways of life, emphasizing material conditions, legal regulations, and individual developments. Some state their preferences for Eastern cultures, stressing spiritual cultivation, moral restraints, and self-discipline. The Chinese medicine often becomes an epitome of the East-West contrast.

Eastern cultural practitioners spread teachings on morality and character-building. They exchange lessons for Taiji and martial arts. When news of domestic abuse, drug addiction, or terrorism breaks out, they blame America for its neglect of family and excessive materialism. Awareness of being different from the larger American population gives them a sense of pride as Chinese for leading a unique life with a meaningful purpose. Where stories about a poet leaving the chaotic city to resettle in a primitive forest or a monk stationing at a mountaintop temple to experience harmony with nature are shared, Eastern cultural followers activate their recollection of childhood or adolescence and renew their nostalgia for home and homeness back in China. Consciousness of being identified with Chinese in China grants them a feel of comfort in keeping their signature character and characteristics on the new land of foreignness. Indeed, Chinese, Chinese culture, and Eastern civilizations define who they are, what they do, how they live, and whether they keep their souls, purposes, and meanings while strengthening bodies, making secular pursuits, and attaining material goals.

Promoters of Western cultures know that they live in America and do not need to remind their fellow WeChat members of the importance of observing laws, paying taxes, or keeping distance from colleagues or neighbors on American soil. What they feel obligated to do is to expose some characteristically Eastern ways of thinking for dragging individuals behind assimilation in the mainstream society. For example, the Chinese deem it a virtue to keep things, whether it is mistreatment or discrimination, to themselves. They feel not just fearful but shameful to report issues to the outside or complain unfavorable situations to the upper level. Advocates of Western styles of life understand that they study, work, and live in the United States and do not need to stress to anyone active in the WeChat court of opinion how much influence U.S. institutions, mass media, and social customs wield over his or her thoughts and behaviors. What they think necessary to do is to reveal the weakness of various typically Chinese habits or traditions on behalf of the whole ethnicity. For instance, Chinese workers prefer bringing self-prepared lunches to workplaces and hence miss a natural opportunity to network with colleagues at dine-out over the lunchbreak. Out of their parents' wishes and their own senses of comfort, Chinese men tend to look back home, China, for possible lifetime partners and therefore give up on a right thing to do,

that is, marrying to an American wife, following her to better fusion in the American social mosaic for a deeper American experience of life.

### **Immigrant Entrenchments**

Living away from it, WeChat members like telling and hearing news or stories about their homeland. To the degree that longing for home affects involvement in current affairs, the former becomes a trench. Struggling on foreign land, WeChat participants hesitate to talk about issues or listen to utterances on reality. To the extent that ongoing life is neglected by avoidance, the latter turns into a trap. Immigrant entrenchments therefore feature an excessive recollection of home or the past in combination with an apparent rejection of reality or the present.

There is no doubt that WeChat attendees pay excessive attention to what happens in China. Attention does not matter with like or dislike. Likers spread positive news, such as a Chinese moral model serving poor neighbors selflessly and China providing humanitarian reliefs in impoverished countries, whereas people of dislike roll out negative information, whether Chinese tourists spit in public squares or China persecutes outspoken intellectuals. WeChat members place too much interest in Chinese and China in the form of either support or opposition. Supporters pull favorable headlines, from breakthroughs in science, completion of a massive project, and adoption of new reform measures to launching of a spacecraft while opposers push damaging postings, as scandalous as a high-ranking official keeping dozens of mistresses, as shocking as a state enterprise losing billions of public funds in just one transaction, or as appalling as some private companies selling harmful products. Naturally, good news blow in greater frequency than bad ones across the WeChat court of opinion. Understandably, stories of detrimental effects lead to higher intensity in the minds of both tellers and audiences. Indeed, it calls for some extraordinary amount of courage to expose a case of badness just as it requires some unusual expanse of space to take in an exposed scene of negativity.

It is without question that WeChat players do not attain sufficient involvements in current affairs across America. A lack of involvement manifests in a poor inventory of vocabularies used to describe and explain issues facing the mainstream society. Drug abuse, gun violence, racial tension, and poverty sound remote as they live on a relatively secured enclave of Chinese immigrants. Political campaigning, voting, partisan bickering, and racial empowering look foreign because they have a hard time relating those to what they do in everyday life. Involvement relates to acts and actions. WeChat members share much in focusing on their own businesses, professions, and areas of study or expertise. They stay away from communal affairs, political events, and social activities. As a result, they suffer from not just a general unfamiliarity with vocabularies for, but also a specific non-acquisition of experiences with the real world of America. Psychologically, within the WeChat court of opinion, members are too clever to touch upon issues about the United States, its legal system, economic operation, and political mechanism for they know that errors in presentation expose their inadequacies over surviving in a new country, which they instinctually hate revealing to their fellow associates. They are too smart to discuss matters concerning America, American history, society, and ways of life since they understand that mistakes over exchange exhibit their limitations in struggling to live on a foreign land, which they habitually resist showing to their own people.

