

8 Building a life on the soil of the ultimate other

WeChat and belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan

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Introduction

A transnational perspective on how migrants construct their self-identities is of great importance. This is particularly the case in the context of the 21st century and a new wave of Chinese emigration to developed countries such as Japan. The identity of Chinese migrants in Japan is configured by the official Chinese “us versus others” political narrative, which views Japan as China’s Other (Billig 2009; Callahan 2010; He 2007; Schneider 2018). Chinese national identity is closely tied to the first (1894–1895) and second (1937–1945) Sino-Japanese wars, the “suffering and struggle” collectively experienced by millions of Chinese during these wars (He 2007, p. 57) and their aftermaths.

Chinese national identity is also informed by the Chinese Communist Party’s interpretation of this history (Schneider 2018). Japan has become one of the most significant “foreign others” in relation to which the Chinese leadership stakes its claim as the “sole guarantor” of the nation (He 2007, p. 48). Consequently, for contemporary Chinese, Chinese national identity is not only about the richness of Chinese cultural and historical heritage, but more importantly, also to “never forget” the atrocities of the Sino-Japanese wars (Billig 2009), the humiliation of the Chinese nation brought by Japan’s aggression (Callahan 2010) and the glory of defeating such aggression (He 2007). Hence, China’s strategy of nation-building and identity construction, which is based in significant part on the “us-versus-others” (in this case, anti-Japanese) sentiment, often subjects Chinese migrants in Japan to an ongoing struggle in identity construction between what they have acquired pre-immigration and what they are exposed to post-immigration amid Japan’s exclusionist, cultural nationalist vision of its own national identity.

The spread of digital media such as WeChat among Chinese migrants in Japan means not only the establishment of new transnational links between these two countries, but also the mediation of conflicting Sino-Japanese ideologies and political narratives through these links. This gives rise to the urgent empirical question of how contemporary Chinese

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migrants in Japan negotiate different—sometimes conflicting—ideologies and national imaginaries through the use of digital media in order to justify their decision to migrate to Japan and make sense of their diasporic lives in Japan. While new members of the Chinese diaspora in the United States and Australia—both discussed in this volume—may need to negotiate such conflicts due to their current geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis China, Chinese migrants in Japan also have to reckon with heavy historical baggage. The reasons as to why the case of Japan deserves special attention regarding WeChat and the diasporic Chinese identity are twofold. First, while accommodating more than 2.8 million migrants, Japan still refuses to identify itself politically as an immigration country and institutionally excludes migrants in its policy frameworks (Liu-Farrer 2018). Differing from other popular immigration countries such as Australia, Canada and the US, Japan promotes a cultural nationalist discourse of racial homogeneity. This exclusionist perspective assumes the uniqueness of Japanese social values and cultural heritage, claiming that these traits are only fully perceivable to people with a Japanese blood tie (also known as *Nihonjinron*). In this context, some empirical research indicates that Chinese migrants are considered to be culturally, socially and politically foreign in Japan (*ibid*). Consequently, their senses of belonging are in large, a response to their perceived unacquaintance with and marginality in the host society (*ibid*).

Second, despite more than 45 years of diplomatic normalisation, perceptions of the other among their respective populations in Japan and China are still deeply rooted in historical issues (He 2017; Schneider 2018). On the one hand, those issues are continuously rehearsed through conflicts between the contemporary Japanese and Chinese states, such as the territorial dispute around a group of uninhabited islands in the East China Sea.¹ On the other hand, problems left over from history, particularly the wounds of past Sino-Japanese wars, have also become an important foundation on which the two nation-states build their respective national identities, which underline conflicting national discourses and socio-cultural traits of the other (He 2013, 2017). Hence, for many Chinese migrants in Japan, their diasporic lives are constantly placed at the centre of the Sino-Japanese power geometry, which may have a profound impact on their self-identification and sense of belonging (Wang 2020a).

Although the studies cited above contribute to the academic inquiry of how Chinese migrants narrate and negotiate their sense of belonging in the Japanese social context, most do not take account of the impact brought by newly emerging digital forms of communication. In particular, Chinese migrants' use of WeChat remains an insufficiently explored field. By focusing on WeChat's ecosystem, scholars such as Yu and Sun (2019) and Sosnovskikh (2021) explore the impact of some particular functionalities of WeChat on Chinese migrants' diasporic experiences, such as the

subscription account and online monetary transfer. These studies suggest that Chinese migrants' life experiences in the host country may be shaped through function-specific WeChat configurations.

WeChat is a key space for Chinese migrants in Japan to negotiate both local and transnational socio-cultural conditions. For this reason, understanding the role of WeChat is crucial if we want to make sense of how this community makes connections, builds community and achieves a sense of belonging. Empowered by digital means of communication, Chinese migrants are provided with new possibilities to remain in touch with the homeland while negotiating the ongoing reality of everyday life in receiving societies (van den Boomen et al. 2009). Therefore, with the increasing embeddedness of digital media such as WeChat in our social infrastructure, we should acknowledge a continuum between online, digitalised life experiences and offline daily practices and events (Wang 2020b). More importantly, given the fact that migrants are now able to enjoy instant communication with both the home and the host societies, we should also consider how these once disengaged but now transnationally linked territories may simultaneously and complementarily impact on the way migrants understand and negotiate their sense of belonging.

