

4. What kinds of stories are popular in Australia's Chinese-language digital media?

Wanning Sun

November 10 2021

This is the fourth in a series of five briefs on Chinese-language media in Australia.¹ The briefs are best read in conjunction with each other in the series, and readers may also benefit from reading the author's 2016 report for the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS:ACRI), Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities,² which provides background, context and detailed information about major Chinese-language media outlets in Australia.

Data used in these briefs come from a three-year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project (DP180100663, Chief Investigators: Wanning Sun and Haiqing Yu) 'Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia: Rethinking soft power'. Empirical data included in these briefs have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals: Media International Australia; Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies; and Social Media & Society. For more information on data sources relied upon in this brief, refer to Methodology below.

Key takeaways

- Despite a widespread belief that Australia's Chinese-language media outlets are mostly becoming political instruments of the Communist Party of China (CPC), their dominant editorial strategy is, in fact, cultural rather than political. Readers are generally most interested in content that deals with cross-cultural dilemmas that are specific to first-generation migrants.
- The most popular stories tend to be those that attempt to (re)negotiate the distance and relationship among three identities – Chinese-Australians, Chinese people living in China and non-Chinese 'mainstream' Australians.
- Australia's Chinese-language digital media outlets source content for the great majority of their stories from both Australian English-language media and People's Republic of China (PRC) state media. This has given rise to a new narrative form that accommodates their audience's identity position of 'in-betweenness', as well as many of their readers' ambivalence towards both the PRC and Australia.
- The process of translating, curating and compiling content from different sources is not just a process of language translation; this process actively and continuously shapes the cultural identity and sensibility of Mandarin-speaking first-generation migrants.

1 Brief 1. 'Why apps are a game changer for Chinese-language media in Australia', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 20 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/why-apps-are-game-changer-chinese-language-media-australia>>; Brief 2. 'What are the key misconceptions about censorship in Australia's Chinese-language media?', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, October 27 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/what-are-key-misconceptions-about-censorship-australia%E2%80%99s-chinese-language-media>>; Brief 3. 'How does Australia's Chinese-language media negotiate between Australian and PRC state media?', Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, November 3 2021 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/how-does-australia%E2%80%99s-chinese-language-media-negotiate-between-australian-and-prc-state-media>>.

2 Wanning Sun, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments challenges and opportunities*, Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, September 8 2016 <<https://www.australiachinarelations.org/content/chinese-language-media-australia-developments-challenges-and-opportunities-2>>.

Introduction

Chinese-language media in Australia includes both long-established legacy media and more recently developed digital/social media. In recent years, this sector has come under increasing scrutiny, as it is believed to be influenced by the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In September 2016, the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney published *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities*, the first report on Australia's Chinese-language media, including print, electronic and digital media.³ Since that report, Australia's Chinese-language media landscape has become even more complex, dynamic, and fluid. Digital technologies continue to transform the ways in which Chinese-language media content is produced, accessed, and consumed. Despite these rapid developments, public knowledge about how this new digital industry operates is still at best fragmented. The lack of this up-to-date and intimate knowledge may have accounted for some out-of-date, simplistic or even misleading statements often made in the PRC influence debate.

Catering to both informational and emotional needs

In a 2019 survey conducted by the author, respondents were asked: 'In your view, what is the main function of the Chinese-language media in Australia'? Respondents were allowed to tick more than one box. About 70 percent ticked 'Chinese-language media should introduce and educate new Chinese-Australians about Australian politics, economics and culture, assisting new migrants to integrate to the new country'. Almost 63 percent ticked 'Chinese-language media should inform Chinese migrants about Australia's education, tourism, and investment opportunities'. About 54 percent ticked 'Chinese-language media should provide me with relevant information about Australia's policies and information which is useful to my survival in Australia'.

The author conducted a number of interviews with the senior staff of online news source *Sydney Today*, the most popular Chinese-language media outlet in Australia, in order to gain a clear sense of how they make daily editorial decisions, as well as their views of why certain stories tend to resonate with their outlet's intended readership. Their responses suggested that they are acutely aware of these expectations from readers. When asked what kinds of stories would interest its intended readers, the editor who oversees the translation team told the author:⁴

We choose stories based on how much our readers – mostly first-generation Chinese migrants – can relate to them. We believe that our readers have the right to information that's of interest to them, and we want to be the platform that caters to that need. For instance, the Chinese people want to know any changes in the Australia's immigration and visa policies. We will report on any changes on that topic.

The digital production editor of *Sydney Today* concurred with the outlet's translation editor: the decision is usually made on the basis of its relevance to the specific community being targeted:⁵

Our core principle in content selection is whether it may be of informational value and cultural benefit to them. Our focus is different from mainstream media. If a Chinese migrant has a car accident in a suburb in Sydney, mainstream media may report it as a story of traffic accident, whereas we will approach it by probing into the Chinese family's cultural background. In other words, we will pick one aspect of the story and expand that angle. We may further investigate from that from a Chinese point of view.