### **Autocratic Personalities**

A salient exhibition in the WeChat court of public opinion is autocratic personality. What is it? What features does it show? Are there any realistic factors and forces behind autocratic personality and its display in public sphere?

Personality affects how one thinks and behaves. It determines what one becomes as a person. One with autocratic personality thinks as if one were an autocrat: One is smarter than everyone else or no one except oneself knows how to think correctly. One speaks like a ruler: You listen while I talk; You utter nonsense whereas I speak truth. One acts as a dictator: You follow my orders as much as I give you commands. One feels one is on top, in the center, and at the right side of reality: Everyone else is down, in the periphery, on the wrong side of history, and therefore can neither say things appropriate nor do things proper. In the concrete, WeChat members assume that they know everything about Chinese and China as they dwell on issues concerning Chinese or China. They tend to imply that Chinese are rude, morally questionable, opportunistic, and not as civilized, professionalized, or openminded as Westerners when they criticize Chinese and Chinese ways of thinking, working, and living. They look inclined to suggest that China is backward, politically secretive, dangerous, and not as modernized, institutionalized, or democratized as Western states wherever they point fingers at China and China's policies, practices, and achievements.

Underlying these autocratic personality characteristics are five important factors or forces. One is about origin. WeChat attendees are Chinese, born to and raised by parents in families of patriarchal tradition. A signature feature of patriarchy is that the patriarch is always right. Another concerns background. WeChat players come from China, a country where one all-powerful party wields firm control of government and the general population to strive for a utopian ideal, communism. The flagship nature of a one-party state is that the party and party leadership can neither be questioned nor challenged. Still another regards reality. WeChat members live on a land where they feel foreign and are treated as aliens. In foreignness, they lose interest to delve into the American mainstream society. It is not uncommon that one says a lot about there and then when one does not know what to tell here and now. With alienation, they seek an outlet to release negative sentiments. It is not untypical that the more one talks about home or past, the more one takes it for granted that one knows all about it even though it becomes more remote. The fourth relates to platform. WeChat is a form of social media. Participants use the media to socialize, vent, or make an impression. Knowing that an audience is there listening yet one does not have to face it, one becomes emboldened to say things extraordinary or even outrageous like a leader, celebrity, or person of influence. The last coincides with opinion. Opinion comes and goes. Sometimes it blows like winds. Sometimes it flushes like waters. To grab attention, one naturally emulates a self-assumed visionary to put forth ideas that draw eyeballs. To leave some impacts, one automatically mimics an ethnocentric preacher to spread messages that stir up minds.

### **A Zone of Error in Discourse**

The most interesting yet significant observation of the WeChat court of public opinion is a zone of error shared by group members. It is identified as a zone because it appears and exists in a court. It is referenced as a zone of error since it involves and invokes errors in thought, speech, and behavior with erroneous consequences.

It is a primary error that WeChat members as immigrants in America do not attend adequately to what goes on around them in workplaces, local communities, and larger societies while putting excessive interests into their past homeland of China. Neglecting current affairs has direct effects. It is likely that Chinese immigrants forgo their due chances for gaining access to social resources. Failing to engage in ongoing activities hold immediate consequences. It is probable that Chinese immigrants miss their rightful opportunities to obtain upward mobilities. On the other hand, attention to the past is meaningless, leading to almost nothing than an escape from reality. Interest in the homeland is useless, resulting in virtually zero than homesickness detrimental to everyday survival.

Moreover, attention to the past reinforces neglect of the present just as interest in the former homeland strengthens disengagement from the current real world. The primary error forms a zone of error when WeChat members express ideas, spread messages, exchange stories, and share feelings across their common court of public opinion.

