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Exploring the significance of WeChat in Chinese international students' practice in the Australian higher education field

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ABSTRACT

WeChat is one of the most popular social media platforms among Chinese international students (CISs) studying in Australia, yet little is known about how its use mediates student transition to Australian higher education. This study draws on Bourdieu's concepts related to practice to explore CISs' WeChat practices in digitally mediating their experiences in Australia. Data were collected from 15 CISs through semistructured interviews via a scroll-back method. The findings suggest that CISs' WeChat practices have deep roots in their habitus. WeChat was found to increase their sense of belonging and negotiation in the new international setting but also diminished their successful transition. Moreover, the social media platform appeared to be underutilized by the university. The findings suggest that WeChat can be a more valuable tool for CISs to negotiate their transition, whereas CISs should also be guided to decrease their use of WeChat to more effectively engage with their higher education.

Keywords: Chinese international students, social media, WeChat, Bourdieu, habitus, field, transitioning, higher education

Much like the United States and the United Kingdom, Australia is a popular study destination for international students seeking top-quality education and qualifications. Many new international students enroll in Australian education institutions each year, with their proportion in the country's total student population growing (Department of Education, 2024). This increasing proportion indicates a growing diversity of needs and characteristics of those who study in Australia, including the affordances of their social media use. Specifically,

questions on how students use social media to negotiate Australian higher education still need to be answered.

One of the most popular social media platforms among Chinese users (home and abroad) is WeChat, which currently has over 1.3 billion monthly users (Thomala, 2024). Relatedly, Chinese international students (CISs) constitute the largest segment of the international student market in the highly internationalized universities of many Western countries, including Australia (Department of Education, 2024). It is reasonable to view CISs' social media practices as important reflections of their dispositions in Australia. Therefore, this study explored CISs' WeChat use in Australia and how it mediated their experiences of cultural and social barriers, differences, and in-group dispositional formation while at university. Accordingly, CISs' WeChat use must be comprehensively understood if universities are to provide higher-quality services to CISs and improve their own reputations in the international education market. This paper outlines the findings of a recent study of current issues related to CISs' use of social media (specifically, WeChat) when living and studying abroad. Next, we summarize the literature informing the study, the theory and methodology, and then the findings and implications from the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study sought to explore CISs' WeChat use when transitioning to and studying at an overseas university. The literature informing the study included how communities formed on WeChat, how WeChat supported student learning, and how it was important during the COVID-19 pandemic.

WeChat Forming Community

A key positive characteristic of any community is its capacity to share personal and group-based experiences; to forward and promote information to reflect members' preferences, interests, and positions on a range of issues; and to maintain connections with others (Glanville et al., 2016). Chinese university students have described using online platforms, such as WeChat, to make connections and to seek out information that could help them identify necessary resources (Sun et al., 2023). Thus, it is reasonable to consider the possibility that CISs may build communities via platforms such as WeChat. In addition, CISs use community-building within their cultural group as a resource for support (Xiong, 2017). Wu and Miller (2021) investigated the roles of cultural awareness and group relationships in students' social media practices and reported that students become more willing to participate in their English chat community via WeChat because of the trust and familiarity gained with group members over time. Students are motivated to use personal, local, and world knowledge through peer and multimodal discussions to share and learn new English expressions within a Chinese cultural context. Therefore, the internal composition of WeChat-based groups formed at universities, as well as the extent to which these groups

constitute communities for belonging and learning, are highly important. Baines et al. (2021) argued that universities should explore the use of popular social media tools, such as WeChat, which are favored by international students, to engage with students, understand their needs, and provide support. This could enhance the intercultural communicative skills of students who struggle with direct intergroup contact, helping them transition successfully.

Use of WeChat in Students' Learning

In recent years, WeChat has influenced learning patterns, yielding several consequences. For example, Wang et al. (2017) examined WeChat as an instant interactive social media tool, focusing on its benefits for enhancing student-centered teaching–learning communication at a Chinese university. During their studies, they created an official account for the course, enabling organizations to publish information regularly and allowing students to make comments and join discussions. Users discussed relevant themes and engaged in student–student and student–teacher interactions. Zheng and Hong (2018) argued that Chinese university students use WeChat to read and absorb information in new ways, such as through text reading, image appreciation, and sound communication. This type of learning could be attributed to WeChat's functionality, reflecting its emphasis on efficiency and convenience in obtaining information and facilitating communication.

