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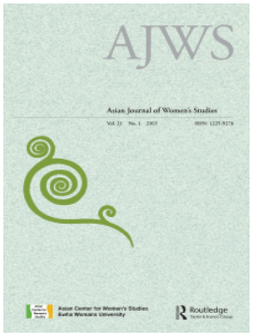

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Chinese first, woman second: Social media and the cultural identity of female immigrants

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ABSTRACT

Based on the conceptual framework of digital diaspora, this article explores the role social media plays in the development of migrant cultural identity and its political potential among digital forms. Using in-depth interviews and online observations, it analyzes the motives, purposes, strategies and outcomes of the use of WeChat, a leading Chinese social media platform, by Chinese female immigrants in Switzerland. Through thematic analysis, the article distills three patterns of WeChat usage by these women. Firstly, it notes how they make use of the technological affordances of WeChat to remain connected with their native culture. Secondly, it explains how, after acquisition of economic capital, they are able to forge a steady intersectional identity in their new host country. And finally, it problematizes their strategy to strive for social equality.

KEYWORDS Immigrant; social media; digital technology; Chinese diaspora

Introduction: Global immigrants in the digital age

Since the 1980s, attention has increasingly been paid to the study of global female immigration. This is partly due to the fact that immigrant women tend to bear a "double burden" due to their position both as foreigners and female (Morokvasic, 1983, 1984). They often face discrimination, both legally and culturally in the host countries, particularly in the labor market (Anderson, 1993; Kim, 2008; Liversage, 2009); while in family life, they are more likely to become victims of domestic violence because of their poor social status (Brownridge & Halli, 2002; Erez, Adelman, & Gregory, 2009). In recent years, with the rise of far-right populism in global politics, many countries have tightened immigration policies and imposed stricter social controls on immigrants, especially those who have transnational marriages.

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Moreover, globally societies are largely in the grip of patriarchal norms, hence it is women, rather than men, who have to face the negative consequences of such discriminatory policies. Also, women from less developed countries who enter more affluent ones tend to suffer the most (Houstoun, Kramer, & Barrett, 1984; Kawaguchi & Lee, 2016; Verkuyten, 2011).

Following China's economic entry into the world market in 1978 and loosening of restrictions on its citizens for entry and exit in 1985, it has rapidly become one of the major regions of the world with a large population moving abroad. According to the UN's *International Migration Report 2017*, the number of Chinese emigrants reached 10 million in 2017, making China the fourth biggest emigration country, in terms of population, after India, Mexico and Russia (United Nations, 2017, p. 13). Research shows that although Chinese immigrants tend to be economically better-off than those of other ethnic groups in European and North American countries, their women who move to these countries following marriage or for family reunification face greater structural discrimination compared to their male counterparts, particularly when they seek careers for themselves (Zong & Batalova, 2017). Discrimination faced by Chinese immigrant women in the West can be found in many social domains. These include underprivileged legal and political rights to education, employment opportunities and healthcare. In addition, they face constant objectification and sexism, often encouraged by far-right groups (Lim, 2018). Today the legal status of an immigrant woman in the West is less dependent on her familial relationships with a father or husband. Increasingly, those from China are well-educated and highly skilled. However, it is still difficult for them to integrate smoothly with host cultures and avoid becoming cultural outcasts, given the oppressive structures they face, in the way of immigration policies and histories of immigration to the West. As such, the lifestyle problems of these women are not just social and legal, but are also to do with the cultural and political milieu they have to deal with. Specifically, China has one of the world's largest number of emigrants; it is a leading force in the global economy; and it remains a major symbol of the "Orient." Therefore, the identification of Chinese immigrant women in the West have both empirical and theoretical significance for understanding cultures of global immigration.