It is a secondary error that WeChat participants living in the United States think they know everything about China as a faraway homeland over the past while feeling they understand nothing about America in front of them right now. The past fades in memory. Memory can never be so clear and reliable as reality. It is a false consciousness that WeChat members feel they know China well for they used to study, work, and live there or they understand Chinese in China sufficiently since they are their parents, relatives, childhood peers, past classmates, former colleagues, and lifetime friends. The matter of the fact, however, is this: China changes everyday and has changed markedly since any WeChat participants departed; and Chinese in China like people anywhere change all the time and have changed noticeably from years ago when any WeChat members left. In the meantime, the present goes on in experience. Experience is always as fresh and dependable as life. It is a myth-shrouded misperception that WeChat members think they have no ways to comprehend America and American ways of life because they are Chinese or they possess no means to grasp the United States and U.S. laws, economic operations, political mechanisms, social institutions, or cultural dynamics due to the fact they are born and raised in China. Studying in American schools, WeChat attendees know enough about American education, culture, and spirits. Working in American organizations, they understand sufficiently how American labor, civil service, business, and professional community intertwine. Living in the United States, they command adequate knowledge and experience about neighborhoods, communities, local jurisdictions, states, the federal government, and their interrelations. Like its primary counterpart, the secondary error converges in a zone of error where WeChat players entertain words about Chinese, China, East, Eastern civilizations, Americans, America, the United States, West, and Western institutions throughout their joint platform of social media.

### **Conclusion**

This paper follows WeChat as a principal social media platform to study overseas Chinese and their communications in terms of form, content, style, and feature.

Upon observation, three unique findings become clear. WeChat gathers overseas Chinese in one place, bringing them into close contact, not face to face nonetheless emotionally and spiritually. Within a WeChat group, overseas Chinese share information, exchange ideas or experiences, and engage in discussion of subjective matters or debate on objective issues as if they lived in one community as one people. Indeed, WeChat functions as a de facto court of public opinion where overseas Chinese play both instantly and constantly as speakers, storytellers, listeners, questioners, commentators, critics, or just spectators.

Through analysis, three significant features seem worth of notice. Overseas Chinese think too much about their homeland as if they still lived there. They naturally assume that they know anything about Chinese because they are Chinese just as they understand everything on China since they are from China. They automatically feel they have an almost inalienable right or obligation to express concerns, voice opinions, or provide support for matters involving Chinese and China. As a result, overseas Chinese tend to forget that they live outside China. Indeed, they no longer know China as it is now nor understand what Chinese experience currently back in China. Most important, they should focus on themselves, getting to know their new culture, society, and country, and becoming involved in their present workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities. Reflected in these related

chains of acts and activities are immigrant entrenchments, autocratic personalities, and a zone of error in social communication.

It is hoped that this paper will open a series of inquiries into China, Chinese social media, overseas Chinese, and immigrant mentality. Unique conceptualizations will spawn fresh interests in research or point to new directions of study in established fields. For example, a zone of errors over a virtual court of public opinion can shed light over communication studies while autocratic personalities and immigrant entrenchments may inform theorizing in demography, sociology, and political science.