Tu et al. (2018) described the benefits of WeChat's fragmented reading and learning pattern. They suggested that this feature can promote self-directed learning in alignment with adult learning patterns, thus making WeChat suitable for tertiary students. Although there are restrictions on the content presented and spread through WeChat, the format may offer higher levels of autonomy for learners seeking to pursue their interests. Group chat is also convenient for forming virtual communities and teams for learning and assignment purposes. This implies a conducive context for Chinese students to use social media to support their university learning. In this environment, WeChat supports students by offering a direct form of learning-related interaction and communication. However, WeChat was not initially designed as an education tool; it is more likely that community development is determined by the self-regulating and self-directed activities of users that determine the development of their communities (Zhong et al., 2016). Accordingly, it would be reasonable to expect that Chinese students use WeChat to support their university learning activities but may experience limitations of fragmented learning (Tong & Tsung, 2018).

Indeed, WeChat has been perceived as a 'double-edged sword' of information searching, communication, and learning. For example, Hou et al. (2021) reported that Chinese university students who check various sources of WeChat information spend more time learning and searching for information. Furthermore, the quality of the information that they obtain through WeChat is greater than that obtained by university students, who rely on only one source. However, the frequency and duration of WeChat use can affect students' quality of life due to its impact on self-control and the dynamics of social relationships

and activities in which they engage. The frequency of WeChat use can have a complicated effect on university students' academic performance, wherein self-control plays a moderating role: University students' WeChat practice patterns determine the limits of the platform's effects. These findings suggest that future research on the WeChat use of university students could be valuable. However, studies on the relationships between WeChat use among CISs, CISs' learning experiences and perceptions during their transition process, and higher education institutions' expectations of students' learning outcomes are lacking. This study addresses this gap, at least in part, and considers a new context during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Use of WeChat during the COVID-19 pandemic

Since the onset of COVID-19, the role of WeChat in information searching and learning among CISs has become increasingly important. WeChat has practically replaced traditional Chinese-language print and broadcast media as a new form of ethnic media in Australia insofar as it focuses on Australian domestic and local news and information, specifically related to the daily lives of average Chinese migrants in Sydney, Melbourne, and other metropolitan areas (Stevic et al., 2022). As the predominant information source for many Chinese people, WeChat provides a space in which many first-generation Chinese migrants, who are often neglected by mainstream social media or English language websites, can obtain relevant information for their living in Australia (Zha, 2022).

Many international students experience a sense of disconnected belonging while they search to locate themselves in Australia, and COVID-19 has amplified their existing issues (Wang et al., 2021). Amosun et al. (2022) investigated WeChat use during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the mediating role of online self-disclosure on well-being and the quality of friendships. They reported that WeChat interaction was significantly correlated with friendship quality and online self-disclosure but exhibited no such correlation with well-being, despite an indirect relationship being found in the mediation analysis. Stevic et al. (2022) reported that communicative smartphone use increases friendship satisfaction over time, confirming WeChat's positive effect on integration during difficult periods. Although WeChat can improve temporary satisfaction and a sense of social belonging, the influence is far from long-lasting. Given these findings, it would be reasonable to consider the extent to which WeChat practices mediate CISs' transition into Australian higher education.

In summary, the literature supports the importance and necessity of studying CISs' WeChat practices in terms of their negotiation of foreign higher education and their dispositions as CISs in this instance at an Australian university.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employed Pierre Bourdieu's theory, where concepts of field (virtual structure of social positions), habitus (bodily dispositions), and capital (value, power) are interdependent and cannot be understood separately (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). By considering how CISs' habitus interacts within the field, by the positions that they maintain and how capital is employed, their practices become apparent (Maton, 2012). CISs have varied backgrounds, personal goals, experiences, and perceptions of higher education institutions, thus rendering it inappropriate to use a general or linear approach to understanding their WeChat practices and overseas experiences. At the same time, their opportunities are also dependent on the new contexts and fields that they enter as international students.