With the rise of digital technology and the popularization of social media, cultures of global immigration have stepped onto a new stage. The widespread use of social media by immigrants has produced a "two-way street" effect. On the one hand, thanks to easier access to information and knowledge via social media, immigrants of the twenty-first century now have more channels to negotiate with cultures of the host society, making their cultural adaptation less stressful (Tapscott, 2009). On the other hand, as online social networks have lowered the time and financial costs for immigrants to communicate with families and friends in their home countries,

the need for them to culturally blend into their adopted society is no longer crucial. This implies that immigrants can now live peacefully without feeling torn by the contradictions between emotional affiliation to their native cultures and their need for survival in the host society as cultural outcasts (Kim, 2017a). As proposed by Dekker and Engbersen (2013), social media has not only built-up new communication channels for immigrants to maintain cognitive and emotional connections with their native cultures, but has also transformed the nature and attributes of the global immigration network in an ecological sense. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the role it plays in the everyday lives of immigrants and the way it affords new patterns of identification for immigrants, through technology, has become crucial for theorizing on immigration in the digital age.

Based on a qualitative inquiry into the use of social media by Chinese immigrant women in Switzerland, this article aims to discover the different strategies and tactics they employ to balance the two cultures in their daily lives. It examines how these immigrant women rebuild or reaffirm their intersectional immigrant identities through cultural negotiation that is digitally mediated and how, via their motivated media activities, they are able to challenge structural and political oppression. With reference to the conceptual framework of digital diaspora, developed by scholars such as Anna Everett (2009) and Jennifer Brinkerhoff (2009), in this paper we seek comprehensive and nuanced understanding of immigrant identities, via ethnic and gender-based perspectives. We also aim to assess how the media-based identifying activities of these women may contribute to possible legal/political changes.

Immigration, social media, and digital diaspora

Social media has played an increasingly important role in both the cultural identification of immigrants and the development of their communities. It has thus become an inevitable reality of the global immigration network (Dekker & Engbersen, 2013; Kim, 2017b; Oh, 2016). Social media is sometimes used by far-right actors to circulate stereotypical, anti-immigrant discourses or even organize political attacks on ethnic minorities (Don & Lee, 2014; Esses, Medianu, & Lawson, 2013). It is also used by immigrants for enculturation and to maintain their intersectional identities (Chen, 2010; Khvorostianov, Elias, & Nimrod, 2011). Social media also enables the breakdown of geographic constraints for immigrants to connect with their native cultures as it assists them in managing personal and family affairs back in their home countries and maintain good mental health in their adopted country (Nedelcu, 2002; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016).

In academic inquiries into the use of social media by immigrants, two subgroups have attracted particular attention, youths and females. This may be due to the more underprivileged social status of these two groups compared

to others. For example, Bunge, Jones, Dickter, Perales, and Spear (2016) point out that young immigrants are normally more adept than older ones at using social media to overcome the emotional, behavioral and cognitive difficulties they encounter in their migratory lives. This is because they can access rich cultural resources via social media to ease their experience of transition. Moreover, Helsper (2013) finds that women are more likely to use social media to communicate with relatives and friends in their countries of origin and are more adept at expressing affection for them from a distance. Studies also find that the use of social media plays a significant role in female immigrants' efforts to relieve cultural stress and resist gendered stigmatization and to acquire working knowledge about how to assume maternal roles within a different cultural context (Miconi, 2020; Zheng, de Haan, & Koops, 2019). Some researches specifically focus on the role smartphones play in improving the mental health of female immigrants and strengthening their communities by creating various new forms of interpersonal communication (García, Ferrás, Rocha, & Aguilera, 2019; Kędra, 2020). To some extent, the use of social media has weakened the rather hierarchical structure within immigrant communities, making digital literacy an increasingly crucial skill for their societal and cultural survival (Noguerón-Liu, 2013). It has also improved the public profile and cultural visibility for digitally competent immigrant groups.