This chapter focuses on WeChat's two main communicative channels, namely "individual chat" and "moments," to illustrate their impacts on the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. The findings reported in this chapter are based on in-depth interviews with 60 Chinese migrants in Japan between May 2018 and January 2021.² In addition to interviews, on-site digital ethnographic observation of 26 informants' "moments" pages rounded out my understanding of my informants' online practices on WeChat. This virtual ethnography complemented the in-depth interviews as it allowed me to capture different identity performances of my informants, and thus to understand the way they positioned themselves when performing their identities to different audiences.

Before I further discuss the sense of belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan, as well as how this already complex picture is further complicated by WeChat, I first of all dissect the concept of "Chinese migrants in Japan." Who are they? What are the characteristics of and differences within this diasporic community? After a general review of this population, I then illustrate the importance of WeChat to their everyday life in Japan by investigating the changing Chinese-language mediascape and its roles. Finally, I conclude this chapter by sharing some findings from my recent study of digital media usage and their application to belonging among Chinese migrants in Japan. I offer this case study to demonstrate the indigenised application of WeChat, and how the interaction between everyday diasporic experiences and WeChat usage is manifested in the context of Chinese migrants in Japan.

Chinese diasporic community and Chinese ethnic media in Japan

Newcomers and oldtimers

By the end of 2007, Chinese migrants had become the largest diasporic population group in Japan, surpassing the number of Korean migrants (~590,000, the second-largest diasporic group) by about 20,000. Today, with a population of more than 813,000, this culturally and socially diversified community constitutes 27.7% of Japan's total foreign demographic (MOJ 2020a). Of these 813,000 contemporary Chinese migrants, many came to Japan as permanent residents (33.6%), skilled and unskilled workers (25.8%), students (17.7%) and family members (15.9%); smaller proportions came as long-term residents (3.5%), entrepreneurs (1.8%), as well as informal migrants (1.3%).³

From a historical perspective, the existing Chinese diasporic community in Japan can be generally divided into two groups, namely the “oldtimers” (オールドタイマー) and the “newcomers” (ニューカマー) (Du 1966; Shiramizu 2004; Yin 2005). The “oldtimers” refer to Chinese who migrated to Japan before the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, as well as their second- and third-generation descendants. The roots of “oldtimer” Chinese diasporas can be traced back to the 1600s, when some Chinese businessmen landed in Japan via Yokohama, a major port city that hosted Sino-Japanese commercial trade back in the Edo era. However, the majority of the oldtimer cohort are Chinese citizens who emigrated to Japan for business or study before the second Sino-Japanese war. During that war, tens of thousands of Chinese were forcibly brought to Japan as imported labour to support Japan's war industries (Nishinarita 2002). Finally, the “oldtimers” also include those who were forced to leave their homeland (mainland China) due to the Chinese civil war between 1927 and 1949.

The “newcomers” refer to Chinese citizens who migrated to Japan after the restoration of Sino-Japanese diplomatic ties in 1972, and the first relatively large-scale emigration flow from China to Japan was mainly constituted by student migrants. From 1984 to 2019, more than 680,000 Chinese students entered Japan under student visas as either foundation course students (including pre-university language courses) or university students. Today, with a population of more than 144,000, Chinese student migrants constitute about 42% of Japan's overseas student population (MOJ 2020a). This emigration flow was initially encouraged by China's reform and opening-up policy in 1978; its follow-up policy was announced in 1984 to support self-financed student migration;⁴ as well as the Project to Accept 100,000 Overseas Students launched by the Japanese government in 1984 (Tsuboi 2006).⁵ From China's side, the main incentive for supporting self-financed students was to harness the returned migrants for national development. For Japan, since the country experienced a labour shortage from the 1970s to 1980s due to its overheated economic market, its efforts to attract overseas

students were primarily a policy incentive to address the need for workers, as well as to improve its international image after the anti-Japanese movement among southeast Asian countries in the late 1970s (Shiramizu 2004). In this context, countries sharing a close geographical proximity to Japan, particularly East Asian countries such as China, South Korea and Taiwan, became ideal targets for importation.

For many Chinese newcomers, entering Japan as a student has become a primary channel to obtain long-term residence in Japan, mainly as skilled and highly skilled workers. Empirical research indicates that among the current Chinese diasporic population, about 70% are holding, or used to hold, a student visa when they first entered Japan (Yin 2005). Furthermore, different from their oldtimer counterparts which include Chinese citizens of both Republic of China (ROC) and PRC, the term “newcomer” refers specifically to Chinese migrants from the mainland (i.e. excluding Hong Kong and Macau citizens). While most enjoy a stable lifestyle in Japanese society with a certain level of educational attainment, this migrant community, with its relatively significant population size, is also characterised by diversity in terms of not only gender, age and Japanese language skills, but also sending regions, legal status and social backgrounds (Liu-Farrer 2017).