This study focused on practice because it provided a way to understand social logic and phenomena (Bourdieu, 1977). There is social logic behind practice, which people understand consciously and unconsciously. Through practice, people maintain and reproduce social norms and structures. People's practices reflect the social values and norms that form their social consciousness. The reciprocal relationship often reinforces the established social order. Such mutuality exists between CISs and their social world (which extends across China, Australia, and their socializing contexts and networks), that is, their networks of social relations and the structured system of the social positions they occupy. Therefore, it was necessary to understand CISs in terms of their social spaces, as well as the operationalization of their field, habitus, and capital.

Bourdieu (1989) used the term 'social space' to indicate the set of all possible positions that are available for occupation at any given time or place. Social space can be physical or virtual. These are mediated differently by different groups of people (in this case, by domestic and international university students and university staff). CISs' social media practices reflect the interrelation of their capital, field, and habitus. In addition, CISs' world comprises the different fields they traverse. Fields have established rules, cultures, structures, and norms that shape members' practices. More importantly, every field has a distinctive logic of practice (Grenfell, 2012), that is, its accepted ways of behaving. Participants in a field hold common beliefs, the adherence to which determines their membership (Bourdieu, 1990). This theory informed the methodology for the study.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach to focus on CISs' social media use and everyday practices, as informed by Bourdieu's concepts. Qualitative research is well suited to obtaining a holistic picture of CISs' social media practices and their relation to other social phenomena (Stake, 2000). The research was conducted at an Australian higher education institution, Beachside University (a pseudonym), one of Australia's Group of Eight, which granted ethics approval (number 25696). Seven first-year and eight fourth-year participants were recruited for the study. Semistructured interviews (Gillham, 2005) with a social media

scroll-back approach (Robards & Lincoln, 2019) were used to collect the data. By having the participants scroll back through their social media content and reflect on their practices, information about fields, capital, and habitus could be gleaned. The second data collection method was a policy document review that outlined Beachside University's related policies and programs for international students. The descriptive outline considered the social issues underlying the globalization of education and international students. This method proved particularly useful for examining the challenges CISs face in changing institutional environments.

RESULTS

The findings indicated that WeChat was significant in CIS practices, embedded in their habitus, and played out as embodied cultural capital, social capital, and linguistic capital to negotiate the context of the higher education field in the new university and country.

WeChat practices and habitus

For many CISs, transitioning into the Australian social and cultural environment is an entirely new experience. In many interviews, participants reflected on three main points affecting their transition: cultural content in communication, homestay experiences, and adaptation to a different learning environment.

First, cultural content in communication, which is embedded in habitus and differs across cultures, influences CISs' ability to communicate. All the participants indicated that they recognized and experienced cultural differences between China and Australia, which was often reflected in the content of these communications. Moreover, the participants' comments supported the notion that cultural background is important in shaping communication in socialization practices.

Second, four participants had homestay experiences during their initial transition. The homestays connected these participants to Australian families and communities, facilitating their understanding of the Australian sociocultural environment. Perhaps more importantly, these experiences facilitated their transition and changing habitus, as did social media practices. However, as participant Han explained, CISs' relative lack of engagement with Western social media inhibited relationships with homestay families after these experiences ended.

Third, almost all the participants reported difficulties adapting to a new educational context. Cultural differences that affect the education system and learning approaches reflect the dissimilarities in habitus between CISs and Australian students. These included different learning patterns within the distinct societal systems and differing values in which they were raised. The participants initially struggled to adapt to the Australian higher education field in this self-

directed learning environment but gradually displayed agency in adapting through motivation and self-direction.

The transition process is also accompanied by various emotions, feelings, and senses of affect, the latter of which can be important factors in the selection and use of social media tools. Through the interviews, the participants confirmed that their social media practices were directly connected to affect. For example, Wen shared her experience during the COVID-19 lockdown:

I relied on WeChat to maintain communication with others, such as my parents and friends in China. I have a very good friend in China, who I have known since junior high school. I chatted with her to relieve my loneliness and panic during the COVID-19 pandemic. I think WeChat has helped me a lot, especially with emotional support.