Globally and culturally, the popularization of social media has largely liberated the life of immigrants from various physical and geographical limitations and contributed to the formation of vibrant virtual immigrant communities with growing diverse, intersectional identities. Since immigrants from varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds tend to have different habits of using social media, a variety of distinctions can be found among different online communities. These include language, economic behavior, cultural values, and political stance, all of which have been discussed in certain case studies of Chinese, Eritrean and Russian immigrants in the West (Bernal, 2006; Chen, 2006; Elias & Shoren-Zeltser, 2012). The virtual communities of immigrants and their descendants, formed via the use of digital technology and online platforms, are defined as digital diaspora. This provides a working conceptual framework developed by ethnic studies scholars to interpret the behavior, mindset and identities of people who constitute such communities as active cultural producer/consumers (Brinkerhoff, 2009). For Laguerre (2010), the formation of digital diasporas has not only facilitated translocal communication of information that is vital for immigrants' enculturation, but has also cultivated effective strategies for immigrants to seek steady post-immigration identities. Research into the use of social media by Palestinian immigrants in the UK and by Chinese immigrants in Australia have illustrated the materiality of the digital diaspora or how digitized communications among immigrants can exert impact on real-life social domains such as geopolitics (Zhang & Wang, 2019).

Existing studies on the digital diaspora provide a working conceptual framework for our research. On the one hand, by understanding specific immigrant groups whose members connect to each other through active use of social media, we are able to reach beyond the perspective of nationality/ethnicity that prevails in traditional immigration studies. We seek to examine immigrant identities with a more intersectional perspective by taking factors of gender, economic status, political orientation, cultural values and attitudes towards life into consideration (Gajjala, 2003). It is because of the extensive use of social media by global immigrants that all these intersectional factors, which were deemed as "less important," are now empirically visible for an interpretation of migratory life. This is not only a prerequisite for us to grasp the cultural features of modern global immigration, but also provides valuable references for more comprehensive discussions on the making of immigration policies. In addition, the digital diaspora framework regards the use of digital technology as a key factor in the construction of immigrant identities. It thus provides us with a new approach for the observation and interpretation of immigrant life experiences, focusing on the process of mediatization. By considering the formation of immigrant identities as a process of digitization/mediatization, we can explore the politico-cultural potential of such identities by analyzing the technological affordances of various social platforms and make a theoretical contribution to the ideal of cultural democratization in the digital age.

Research methods

Based on the concept of digital diaspora, this study attempts to present a comprehensive qualitative study of the relationship between the use of social media by Chinese female immigrants in Switzerland and how they build/reaffirm their cultural identities. This topic is significant on account of two considerations: first, as Switzerland joins China's "Belt and Road" initiative, the economic, trade and cultural exchanges between the two countries are becoming increasingly frequent, which makes an in-depth study of the living conditions of Chinese immigrants in Switzerland and how these affect the relationship between the two countries a natural call. Lieber (2010) points out that the role of Chinese immigrants in local Swiss society has changed from one of "mutual assistance" to "promoting economic interests," which illustrates the altering patterns of the Chinese diasporic culture in Swiss society. However, what is the relationship between this transformation process and the enculturation and identification of Chinese immigrants, given the wave of social media? Have the marginal voices and structural inequalities that exist within this group been ignored, despite the increasing and visible presence of these immigrants in Switzerland? These are questions that need micro, empirical and bottom-up research to answer.

Second, Swiss immigration policy has long been criticized for being over-protective about Swiss citizens and its latent discriminatory approach to immigrant women in various social domains. According to official sources, the total number of permanent Chinese immigrants registered in 2019 was 19,712, with more than 60% being female. Transnational marriage and family reunion are the most common types of immigration undertaken by Chinese women, most of whom are not employed during the initial years of their lives in Switzerland due to limited language skills and the non-recognition of their college degrees or earlier work experience by local labor markets (Federal Statistical Office, 2020). A report issued by the Federal Commission for Migration (CFM/EKM) in 2019 shows the employment rate of female immigrants in Switzerland of 68.6% is significantly lower than 78% for male immigrants, while Swiss female and male nationals represent 83% and 85%, respectively. This implies that immigrant women comprise the most vulnerable social groups in the local labor market. The report also indicates that even though the vast majority of immigrants in Switzerland have higher-than-average professional qualifications and labor skills, they are often forced to undertake jobs for which they are overqualified (EKM, 2019). This reveals that gender, among various cultural factors, plays an oppressive role in Switzerland. So, to what extent has the widespread use of social media by immigrant groups changed this situation? Can female immigrants become empowered through the use of social media and hence enabled to lead better lives in the face of immigration laws that are gender discriminatory?