This editor noted that 80 percent of the publication's energy is spent on the lead story of the day. They also stated that there is a hierarchy of priorities in content selection, with stories related to PRC migrants in Australia at the top, followed by topics that would interest both PRC migrants in Australia and readers in the PRC. For instance, news and information about Australia's policies or studying in Australia would be of informational value to both these reader communities. Ranked below these are stories that would concern all those living in Australia, regardless of country of origin – for instance, interesting domestic events or supermarkets having a promotional sale. From time to time, *Sydney Today* also runs columns providing problem-solving tips and informational advice aiming to help the Chinese migrants – both prospective and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Interview with *Sydney Today*'s translation editor, February 12 2020.

⁵ Interview with *Sydney Today*'s digital production editor, February 24 2020.

already settled – to live a more informed and interesting life in Australia. This includes advice on how to complete tax returns, how to buy a property or where to go over the Easter break. The digital production editor said:⁶

Of course, all media outlets can find a topic of interest. But to be able to retain your fan base and cultivate a loyal readership, you have to give them something worth sharing.

According to the digital production editor, selecting content from Australian English-language media outlets is important for a number of reasons:⁷

First, many of our readers can't read news in English, so we have a responsibility to inform them of what is being said in that space. Second, our readers are very curious to see how mainstream, non-Chinese news and their readers say about a certain topic, especially if it is related to the Chinese community.

The digital production editor also believes that *Sydney Today* has a duty to tell its readers what the mainstream society is saying about 'us':⁸

Sometimes, we think it is worth reporting on the fact that an incident or issue involving Chinese people from China or Chinese community in Australia has been reported in the mainstream English language media.

Case studies

We can get a sense of how Chinese-language media outlets engage in content brokering and cultural mediation by looking at the two most viewed articles published by *Sydney Today* in the month of July 2019 – each with a PPV (page per visit) count exceeding 100,000.

'Shame on us'

The article headlined 'Just in: Chinese Embassy in Australia issued a notice! As a person of Chinese origin, I am so ashamed!' was published on July 10 2019.⁹ It was about PRC migrants 'behaving badly'. According to the article, Australian police had apprehended numerous fraudsters who happened to be elderly migrants from the PRC acting as 'professional beggars'. The article comprised a mixture of images of the 'beggars' in the street, screenshots of acerbic commentary from English-language media outlets and sarcastic remarks from social media users. The author of the article wrote, 'As a person of Chinese origin, I am ashamed, humiliated and angry beyond words! They are the black sheep of the entire community!'

Material from English-language media outlets such as the *Daily Mail*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Nine News and the ABC, as well as English-language social media, served as evidence of 'their' contempt and disapproval for 'us'. For example, the story included a screenshot of a social media user's comment, 'Does anything good come out of China these days?' In terms of PRC sources, the article included a public notice from the Consulate General of the PRC in Melbourne, alerting people to the scams and urging them to respect local laws and customs and a Weibo (microblog) post from Toutiao, a Beijing-based news and information content platform, providing information about PRC fraudsters in Thailand.

The sense of shame and humiliation in the readers' comments was palpable. They were also angry that these particular fraudsters may have caused the entire PRC community in Australia to 'lose face'. One reader said, 'These people don't even want their own face (meaning dignity), how can we expect them to care about the face of their country!' Another said, 'A few people are ruining China's reputation. These bad behaviours always come from China, so it's easy to see why local people have unfavourable view of us.'

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 *Sydney Today*, July 10 2019 <<https://rank.aoweibang.com/wx/9I02AUhC8QGvgot7CsHbr8Yx74IVpNzt3xV4GrAPnhM2QU-ml-i4RxBdC22WRo2yXFrqKLIaK1GgoCQU3aPhVA>>.

A tragic tale of a cross-cultural clash

The article headlined ‘Tragedy caused by Chinese-style education!’ was published on July 23 2019.¹⁰ It was about a Chinese father in Sydney who violently and repeatedly stabbed his daughter, then jumped from the building from a shopping mall. It was a tragic story of a cross-cultural clash between Chinese and Australian education. The article started with a screenshot of a headline from the *Daily Mail* which reported that a 52-year-old father stabbed his only 14-year-old daughter in the neck then jumped to his death at a shopping centre. The article then quoted the *Daily Mail’s* observation that this violence was an unfortunate outcome of forcing children to conform to traditional Chinese ways despite being part of the Australian education system.

The *Sydney Today* article inserted several pictures – a hand holding a knife, a knife covered with blood – which had nothing to do with the story. But *Sydney Today* also included a different incident that took place in Shanghai a few months earlier, where, during a row with her mother, a daughter jumped out of a moving car and leapt from a bridge. *Sydney Today* used CCTV footage of the incident, comments on Weibo and various clips from PRC television dramas and talk-shows on parents’ disappointment with children. The story ended with an editorial note urging people to reflect on their parenting philosophy and to treat children as people, rather than as their possessions.