Although CISs can use a variety of social media tools to express their affect, they choose WeChat because significant others use it. They could use this platform to create and maintain virtual connections with significant others, as well as to voice and share their affective experiences. Therefore, WeChat appears to be an important outlet through which CISs can articulate their affective responses and thereby gain relief while negotiating the transition process. To conclude, cultural differences affected the participants' communication approaches and transitions to the new learning environment. The findings here show that the participants' WeChat practices were directly connected with their affect. For CISs coming to Australia, using WeChat for social connection is already a part of their habitus, that is, a prior experience and established practice that continues when they transition into the Australian higher education field.

WeChat practices and capital

Embodied Cultural Capital

Social media practice reflects embodied capital because it extends from the language, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, preferences, and patterns held by people from different fields. Similarly, common embodied capital is vital if people are to build and maintain relationships. Social media practices have extended and strengthened existing relationships through virtual networks.

CISs engage in long-term, ongoing communication with other Chinese people through WeChat. One important factor was that, despite differences in their class, ethnic group, age, and status, they are relatively homogenous in terms of their status and background, such as their education experience in China and their habitus. WeChat reinforced cultural capital because it was collectively understood and legitimized as a social media tool (a type of objectified capital). CISs all use WeChat, meaning that communication through it is widely accepted—a form of objectified capital related to and reflecting embodied capital. For example, Han said, 'I often play Tencent games. These games all need WeChat account registrations.'

Regarding Western social media and communication with non-Chinese classmates, Jolin said, 'I just use Facebook to discuss assignments with my group members. The communication purposes and topics are restricted to these academic things because I felt that we do not have other common topics to chat with each other'. This social media practice led Jolin to further indicate that the relationship was restricted to the academic field because she did not communicate or keep in touch with non-Chinese students after class or upon completing group assignments. Thus, these were not ongoing relationships that could extend the social network of these CISs among Australian tertiary students. Rather, these relationships within the group had a common purpose and specific date of closure because of the lack of common embodied capital with which to provide more intimacy or closeness. Indeed, Cong noted:

Cultural differences are represented through social media content, such as different pop cultures. WeChat content is not popular on Facebook and vice versa. WeChat can also connect with other social media accounts, such as Taobao, RED and TikTok. I usually share some interesting videos and Taobao shopping links. The official accounts are also a source of information.

Popular Chinese social media platforms can be found on WeChat without downloading, so the participants felt distanced from Western social media tools because of the content they contained; this distance represents the cultural capital gap between CISs and non-Chinese students. The cultural fields in which they were raised imprinted a common pattern by which the CISs could extend a relationship to become more dynamic and interrelated. This, in turn, influenced their WeChat practices. The cultural capital underpinning values, symbols, and language plays a vital role. WeChat connected CISs with Chinese fields through its ability to reproduce Chinese social space and represent Chinese cultural, historical, and linguistic ties.

Social Capital

For CISs, WeChat was used to accumulate more social capital by increasing connections with social networks. WeChat extended the virtual realm to social relationships being formed in the physical realm. WeChat maintained and strengthened these social relationships. For example, Yuan explained, 'The only reason I use WeChat is because all of my Chinese friends and family use it'. His social relationships in China were an important reason for using WeChat, which he had already used before arriving in Australia. Therefore, Yuan used WeChat to maintain or extend social networks and relationships. Cong, added:

WeChat is an essential phone app for me and is even more important than the call function. My friends and I use WeChat to reach each other rather than using a phone call. Even with my close friends in Australia, we did not even record each other's phone numbers.

CISs maintain their social networks in their first language through WeChat despite being in a new context of a higher education field. They used WeChat to maintain social networks both before and after their arrival in Australia. Acquiring and maintaining social networks can be a resource for gaining more social capital and higher positions in Chinese fields. The network represents an important source of power and capital.

As an information source, significant effort was devoted to WeChat to enhance learning:

I think my official accounts are full of information. Almost all of the information I am interested in comes from official accounts. You can add accounts about Australia. The information presented on these official accounts, such as news and social events, is diverse and useful. They show all kinds of information about Melbourne, as well as what discounts you can get. (Jiao)

The participants viewed WeChat as an important source of information, including daily news about Australia and China, promotions, education and entertainment. Information could also be shared from outside of usual friendship networks, and online capital was gained by sharing ‘valuable’ information.