For instance, the latest available demographic data (which is from 2011) (MOJ 2011)⁶ shows a relatively heavy concentration of Chinese migrants from northeastern provinces such as Liaoning and Heilongjiang, coastal cities such as Fujian and Shanghai, as well as areas with heavy Japanese investment and Sino-Japanese economic exchanges such as Shandong and Jiangsu. However, in terms of regions of origin, the composition of Chinese diasporas in Japan changed significantly from the late 1980s. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, Chinese migrants in Japan were mainly from regions such as Fujian, Shanghai and Beijing, whereas almost no migrants originated from northeastern provinces. However, in the mid-1990s, with the bankruptcy of many state-owned Chinese enterprises in mining and heavy industries in northeastern provinces and consequently the introduction of Japanese and Korean investments, the need for Chinese citizens with either Japanese or Korean language proficiency increased significantly. As a result, not only did some Chinese schools of foundational education in northeastern provinces start to teach Japanese as the first foreign language instead of English; some Japanese universities and language schools also began to directly recruit Chinese students from these regions. Taking student migrants as an example, while in the early 1990s, students from Beijing (17%) and Shanghai (43.3%) dominated this population group and no students were from northeastern provinces, by 2004, the size of students from northeastern provinces (31.2%) had surpassed Beijing (6.4%) and Shanghai (15.9%), to become the largest student migrant community in Japan.

The Chinese community in Japan became even more diversified with Chinese citizens, mainly from southeastern coastal areas and rural areas, coming to Japan seeking economic opportunities between the 1980s and

1990s, as well as the return of descendants of Japanese war orphans in China from the late 1970s (Itoh 2010).⁷ In terms of the former, although many were granted a student or trainee visa, a significant portion of this group never attended educational institutes in Japan but used their visas as a means to enter the country's low-wage labour market (Wakabayashi 1990; Yin 2005). Furthermore, following the expiration or revocation of their visas, many became undocumented migrants, suffering from social marginalisation, discrimination and violence due to their limited, if any, access to civic rights and legal protections. In terms of the latter, the majority of war orphans with Japanese blood ties regained Japanese nationality after returning to Japan, despite their limited knowledge of both the Japanese language and society. Their relatives (i.e. spouses and second- and third-generation offspring), however, often held a long-term residence visa (定住者ビザ), and only a small portion of them were granted either a permanent residence visa (永住者ビザ) or Japanese nationality.

Japanese war orphans are often considered to be a financially and socially vulnerable group in Japan (Okubo 2006). Socially, war orphans—even their second- and third-generation descendants who have been living in Japan for a long time or were born in Japan—are often identified as “Chinese” by Japanese citizens and as “Japanese” by Chinese migrants (*ibid*), leading to difficulties in self-positioning and identity construction (Itoh 2010). Financially, due to their long-term residence visa status, they are not eligible to receive benefits or financial aids provided to migrants,⁸ resulting in relatively low educational attainment and consequently concentration in the unskilled or lowly skilled labour market (Okubo 2006).

The above review not only indicates a shift from oldtimers to newcomers as the main demographic composition of the Chinese diaspora in Japan; it also shows the complexity of this population in terms of historical roots and visa/citizenship statuses. Scholars such as Duan (2000), Yin (2005) and Shiramizu (2004) point out that among the first wave of Chinese newcomers, i.e. Chinese government-sponsored student migrants who came to Japan after the 1980s, Chinese-language media have played a critical role in their diasporic lives. Due to their limited Japanese language skills and knowledge of Japanese society, Chinese-language media such as newspapers and magazines have been an important channel for them to seek support in life, (part-time) job opportunities and social relationships (i.e. intimate and marital relations) with other Chinese migrants, as well as to follow news and information regarding both the home and host societies. However, as I explain in detail in the following discussion, the Chinese-language media in Japan after the late 1930s and before the 1980s was largely in a vacuum due to the Sino-Japanese war and the subsequent breaking off of Japan-China diplomatic relations. In this context, the development of Chinese-language media in Japan reflected the political dynamics between Japan and China, and its first bloom coincided with the arrival of Chinese students after the restoration of diplomatic ties between these two countries.

The evolving Chinese mediascape in Japan: from print to WeChat

The Chinese ethnic mediascape in Japan has paralleled the increasingly diversified Chinese diasporic community, evolving from small-scale print media to mass media and now to digital media. The first Chinese-language media created and published by Chinese migrants in Japan can be traced back to 120 years ago, before the 1911 Chinese Revolution, when some exiled Chinese politicians and merchants launched *Eastern Asia News* (東亞報) and *The China Discussion* (清議報) in Yokohama in 1898. Between the 1911 Revolution and the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, about 29 Chinese-language newspapers and magazines emerged,⁹ partially provoked by the 1931 Mukden Incident (滿州事變) (Nakano 1999); these publications included *Junsheng-zazhi* (軍聲雜誌 in 1912), *Beifa-zazhi* (北伐雜誌 in 1926), *Wenhua-zhiguang* (文化之光 in 1932), *Likelunye* (理科論業 in 1936) and *Xinjingji-zazhi* (新經濟雜誌 in 1936). Their contents were concentrated on discussions around the political and military relationship between Japan and China, as well as modern western thought and literature translated from English or Japanese to Chinese (Duan 2003). While no human mobility was allowed between China and Japan in the years 1937–1945 due to the second Sino-Japanese War, about four newspapers and magazines,¹⁰ such as *Yakugyō Gekkan* (訳業月刊 in 1938) and *Xuelian Banyuekan* (學聯半月刊 in 1938), were published during the period by Chinese migrants who had come to Japan before 1937. Following this period, Chinese-language print media in Japan published after 1945 and before 1970 were marked by a shift in focus from Sino-Japanese relations to the antagonistic relations between the CCP and KMT (Kuomintang, Chinese Nationalist Party (Taiwan)). These included *Dadibao* (大地報) (managed by mainland Chinese in Tokyo), *Huaqiao Xinbao* (華僑新報) and *Ziyouxinwen* (自由新聞) (produced by Taiwanese student migrants in Japan).