Readers were divided in the comments: some blamed the father, while others thought the daughter was too wilful. Some thought Chinese education was responsible, while others believed it had nothing to do with Chinese culture. But although most express disbelief that the father could be driven to such violence towards his daughter, having to negotiate the difference between two educational systems and cultural sensibilities regarding parenting clearly resonates with them.

Why are these stories popular?

The story about the PRC fraudsters is popular because it embodies the complexity in (re)negotiating the distance and relationship between two Chinese identities ‘us’ – Chinese-Australians – and ‘them’ – Chinese people living in the PRC. While ‘we’ identify with ‘them’ on issues evoking national pride and indignation, ‘we’ also can be critical and disapproving of ‘them’ for behaving badly while at the same time feeling ashamed of their behaviour.

Apart from negotiating different kinds of ‘Chinese-ness’, popular stories in Australia’s Chinese-language media also tend to be those which navigate the boundary between Chinese-Australians and those of other backgrounds who make up mainstream Australian society. These stories often cite Australian English-language media stories in mainstream society – in Australia or elsewhere – to invoke the gaze of ‘them’, who criticise, judge and embarrass ‘us’ – sometimes justifiably, other times unjustifiably. Often, these stories encourage readers to reflect on the undesirable aspects of ‘Chinese-ness’ and the desirability of cultural values of the Other. These Chinese-language outlets function like a new cultural compass with which readers can use to navigate the confusing question of who ‘we’ are and the culture(s) to which ‘we’ belong.

Apart from identity narratives, living between cultures is another recurrent theme. When asked to comment on the popularity of the tragedy involving the father and daughter discussed above, *Sydney Today’s* editors believed that it was predominantly due to cultural resonance. During the author’s interview with *Sydney Today’s* translation editor, they observed that:¹¹

If a father stabbed his daughter somewhere in America, there would be no interest at all. If a father from a Chinese migrant background in America stabbed her daughter, there would be a bit more interest. The story, about what happened to a Chinese family in Chatswood, Sydney, achieved phenomenal resonance, not only because it struck a raw nerve among most Chinese families, but also because it happened ‘right here’. They are caught between Western and Chinese expectations and having to navigate through the difficult dynamics between parents and children.

¹⁰ *Sydney Today*, July 23 2019 <<https://www.sydneytoday.com/content-101930234596583>>.

¹¹ Interview with *Sydney Today’s* translation editor, February 13 2020.

The digital production editor also attributed to the phenomenal popularity of the story to its capacity to tick many boxes:¹²

The story has quite a few key ingredients. First, it is about a tragedy in a Chinese family living in Sydney so the news is of wide appeal to our readers. Second, the story is about what happens when Chinese and Australian ways clash, so it forces our readers to reflect on their own life and behaviour. Since people are likely to have different opinions – some side with the father, others side with the daughter – the conflict in opinion is likely to engender debate and discussions. Third, the story appeals to both earlier-generation migrants and new migrants, but these two cohorts have different mentalities and ways of thinking. Since people can't agree, they therefore keep debating, hence the need to keep going back to the story. Finally, education is highly valued by Chinese people and the difficulty in educating children, especially in another culture, is something that concerns most readers.

Conclusion

Despite most Chinese-language digital media outlets' well-known penchant for sensational content and click-bait headlines, they nevertheless do aim to cater to the informational as well as emotional needs of their intended readers. Rather than reproducing the news-making practices in the PRC or adopting the journalistic conventions in Australia, these media outlets broker content from both sides, using a distinct and hybrid narrative format. In this sense, many digital Chinese-language media outlets in Australia play the role of a cultural intermediaries as well as that of news organisations.

¹² Interview with *Sydney Today's* digital production editor, February 24 2020.

Methodology

Data and information used for this briefing come from three sources. The first is a survey conducted in February 2019. The survey, involving 927 Mandarin-speaking Chinese-Australian participants, focused on the media and news access and consumption habits, and the preferred platforms or sources of the surveyed cohort. It was conducted through ‘convenience sampling’ – participants were recruited largely via social media platforms, primarily WeChat and Facebook. The second is narrative analysis of the top two news stories in *Sydney Today* in the sampled month of July 2019. The third is a number of interviews conducted with two senior editors of *Sydney Today* over the period of 2019-2021.

Author

Wanning Sun is a Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Technology Sydney. A fellow of Australian Academy of the Humanities since 2016, she is currently a member of the Australian Research Council (ARC) College of Experts (2020-2022). Author of a major report, *Chinese-language media in Australia: Developments, challenges and opportunities* (2016), Wanning has led an ARC Discovery Project, ‘Chinese-language digital/social media in Australia: Rethinking soft power’.