Jolin indicated that official WeChat accounts were a useful tool for obtaining important information about studying in Australia:

When applying for a university in Australia, I look for current students or alumni and then ask for help. I searched related questions in Baidu’s postbar, found relevant WeChat groups for these universities, and joined them. When I arrived in Australia, everything was new. I received much help from these WeChat groups and the current and former students within them. I still encounter many questions about assignments and daily life. I can ask questions in WeChat groups and then quickly get support.

The participants lacked enough support and resources because of insufficient social capital during their negotiations in the Australian higher education field. WeChat helped them change their situation by maintaining and expanding their already established social capital in China and in CIS groups. They used WeChat to support each other and gain information to support themselves academically and socially. Thus, the participants frequently and widely used WeChat to mitigate their disadvantaged position in acquiring social capital, as well as to accrue capital through the platform, thus ultimately trading social capital for cultural capital.

Linguistic capital

Some participants indicated that English proficiency was a challenge during their transition. This absence of linguistic capital affected their integration and communication with residents and non-Chinese students. For example, Cong said:

I was not used to using English to communicate with others when I was in my first year because I was not confident about my proficiency... This made me feel reluctant to develop relationships and communicate more with non-Chinese students.

Jolin reported her experiences of usually finding other CISs in class and WeChat exchanges. She said:

In one class in my first year, I found no other CISs, so I was so worried and nervous about the learning content. Fortunately, I found CISs later, and we exchanged WeChat accounts and maintained ongoing communication. This made me feel very safe, stable, and confident because I felt there were back-ups and acquaintances in the class so that we could support each other.

In a WeChat group discussion (Figure 1), we can see from Jiao's screen how they processed their presentation. This shows how WeChat can extend the daily conversation from face-to-face to an online mode that facilitates ongoing and convenient communication between CISs and helps avoid misunderstandings in class.

Figure 1
Jiao discusses the Group Presentation's Topic and Content with Peers in a WeChat Group



Figure 2
A WeChat Group Shared by Jiao



Poor linguistic capital affects CISs' social capital. This, in turn, reduced their ability to communicate and integrate with non-Chinese students. They used WeChat to form connections with each other to mitigate feelings of helplessness and isolation. WeChat provided them with a communication channel to form and maintain their social ties and connections in Australia, which was useful and supportive during this critical period. They can transition more smoothly even when not integrated into local communities, forming CIS networks through WeChat. This finding also demonstrates that WeChat was used as an academic medium to overcome language barriers by asking clarifying questions to other CISs. Doing so helped to avoid misunderstandings in classes or assignments and alleviated doubts or negative feelings stemming from the language barrier.

WeChat practices and the field

Student Experiences in the Higher Education Field

The CISs suggested that different cultural groups (CISs and domestic students/non-Chinese students) could be perceived as independent groups existing in parallel within Australian society. Social membership in these culture-based groups was built by a sense of belonging within the field of education. For example, CISs constitute a group independent from Australian domestic groups. According to Xin, 'I am still in a network full of Chinese people, that is, all my friends are Chinese.' For participants, most friends were Chinese, even after moving to Australia. Ethnicity was a symbol that formed and created a clear boundary between field contexts. Ethnicity appeared key to joining the field.

In the higher education field, rules shape and determine the practices of members in various groups. For example, the type of social media used acts as a rule or symbol that distinguishes in-group members from others. Importantly, the participants reported that their friends and family members were all Chinese and used WeChat; thus, they primarily used the same platform even after moving to Australia. The previous section demonstrated that participants recognized the importance of WeChat's role in the social relationships of Chinese groups and thus continued to use it for communication. In general, WeChat won this symbol competition and was selected by members to communicate within the higher education subfield of Chinese ethnicity.

The participants recognized that WeChat was used by the Chinese group and had become the norm but also allowed for the existence of other rules and tools in other groups. They had to adapt to this situation to create connections and maintain social relationships with those in different contexts. This reflected the changing symbols that a CIS encounters within different subfields in Australia's higher education field. One subfield is the Chinese cultural group to which they belong. Another is the Australian tertiary or domestic student group, which must have a certain level of contact and communication to complete assignments and begin social lives in the new community. The experience of contacting people across these two subfields contributes to changes in their selected symbols despite clear boundaries between the use of WeChat and Western social media tools. For

example, Yue said, 'I still relied on WeChat rather than Facebook.' This shows the transitory nature of symbols selected by some. However, Yuan explained this from another perspective:

With some foreign friends, we may use Facebook or WhatsApp to communicate, but it is more about group work or academics during the semester. No chat or socialization is done via Facebook, only with respect to the project.