It is worth mentioning that Chinese-language media produced by Taiwanese (student) migrants¹¹ peaked between 1952 and 1972¹²—dates which marked the establishment and dissolution of Japan-Taiwan diplomatic relations, respectively. These newspapers and magazines mainly served as a propaganda apparatus of the KMT, and each issue was freely distributed to documented Taiwanese student migrants (around 4,000–5,000 people) in Japan. Following the cessation of Japan-Taiwan diplomatic ties and consequently the establishment of Sino-Japanese diplomatic normalisation in 1972, the Chinese-language media was mainly edited by mainland Chinese migrants, and one of the most widely spread Chinese-language newspapers was *Ryugakusei Shinbun* (留學生新聞).¹³ Although this newspaper was initially intended to provide Chinese student migrants with information about life in Japan, it gained much attention after reporting the Tiananmen Square Incident in 1989, and drastically switched to become a newspaper with a heavy concentration on political content regarding China, Sino-Japanese relations, Taiwan and Japan-Taiwan relations.

The success of Ryugakusei Shinbun initiated rapid development in Chinese-language ethnic media in Japan. Today, there are about 35 Chinese ethnic newspapers and TV channels in Japan,¹⁴ producing content related to four main categories, namely: entertainment; political content concerning ROC, PRC and Japan; study and work opportunities for Chinese students; and information on living in Japanese society. However, compared to Chinese-language media in other regions such as North America (Zhou & Cai 2002) and Australia (Sun 2019; Yu & Sun 2019), Chinese ethnic media in Japan has several particularities. Firstly, while empirical evidence indicates that in countries such as Australia, the main audience of Chinese language newspapers has shifted from Chinese-reading migrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan to those who are from the mainland due to the significant inflow of the latter during the past few decades (Yu & Sun 2019), the main audience of Chinese ethnic media in Japan has been migrants from the mainland ever since its emergence in the late 1890s (Shiramizu 2004; Yin 2005). I argue that this phenomenon is due in part to the number of mainland Chinese migrants in Japan. As briefly illustrated above, whether before or after the establishment of the PRC, the majority of ethnic Chinese migrants in Japan have been mainland Chinese. If we think about Chinese migrants from Greater China (i.e. Hong Kong and Taiwan), in contrast to countries such as the UK and Canada, Hong Kong migrants never had a predominant presence in Japan. And in terms of Taiwanese emigrants in Japan, their largest population share of the ethnic Chinese community in Japan was in the year 1951, when it accounted for 43.7% of the total Chinese population in Japan,¹⁵ which was still smaller in size than its mainland counterpart.

A second distinguishing feature of Chinese language media in Japan is that the majority of Chinese ethnic media companies (29 out of the 35) still use traditional Chinese characters for content production, even though their main audiences are, and have always been, mainland Chinese migrants. This is in contrast to regions such as North America, Europe and Australia, where the language of Chinese ethnic newspapers has largely shifted from traditional to simplified Chinese characters due to the increasing number of Chinese migrants from the mainland. Scholars such as Yin (2005) and Shiramizu (2004) argue that the reason for the dominance of traditional Chinese characters in Japan is twofold. Firstly, although traditional Chinese characters have been officially abolished in the mainland since 1986, due to the fact that many first-generation newcomers migrated to Japan prior to 1986, they still opt to use traditional Chinese characters in their daily lives. Therefore, the use of traditional Chinese characters is mainly to accommodate the needs of oldcomers and to include the readership of migrants who originate from societies where traditional Chinese characters are used, such as Taiwan. Secondly, as Duan (2003) points out, Chinese-language media in Japan are largely operated in such a way as to attract advertisements and serve business-related purposes. Most of these newspapers and magazines

are distributed free of charge because their main source of income is advertising fees paid by restaurants, karaoke shops, firms, churches, NGOs and language schools run by Chinese migrants in Japan. Duan (*ibid*) finds that for some newspapers, more than 48% of their contents are advertisements. Therefore, choosing traditional Chinese characters over simplified characters is mainly a business strategy to attract as broad a Chinese readership as possible (*ibid*). Thus, the main functionality of these print and mass media has gradually shifted from offering useful information for everyday life to promoting businesses.

As a result, Chinese migrants need to find alternative channels to obtain critical information to sustain their lives in Japan, and some newly evolved (mainland) Chinese ethnic digital media, such as WeChat, has become an essential tool for them to do so (Wang 2020b). The popularity of WeChat among Chinese migrants is partially due to the fact that some other digital platforms for communication such as LINE and Facebook, although widely used across Chinese-speaking regions such as Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, are banned for the public in the mainland. Hence, WeChat, as the most popular social media in China, with over 1.2 billion active users, 30,000 public service channels and 14,000 Chinese government-related service accounts (CAICT 2020), has naturally become one of the essential tools—if not the only tool—for Chinese migrants to remain connected with their families, friends and the broader socio-cultural environment back in China.