## References

- Ai, C., Chen, B., He, L. N., Lai, K. S., & Qiu, X. G. (2018). The national geographic characteristics of online public opinion propagation in China based on WeChat network. *GeoInformatica*, 22(2), 311-334.
- Berinsky, A. J. (2020). *New directions in public opinion*. New York: Routledge.
- Carrier, M. (2018). *From smartphones to social media: How technology affects our brains and behavior*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.
- Carrigan, M. (2020). *Social media for academics*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Chan, A. (2007). Guiding public opinion through social agenda-setting: China's media policy since the 1990s. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 16(53), 547-559.
- Chen, Y., Liang, C. L., & Cai, D. Q. (2018). Understanding WeChat users' behavior of sharing social crisis information. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 34(4), 356-366.
- Christoff, P. S. (2019). Walls and coexistence: Chinese and American footprints. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 46(1/2), 78-96.
- Harwit, E. (2022). *WeChat and the growth of China's indigenous internet*. Honolulu, HI: East-West Center.
- Humphreys, A. (2016). *Social media: Enduring principles*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jordan, J. M. (2024). *The rise of the algorithms: How YouTube and TikTok conquered the world*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Kareem, A. A., & Amjad, F. A. (2020). Cultural clash and self-discovery: A multicultural study of Amy Tan's *The joy luck club*. *International Journal of Psychosocial Rehabilitation*, 24(3), 82-89.
- Levy, M., & Wright, M. (2020). *Immigration and the American ethos*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Li, L. (2020). Visualizing Chinese immigrants in the U.S. statistical atlases: A case study in charting and mapping the other(s). *Technical Communication Quarterly*, 29(1), 1-17.
- Li, Y., Sallam, M. H., & Ye, Y. H. (2019). The impact of WeChat use intensity and addiction on academic performance. *Social Behavior & Personality: An International Journal*, 47(1), 1-7.
- Liang, Z., Li, J. J., Deane, G., Li, Z., & Zhou, B. (2018). From Chinatown to every town: New patterns of employment for low-skilled Chinese immigrants in the United States. *Social Forces*, 97(2), 893-920.
- Liu, L. S. (2023). Virtual ethnic town hall: WeChat and suburban Chinese migrants' multidirectional activism. *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 42(3), 5-39.
- Pang, H. (2018). Is mobile app a new political discussion platform? An empirical study of the effect of WeChat use on college students' political discussion and political efficacy. *PLoS One*, 13(8), 1-16.
- Ruan, L., Crete-Nishihata, M., Knockel, J., Xiong, R. H., & Dalek, J. (2020). Intermingling of state and private companies: Analyzing censorship of the 19th national communist party congress on WeChat. *The China Quarterly*, 246, 497-526.
- Russell, M. A., & Klassen, M. (2019). *Mining the social web: Data mining Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, GitHub, and more*. Sebastopol, CA: O'Reilly Books.
- Sandel, T. L., Ou, C. Y., Wangchuk, D., Ju, B., & Duque, M. (2019). Unpacking and describing interaction on Chinese WeChat: A methodological approach. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 143, 228-241.
- Shaw, V. N. (2013). *Conspicuous and inconspicuous discriminations in everyday life*. New York: Routledge.
- Shaw, V. N. (2019). *Three worlds of collective human experience: Individual life, social change, and human evolution*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature.
- Stockmann, D., & Luo, T. (2017). Which social media facilitate online public opinion in China? *Problems of Post Communism*, 64(3/4), 189-202.

- Su, Y., & Xiao, X. Z. (2021). From WeChat to “We Set”: Exploring the intermedia agenda-setting effects across WeChat public accounts, party newspaper and metropolitan newspapers in China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 14(3), 278-296.
- Sun, W. N., & Yu, H. Q. (2022). *WeChat and the Chinese diaspora: Digital transnationalism in the era of China’s rise*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Suryadinata, L. (2017). Blurring the distinction between Huaqiao and Huaren: China’s changing policy towards the Chinese overseas. In *Southeast Asian affairs* (pp. 101-113). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tran, É., & Chuang, Y.-H. (2020). Social relays of China’s power projection? Overseas Chinese collective actions for security in France. *International Migration*, 58(3), 101-117.
- Wang, G. L., Duan, J., Kan, Q. Q., Zhou, Y. Q., Cheng, Z. P., & Tang, S. L. (2023). The correlation analysis of WeChat usage and depression among the middle-aged and elderly in China: The mediating role of social participation. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1), 462-462.
- Wang, Y., & Zhao, Y. L. (2013). *Seeking the common dreams between the worlds*. Charlette, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Xu, S. J. (2017). *Cross-cultural schooling experiences of Chinese immigrant families: In search of home in times of transition*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Xu, X. Y., Zhao, M. M., & Wang, M. Y. (2025). *Chinese social media. I: Insider, intercultural and interdisciplinary perspectives*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Yan, X. Y., & Schäfer, M. S. (2025). Multimodal climate change communication on WeChat: Analyzing visual/textual clusters on China’s largest social media platform. *Climatic Change*, 178(133), 1-22.
- Yang, B., Zhang, R., Cheng, X. S., & Zhao, C. (2023). Exploring information dissemination effect on social media: An empirical investigation. *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing*, 27, 1469-1482.
- Zha, X. Y. (2022). *WeChat’s role in Australian democracy: A grassroots view*. Sydney, Australia: Lowy Institute for International Policy.
- Zhang, S. M. (2024). *Authorship analysis in Chinese social media texts*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Zhang, W. P., Du, W., Bian, Y. Y., Peng, C.-H., & Jiang, Q. Q. (2020). Seeing is not always believing: An exploratory study of clickbait in WeChat. *Internet Research*, 30(3), 1043-1058.
- Zhao, R. H., Zhang, H. W., Zhao, J. H. S., & Wang, X. T. (2019). When the west meets the east: Cultural clash and its impacts on anomie in a sample of Chinese adolescents. *Deviant Behavior*, 40(10), 1187-1205.
- Zhou, Z. Q., Cavazos, M., & Sohn-McCormick, A. (2018). Psychological assessment with Chinese Americans: Concerns and recommendations. *Psychology in the Schools*, 55(9), 1121-1132.