Social media tools seemed to be symbols across these subfields. The participants switched among different social media tools to communicate with people in other ethnic groups, as each group had different symbols for different social media tools. Members choose social media tools specific to each subfield, indicating a particular tool's symbolic dominance as the established norm. Maintaining this norm resembles symbolic violence in forcing existing and new members to adopt and reproduce it to gain/retain membership. Nonetheless, the field can be considered a space for indefinite item selection. While the field marks the items to be selected for social members, it does not finalize their status. Individuals might make a variety of colocated choices of competitive strategies to gain capital. The results can reflect the will of the selector or the requirements and limitations of the field. The participants clearly understood the boundaries between Chinese and domestic students. This suggests that the choice of social media tool was a symbol that represented the abstract boundaries between field contexts.

The participants also reported a lack of sufficient institutional capital to receive enough support from the university and social system. Although such institutional capital is related to social capital, they have social networks and relationships that offer them resources and information. The participants tended to join several WeChat groups, which allowed them to access different types of important information and resources to support their studies and life in Australia. This was a highly important factor in motivating the participants to continue their frequent and high use of WeChat. Social networks through WeChat acted as sources of support, alleviating the lack of institutional capital.

The CISs' social networks offset the lack of institutionalized networks and provided support during the transition. For example:

The content that is spread and promoted via WeChat is tailored for us, which means that such information meets our needs. For example, COVID-19 information and support were sent through the Chinese student association WeChat group. This support was exclusive to CISs. The information spread through WeChat groups is highly useful to us (Wen).

Jolin indicated that she knew that there were support groups for academic purposes but preferred to seek help from Chinese friends:

The university has a peer mentoring group, which will pair you with a senior student who will give you support, such as helping you adjust to

the new learning environment. You can also ask them if you have any questions about your studies. However, honestly, I would prefer to ask my friends who have graduated by using WeChat because we do not have a language barrier.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, WeChat became an increasingly important information channel for participants; therefore, the affected link and functional use of WeChat became increasingly salient. Figure 2 shows Jiao's WeChat post from the Chinese Embassy to publicize the free provision of personal protective equipment to CISs in Australia. The CISs registered through the WeChat chat group with the student association staff and were then able to collect the equipment at the university. This information was exclusive to CISs and distributed only through CISs' WeChat groups. The CISs felt 'valued' by the Chinese Embassy, and the information it provided (as well as the network through which it was spread) gave the CISs a sense of tradeable capital and social connection through the domestic use of WeChat. These functions not only accord with the exclusive use of WeChat in Chinese communities but also further cemented its dominance in the social media and communication of CISs. If CISs do not view WeChat frequently and maintain their group identity on the platform, they will miss significant information and benefits. WeChat's multiple functions and roles in Chinese communities were important in furthering CISs' daily reliance on WeChat.

Such useful and tailored information spread through WeChat groups can thus be considered an important factor for motivating CISs' frequent use and reliance on the platform for dealing with CISs' lack of institutional and social capital in Australia. The rich resources associated with WeChat groups strengthened the platform's role as a habitus-reproducing social media tool.

University Policy

This section details the document review of the university's policy and management of its official WeChat account. Beachside University has various policies and documents intended to outline the vision, mission, principles and objectives of areas relevant to CISs. According to their website, orientation was provided to new students every semester. Beachside University also has a student engagement procedure policy to support students engaged in the learning process and environment.

Although the university did not officially use WeChat to engage with CISs, its Chinese Student Association (CSA) provided CISs with the widest range of resources to facilitate a smooth transition into university through graduation. The CSA was registered under Beachside University and the Chinese Embassy. The Association operated and managed the official account's communication and information sharing, posting two types of content. The first type was advertising. As an example (Figure 3), the Association posted an online recruitment advertisement. The Chinese Student Associations of Australia and New Zealand organizing a job fair were also advertised. These events aimed to build bridges

between enterprises and Chinese students and create professional workplace social platforms. The second type was event promotion (Figure 4). The CSA organizes many activities for CISs within and outside of the university. This was to encourage them to build contacts and form relationships with others through engaging in these activities. The participants all indicated that the university provided several opportunities for activities to support the students' transition.