WeChat, transnationalism and Chinese migrants' belonging in Japan

As I have argued elsewhere, new forms of Chinese-language digital media such as WeChat allow many Chinese migrants in Japan to challenge the conventional state-centred logic that stresses the importance of geographical demarcations in their self-positioning and identifications (Wang 2020a). While ethnic digital media produce culturally relevant and vital local information for Chinese migrants in the host society, such media have also become an alternative space alongside the existing social environment for them to bring together ideas, emotions, rituals, as well as cultural and political imaginaries emanating from diverse physical markers (Yin 2013, pp. 556–572). In this way, migrants' identity and belonging are not prefixed or determined but are essentially in flux, representing a sense of in-betweenness and hence placing them in the centre of the fluid topography of homeland-host society transnational networks (Appadurai 1996; Scannell 1996). Observing the usage of WeChat among Chinese migrants in Japan serves as an excellent window into this fluidity. Specifically, I examine two of WeChat's communicative functions—namely “individual chat” and “moments”—to illuminate the complex dynamics that characterise the diasporic experience of Chinese migrants in Japan.

***“Individual chat”: constructing Chinese identity
in the land of China’s ultimate other***

Interviews with many of my informants started with an appreciation of WeChat’s cross-national connectivity. For instance, Lufan, aged 44, a male business worker who lives with his Japanese wife and 12-year-old son, shared his thoughts regarding WeChat and transnationalism with me:

They (refers to more recent Chinese migrants than him) are lucky for being able to use this app ... back then, chatting with left-behind families was a luxury. You would either pay an extremely expensive rate for international phone calls or opt for letters, which were very slow. and you wouldn’t even dare to imagine that you could see their faces while chatting with them ... They are blessed. They can reach their families just like the way my son chats with me.

As Lufan narrated, Chinese migrants today are able to maintain continuous contact with the homeland through WeChat. This continuous contact has also become a characteristic on the basis of which he constructs an “us versus them” narrative. “Us” is Chinese migrants who migrated to Japan “back then” and “them” are more recent arrivals. Both are differentiated by their access to new media, or lack thereof.

More importantly, I argue that a feeling of close proximity to the homeland and Chinese political and national ideologies mediated through WeChat play an important role in Chinese migrants negotiating their identities as mainland Chinese living in Japan. This is intrinsically associated with ongoing Sino-Japanese disputes as well as conflicts in their strategies around building national identity. As discussed earlier, for China, Japan serves as an important “other.” In this context, many of my informants indicate that living in Japan as a mainland Chinese often means to bear an intricate and somehow indescribable feeling of ambivalence caused by the fact that they are living on the soil of their homeland’s ultimate “other.” For instance, 56-year-old Changying, a single mother and an owner of an interior design studio, talked about struggles in processing her identity:

This country has a particular meaning to Chinese for obvious reasons. I believe for many of us, processing our identity as a Chinese living in Japan is difficult, because you need to justify reasons for migrating to Japan to yourself. Because as mainlanders, the patriotic education we received teaches us to dislike Japan ... but chatting with my family on WeChat definitely helps, as I realise that what matters to me the most, my home, is still in China. I’m just here to earn better money so I can provide for my daughter and parents.

Changying’s narrative clearly illustrates the significant influence exerted by China’s nationalist identity on the way Chinese migrants understand

their own identities. For Chinese who have built a life on the land of China's "primary enemy" (Callahan 2010, p. 35), the process of self-identification can be perceived as less of a process of self-positioning or searching for belonging, and more as a process of self-justification and proclaiming a sense of belonging. As Changying's experiences indicate, such a process is in large part about how to justify one's decision to migrate to Japan.

According to Changying, one way to do so is through constant interaction with left-behind family members on WeChat. In this way, she can feel less engaged with the Chinese nationalist discourse and simultaneously claim economic motives as well as emotional and familial ties to justify her China-Japan emigration trajectory. Throughout the interviews, many informants echoed Changying's experiences, indicating that chatting with friends and families on WeChat is an effective diversion from the Sino-Japanese tension, so they can maintain a Chinese identity without being associated with Chinese nationalist discourses. Xinni, a 23-year-old who came to Japan for higher education, mentioned that he would undoubtedly identify himself as "Chinese ... Because I feel WeChat keeps me close to my family." However, he further clarified that he is "a Chinese without any traits that are political or nationalistic." He justified his migration to Japan as "purely rationally motivated" because of its affordable cost of living. Similarly, 51-year-old Youan, the owner of a logistic company, explained to me that:

Chatting with friends and relatives on WeChat is the most intuitional way to feel my Chinese roots, you know, like how our cultures are always family-oriented, and the way we keep our friends close ... I came to Japan with my family to start a business, so migrating to this country doesn't equate to me taking either country's side on the never-ending Sino-Japanese battle. It's for more practical and rational reasons.

Together with Changying, Xinni and Youan's narratives support the argument that for many Chinese migrants in Japan, their ties with the homeland—ties that are not subject to Chinese political and nationalistic discourses—have become an essential reference point for them to feel Chinese. As articulated by my informants, this feeling of Chineseness is further justified by various "rational reasons" and motives: something that both validates their diasporic experiences in Japan and does not necessarily induce a head-on confrontation with the Chinese nationalist perspective towards Japan.

The way overseas Chinese actively extricate themselves from Chinese nationalist discourses while maintaining their socio-cultural ties with China is not new, and has been extensively documented in empirical research concerning Chinese diasporas living in different regions (Ong & Nonini 1997). Previous studies have argued that a part of such desire for distancing relates to the CCP's ruling regime: for many Chinese migrants, being politically detached from China means political freedom and liberty (ibid). However,

the narratives in this study suggest that such desires may also be shaped by other incentives. As a community that is placed at the centre of the Sino-Japanese power geometry, for many Chinese migrants in Japan, opting for an identity position that is not “politically” nor “nationalistically” defined has become an alternative that allows them to process “the feelings of ambivalence,” hence establishing a Chinese identity without “taking sides in the never-ending Sino-Japanese battle.” Constructing an identity in this reductionist manner—reductionist in the sense that only their cultural and emotional ties are emphasised—is essential for Chinese migrants in Japan to find unity between the two conflicting roles they are constantly playing—the role as a Chinese who is educated to view Japan as pernicious (He 2007), and the role as a Chinese who wants to live a good life in the “pernicious” Japan. Indeed, as explained by another informant, Boya, “we (Chinese migrants in Japan) are on the frontline to suffer from Sino-Japanese conflicts, so of course, I want to be indifferent to anything political about these two countries, so I can find peace within myself.”

Narratives shared by my informants also indicate the important role WeChat plays in the process of their identity construction. In a context where many Chinese migrants in Japan tend to identify themselves with apolitical and non-nationalistic traits, WeChat’s individual chat function has become the main medium enabling their emotional and cultural ties with the homeland. The fact that many of them feel “WeChat keeps me close with my family” and communicating with left-behind contacts through WeChat “is the most intuitional way to feel my Chinese roots,” clearly exemplifies that WeChat for them means much more than a technical configuration for instant communication. Instead, it carries an emotional charge, bringing up associations with memories that are intimate, familiar, shaped by cultural ideologies and experienced at a sensory level by each migrant individual, so they can explicitly feel their “Chinese roots” and “family-oriented culture.” In this sense, WeChat’s individual chat function has become one of many components that immerse Chinese migrants in Japan in the social practices and ideals of the homeland.

“Moments”: constructing Chinese transnational identity

WeChat’s “moments” function has a unique social logic. Many existing studies indicate that it constitutes a private sphere where discursive statements and everyday life episodes are shared in a restrained and selective manner (Peng 2017; Schneider 2018). As my informant Wenwei explained, the “moments” function represents some sort of selective engagement, in the sense that WeChat users have full control over the horizontal and vertical publicity of each post they share with their lists of friends:

Basically, you can choose who can see your posts, like you can group your friends into different sub-groups, so only selected groups can see

the contents you designated ... you can also decide for how long you want your posts to be visible to others, like for three days, a month, six months, or longer.

Content posted on “moments” is like a private and exclusive art show, as only selected audiences (vertical publicity) are allowed to enter into the venue for a designated period of time (horizontal publicity). Moreover, although similar to Twitter and Instagram in that invited audiences can “like” a post and make comments under a post, they would not be aware of each other’s existence unless they are also on each other’s friend list and are mutual friends of the post creator. In this way, WeChat’s “moments” allows the user to develop a “personal online profile full of everyday episodes” and encourages users to “maintain their relationships with friends and family” (Peng 2017, p. 8). And more importantly, my two-year digital ethnographic observation suggests that “moments” provides Chinese migrants in Japan with new possibilities to develop diversified and potentially non-interfering emotional and intimate ties with their contacts who belong to different sub-groups, and hence the performance of their multidimensional, negotiated self-identities.

A good example to illustrate this argument is that of my informant Fangyi, who migrated to Japan five years ago and works as an interpreter specialising in the field of medical treatment. During my three-month digital ethnographic observation of her “moments” page, I found that by frequently uploading her everyday diasporic experiences on “moments,” Fangyi is able to appeal to different audiences and cultivate a multifaceted self through the strategic (mixed) use of different languages, such as Japanese and simplified Chinese. Figure 8.1 represents two classic types of content that Fangyi uploads on her “moments” page. On the left-hand-side screenshot, Fangyi shared a photo of her garden, together with a thank you message to her university supervisor written in Japanese. In the other screenshot, Fangyi is holding a box of chocolates that she received from her colleague on Valentine’s day, together with a short text written in a combination of simplified Chinese and Japanese.

The extensive use of Japanese as a language medium for content creation serves as one of the most distinctive features of Fangyi’s “moments.” Throughout 154 “moments” posts she created during my three-month observation, only 19 (12.3%) posts were fully written in simplified Chinese, and the rest were written either in Japanese (94/154 = 61%) or a mixture of Japanese and simplified Chinese (41/154 = 26.6%). The language choice is part of Fangyi’s strategic construction of a transnational Chinese identity. She groups her WeChat contacts into three types, namely Chinese in Japan, left-behind family and friends and business contacts in China. And she selectively shares different “moments” posts with different groups. WeChat enables one to choose what content to share with which group(s). This allows Fangyi to cultivate a multi-layered personal profile that best aligns her interests with each group of her contacts.