Figure 3
Recruitment Advertising on the Chinese Student Association's Official WeChat Account



Figure 4
Promoting a Music Festival on the Chinese Student Association's WeChat Official Account



Given the increasing number of international students, Australian universities have made efforts to create new forms of higher education space that better support international students' adaptation to the new culture and field of Australian higher education. Beachside University's efforts exemplify these. Consistent with social media principles and aiming to address the needs of CISs, Beachside University created official social media accounts and a public WeChat page to regularly post the latest news and information about university and student life. This social media practice evidenced Beachside University's attempt to address the field/habitus mismatch and field/habitus dissonance faced by CISs.

Although the university had a WeChat official account, the way in which this was operated and managed reflected the university's attitudes toward the position of CISs in Australian higher education, as well as the legitimization and

reproduction of the existing social space and capital. The WeChat official account was active during 2019, in that the university occasionally updated its campus and seminar information to increase CISs' level of awareness and engage them in various activities. The content posted by the university focused on cultural activities, promotional information, information about subjects and courses, and language sessions. This content was tailored for CISs to understand their subjects and career development, to receive support from the university, and to gain opportunities to participate in university activities and meet people. This shows the university's intention to engage CISs, support them in overcoming the social space between CISs and non-Chinese students, and give them the opportunity to gain social and cultural capital.

However, the frequency of updates has decreased significantly. The official WeChat account of the university has rarely been updated since 2019, to the point that it now seems inactive. This is reflected in the two main options of the university's official WeChat account, one about faculty and course information and the other relating to student services on campus: both were last updated in 2019. Since then, the university seems not to have devoted ongoing or long-term efforts to developing and implementing effective strategies to engage CISs and improve their social and cultural capital. The short-term efforts devoted to the university's WeChat official account indicate that it lacks the institutional capital to continuously motivate the university to engage CISs and improve its position. The legitimate culture dominated the university's practice, so its efforts were not maintained in the long run. The legitimate culture of the higher education sector revealed the shared value of social space between CISs and non-Chinese students and the legitimate value that reproduces this social space and capital distribution. Moreover, the existing power distribution in the Australian higher education field reinforces the mainstream position of locals and the marginalized position of ethnic minority groups, such as CISs. This internal system and structure, which arguably re-established a barrier to CISs' integration, drove them to continue using WeChat to create small groups and maintain their marginalized societal position but in relationships of belonging.

The findings indicate that WeChat is an important, culturally significant practice in CISs' habitus before and after they become international students. They embody its use and maintain important social and linguistic connections despite a change to a new field (higher education) in a new context (Australia). While the field recognizes this, there are still significant gains that could be made, should WeChat be used more significantly by universities attempting to facilitate international student engagement, it also acts as a communication mode that could constrain CISs' transition.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how CISs' WeChat practices mediated their negotiation of transition into Australian higher education, as well as their habitus within university practices. The findings contribute to the existing understanding of

CISs' social media practices and reveal how transitions can be made more effective for CISs. The findings supplement those of Dai et al.'s (2020) study on CISs' simultaneous experience in Chinese and Australian contexts and across and between the two in a liminal, in-between space through the internet and social media. The findings from this study show that WeChat indeed plays a role in CISs' habitus formation. Notably, some CISs stopped relying on WeChat once they entered the Australian higher education field and instead adopted Western social media platforms. Indeed, they sought to overcome barriers, restructuring their habitus by positioning themselves as acquiring value in a learning process and adjusting their practices to a new context. However, for most participants, WeChat was perceived as a virtual, in-between space where various subfields, such as education and family, could be developed, thus enabling them to acquire capital just as they would in the physical field of Australian higher education.