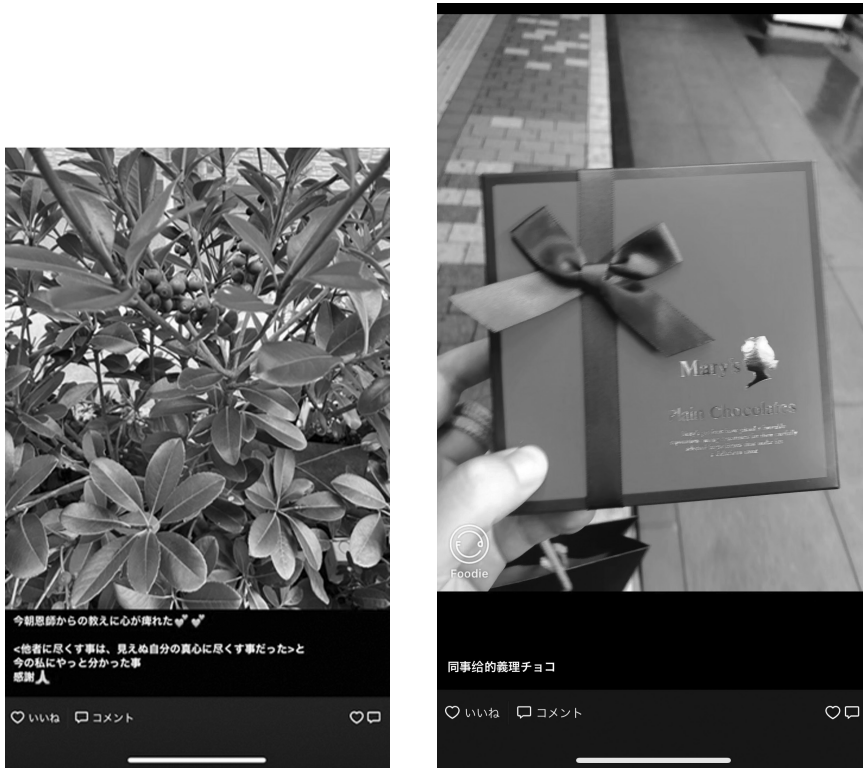


Figure 8.1 Two screenshots of Fangyi's "moments" posts

Fangyi explained her use of Japanese instead of Chinese in her "moments":

I make my Japanese content mainly accessible to my friends at home (China) ... As someone who lives in Japan, I feel naturally I should write things in Japanese, because I'm part of its culture ... and so my friends know that I'm abroad ... Among overseas Chinese, we often say "xiang-huiguo, huibuqu" (wanting to go back to China, but can't go back), and I do agree with it ... I may not necessarily enjoy a better material life here in Tokyo compared to my friends in Shanghai, but we are different. I'm not your typical, average Chinese who has never seen a different world.

When it comes to the occasional use of simplified Chinese and the mixed use of Chinese and Japanese, Fangyi explained that:

Oh, those Chinese posts are only for my family in Shanghai, as I want them to know that I'm having a nice life here in Japan, so my parents wouldn't worry too much ... and I don't know why I use a weird mixture



Figure 8.2 Mixed use of Chinese/Japanese kanji characters

of two (languages) in one sentence ... I guess it is because I mainly show these posts to my Chinese friends and colleagues here in Japan ... I mean, I'm still a Chinese, so I guess it would be best to keep that part of me as well.

Similar to Fangyi, many other informants such as 28-year-old Zhong, a programmer, or 25-year-old Jingjing, a hairstylist, often use Chinese and Japanese interchangeably to create “moments” content to demonstrate their transnational identity (Figure 8.2).

While Fangyi constantly stresses her feelings of “still” being “a Chinese,” she also actively emphasises an overseas Chinese identity as being “part of the Japanese culture,” being “abroad,” and being “different from those Chinese who are immobile.” Fangyi’s experience is shared by other informants, such as Chengrong, a 29-year-old therapist, who claims that “I need to group them because some narratives can only be comprehended by overseas Chinese.” Similarly, Miao, a magazine editor, indicates that “many of my friends don’t like Japan so I’ll have to separate them from contents that advocate the good side of Japan ... so we can maintain a good relationship.”

It is clear that these participants' self-identification involves an attachment to not only their Chinese roots, but more importantly their transnational, intercultural routes. The latter implies that movement itself can sometimes be a source of creating meanings that are crucial for migrants' self-identifications, as highlighted by Clifford (1997). Transnational migration is an experience that separates migrants from those who are "at home." It gives them a license to claim an overseas Chinese identity that is transnational and transformational. Many Chinese migrants in Japan feel the dilemma of "huibuqu" (cannot go back): not physically (back to China) but psychologically and ontologically (back to the "authentic" or "pure" Chineseness), alluding to a difference between themselves and their non-migrant counterparts.

Conclusion

Through "individual chat" and "moments," WeChat plays a critical role in the ongoing negotiation of belonging and self-positioning among Chinese migrants in Japan. On the one hand, in the context of contested Sino-Japanese relations and their respective officially sanctioned national identities, "individual chat" helps to construct a Chinese identity outside of national discourses or political traits by mediating Chinese migrants' emotional and cultural ties with the homeland. On the other hand, by categorising their contacts and creating diversified "moments" content, Chinese migrants differentiate themselves from their non-migrant counterparts based on their transnational human mobility. In this way, they construct a Chinese identity based on the recognition of differences between the homeland and the host society in terms of socio-cultural practices and ideals. The meanings implicated behind each "moments" post may vary. However, the foregoing empirical findings indicate that both Chinese migrants' "moments" practices and consequently the way they relate to the homeland/host society are indeed informed by a sense of cultural complexity (Hannerz 2008). This cultural complexity not only calls for recognising WeChat's "moments" as a transnational cultural space; it also suggests that a hybrid identity is strategically constructed through the selective use of Japanese and selective content sharing among groups in order to demarcate the difference between themselves and those left behind. By providing them with assorted technological functions such as friend list grouping and multi-linguistic support, WeChat's "moments" allows Chinese migrants in Japan to negotiate, construct and express a multi-layered sense of self and belonging so as to reflect their personal desires and transnational experiences.

Endnotes

- 1 This archipelago is located west of Okinawa Island (Japan), east of China and northeast of Taiwan. It is known in Japan as the Senkaku Islands, Diaoyu Islands in China and Diaoyutai Islands in Taiwan. It is the focus of both the Sino-Japanese and Japan-Taiwan territorial disputes.

- 2 The sample comprised 34 women and 26 men, including Chinese migrants in 5 types of migration schemes, namely student, entrepreneur, business investor, highly skilled worker and spouse of Japanese citizens. The majority of them (34/60) lay within the 20–30 years of age group. In order to collect insights from migrants who are economically independent with stable living conditions in Japan, I controlled for years of residence in Japan (at least three years), educational attainment (higher education and above), income (financial independence calculated based on the 2018 average monthly earnings in Tokyo, Kanagawa and Saitama, as published by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW 2018)), and language skills (N1 level, see Japan Foundation (2012) for explanation). Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese, and all extracts were translated into English by the author.
- 3 Percentages of different documented migrant categories are calculated by the author based on data published by the Ministry of Justice (MOJ 2020a). The percentage of undocumented Chinese migrants is calculated by the author based on data released by Immigration Services Agency (MOJ 2020b).
- 4 This policy was known as the Interim Regulations of the State Council on Self-funded Study Abroad (国务院关于自费出国留学的暂行规定 in Chinese), which relaxed the previous ban placed on privately funded student emigration. Before the launch of this policy, the majority—if not all—Chinese student migrants were state-funded, and only those with a certain level of educational attainment and work experience were allowed to study abroad. In addition, this policy also permitted self-financed students to apply for overseas scholarships and to purchase foreign currencies in order to support their diasporic lives as student migrants. For more details, see Iguchi and Shu (2003) and Meng (2018).
- 5 In the late 1970s, the anti-Japanese movement had peaked in many Southeast Asian countries due to Japan’s mass export of industrial products to developing countries in Asia. Consequently, this project (留学生受け入れ 10 万人計画) was proposed by Japan’s former president Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1983 as a key strategy to promote pro-Japan discourses among ASEAN countries. It was formally launched in 1984 as part of the “About the Development of International Student Policy in the 21st Century” project (二十一世紀への留学生政策の展開について). For details, see Tsuboi (2006) and Shiramizu (2004).
- 6 There were 668,644 mid- to long-term Chinese migrants (including permanent residents) in Japan in 2011. Before 2011, an “Alien Registration Certificate” (外国人登録証明書) was distributed to eligible foreign residents; this recorded not only their nationality but also their regions of origin. Starting from 2011, this Certificate was replaced by a “Residence Card” (在留カード), which only displays migrants’ nationality. Therefore, data regarding migrants’ regions of origin were no longer available from 2011 onwards.
- 7 Japanese orphans in China primarily refer to Japanese children left behind as a result of the Japanese repatriation from Huludao (in Liaoning, China) in the aftermath of World War II. Roughly 2,800 Japanese children were left behind in China, and about 90% of them were adopted by rural Chinese families in northeastern provinces and Inner Mongolia. Since the normalisation of Sino-Japanese diplomatic relations in 1972, more than 20,000 Japanese orphans and their descendants have returned to Japan.
- 8 Benefits and financial aids include the “Special University Entrance Exam for Foreign Students” and scholarships/tuition fee waivers for foreign students. These benefits/aids are often only available to migrants who *do not* hold a “long-term” or “permanent” residence visa. At the same time, because most of these war orphans’ descendants do not have Japanese nationality, they cannot access benefits/aids for Japanese citizens.
- 9 Per author’s investigation.

- 10 Per author's investigation.
- 11 Such as *Liurizazhi* (留日雜誌), *Huabao* (華報) and *Dongjing Huaren Youbao* (東京華人郵報); see Duan (2003) for details.
- 12 The word 'peaked' here indicates the peak in number of such media. One should not misinterpret it as indicating that the main consumer of Chinese-language media in Japan during this period was Taiwanese migrants. By the end of 1972, there were about 46,000 documented Chinese-origin migrants in Japan, and less than half of them (~20,900) originated from Taiwan, despite the Taiwan-Japan student emigration boom. The rest were migrants from the mainland. Therefore, the main audience of Chinese-language media from 1952 to 1972 was still Chinese migrants from the mainland (MOJ 1974).
- 13 While its main audience was mainland Chinese student migrants, many issues of this newspaper were co-edited by student migrants from mainland and Taiwan.
- 14 Here "Chinese ethnic newspapers and TV channels" refers to media companies owned/edited by Chinese migrants from the mainland. If we include Chinese ethnic media companies owned by migrants from Taiwan, then the number would be around 40.
- 15 In 1951, the Chinese population in Japan was 43,377, where 18,947 people were from Taiwan and 24,430 people were from mainland China (STAT, 1952).

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