WeChat was found to play an important symbolic role, as reflected in its value in CISs' existing habitus and its use as a means for them to acquire social capital online through existing relationships and networks within their Chinese communities. The Chinese community legitimizes CISs' WeChat practices by continuously reproducing their value and importance in daily communication, work, entertainment, and information sharing. Through WeChat, CISs maintained and expanded their social capital in Australia's Chinese community. CISs' social capital was closely related to, and largely dependent on, the networks and relationships in which they participated. Social networks of personal position and influence also seem to be important factors that determine the cultural and communicative aspects of CISs' WeChat practices. For CISs to understand the importance of maintaining capital in WeChat, they also need to realize their capacity to adapt to other forms of capital in negotiating new relationships with non-CISs and through other mediums that are valued in the new context.

Chinese culture and Australian higher education affect CISs' purposes, motives, and experiences in WeChat use. Although CISs' changing geographical location affects their choice of social media, it does not alter the dominant position of WeChat in their social communication and relationship maintenance. WeChat served as a salient symbol that reflected the underlying culture and structures of the Chinese community that shaped and supported CISs' practices.

WeChat is a potential but unrealized medium that could constitute the social space of higher education for CISs if CISs are able to use university information to mediate the transition to English-based platforms. Maintaining and strengthening social relations on WeChat also enabled CISs to establish and manage their group identity as Chinese students in Australia. More importantly, WeChat has become a symbol of CISs' habitus in Australia, which has allowed them to project their identity and position in the social spaces of fields in China and Australia's Chinese community. In other words, WeChat acts as a social space in which CISs can maintain and express their identity as CISs in Australia for both Chinese people at home and other Chinese students in Australia. This point is crucial to developing an understanding of the forms and content of communication between CISs and non-Chinese students, as well as incorporating

such an understanding into programs aimed at ensuring a positive transition for CISs into the field of Australian higher education.

Beachside University recognized some challenges encountered by CISs, as well as the differences between the social media practices of CISs and domestic students. Some participants believed that the university could have done more through ongoing and significant use of WeChat to enhance transition. Accordingly, universities could continue adopting new strategies for intervention on WeChat to symbolically reduce the distance between them and CISs. Policymakers could consider reevaluating the current measure of social media policies. This study indicates that universities should advocate for and support inclusion policies on WeChat to provide more valuable and effective ongoing support programs for CISs' transition process. Moreover, CISs do well to consider themselves active agents in overcoming barriers and initiating self-improvement.

IMPLICATIONS

This study has implications for universities seeking to understand CISs' current WeChat practices and, more comprehensively, the challenges that they face when negotiating in the Australian higher education field. WeChat could be of greater use in universities, assisting in students' successful transition and engagement. This research incorporated a policy document review, a scrollback method, within semistructured interviews to examine 15 CISs' perspectives in Australia. The use of Bourdieu's concepts helped reveal CISs' use of WeChat in their transitions to academic and social life in Australia. Through their continued use of WeChat, CISs were able to avoid a sense of social isolation, retain their identity in CIS communities, and maintain their cultural capital in the virtual and physical social space. These CISs were in a 'potentially agentic' space while transitioning from a Chinese cultural field to an Australian university higher education field. The cultural transition they experienced in the new location was reflected in their habitus, and the elements that enabled their peri-transition habitus formation differed for each participant. For example, some were motivated and made efforts to change their practices to adapt to and embrace the new environment. When they arrived in Australia and began their transition, fractures in the cultural field caused by internal tensions and pressures from the Australian cultural context created opportunities for their habitus to transform, whereas the potential for exclusion was exacerbated in cases where the transformation was disabled or resisted. The evidence strongly suggests that habitus plays an important role in shaping CISs' communication and social media practices. Therefore, universities can facilitate the transition process by providing more explicit resources for habitus shifts. WeChat held symbolic capital for CISs, aiding identity maintenance and social position within Chinese social spaces. WeChat can also be considered a virtual space where various fields, such as education and family, enable CISs to acquire social and cultural capital just as they would in the physical manifestation of the field of Australian higher education. Thus, the participants'

WeChat practices appeared to play a vital role during their transition in Australia. The findings of this study have implications for future research on CISs' use of social media over longer time periods, Chinese and Western platforms, and their interactions and relationships with in- and outgroup others both on and off social media. The findings should be of interest to Australian university decision-makers and policymakers seeking to understand and enhance CISs' transition process, as well as (more broadly) to universities wishing to promote international student enrollment.

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