We conducted an intensive case study of the use of WeChat by Chinese immigrant women in Switzerland. Developed and managed by the Chinese hi-tech giant Tencent, WeChat is a social platform that relies on mobile communication to deliver various types of information services. Users can send text and voice messages, share pictures and videos, or make voice/video calls with their contacts so long as their mobile phones have Internet access. Besides peer-to-peer communications, users can also use WeChat to organize video conferences and group chats. However, what makes this the most popular social platform among Chinese people worldwide lies in its powerful configuration of Moments, which people regularly use as a semi-private webpage for sharing personalized information only with contacts of their own choice. Moreover, users nowadays also use WeChat for transferring money instantaneously to contacts so long as their accounts are linked to real personal bank accounts. As we see, the technological features of WeChat are roughly equivalent to those of WhatsApp and Facebook (which are banned in China) combined, but have the added feature of financial transactions. The number of WeChat users reached 1.11 billion in the first quarter of 2019,[1] making it the most popular social platform for Chinese people globally. In recent years, the platform has played a role in

the daily lives of Chinese immigrants for the construction of overseas Chinese communities and organization of global Chinese social movements, which have led to considerable scholarly attention (Harwit, 2017; Zhou & Liu, 2016). However, there is no empirical research so far that examines the use of WeChat by Chinese female immigrants, a gap this article hopes to address.

We undertook a three-pronged approach: First, we conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with 52 Chinese immigrant women in Switzerland between July 2016 and October 2017. We then posted information on various WeChat chatgroups of local Chinese immigrants in order to recruit potential respondents. Over 70 women responded positively to our call. However, given the face-to-face format, we limited our interviewees to only those living in the cantons of Geneva, Zurich, Bern and Vaud, where most major Swiss metropolises are located. Each interview lasted about 60–90 min and was conducted in Chinese and then translated into English. The questions we asked the respondents were broadly on three topics: their lives and professional paths before they moved to Switzerland and why they chose do migrate? Why they were motivated to use WeChat and what were their use patterns after moving? And how the use of WeChat impacted their daily lives, psychological states and cultural identities?

Second, from October 2017 to February 2018, we undertook online observations of these 52 respondents' activities in six WeChat chatgroups and the content of their posts in Moments. We also attempted to obtain supplementary material about their real-time usage of WeChat for information exchange and identity construction and verified the data collected during our face-to-face interviews. The six chat groups were initiated by Chinese immigrants in Switzerland for various purposes such as discussion on immigration policy, sharing information on locally available goods, career and life support, and so on. It is worth mentioning that although these chat groups had different themes, they were quite similar in both content and function and most daily conversations between group members focused on their daily lives as immigrants.

We then conducted a thematic analysis of all the qualitative data obtained through our interviews and observations to interpret the affective and symbolic meanings in the respondents' daily use of WeChat, a common methodological choice made by many digital media researchers because of the conversational nature of daily online communications (Joffe, 2012; Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2019). We based our examination on the interpretive framework of digital diaspora proposed by Laguerre (2010), which focuses on the mobility of digital media users, the multimedia environment within which these users operated and the diaspora-homeland relations constructed through their agentic use of digital media. Finally, three thematic constructions of our respondents' use of social media were identified: the virtual co-presence of native and host cultures; identity reaffirmation through self-display; and e-commerce for women as an economic basis for identity development.

Virtual co-presence of native and host cultures

It was evident from our interviews that the immigrant women used social media to connect with each other for communicating and sharing information, mainly to fulfill emotional needs, a mechanism noted by Hillis, Paasonen, and Petit (2015) as "networked affect." For them, social media not only provided auxiliary tools to form virtual communities, but also created new intensities, sensations and values that both defined and consolidated such communities. Thus, "networked affect" is key to our understanding of the motivation for our interviewees to undertake daily use of social media.

Many respondents clearly said they used WeChat mainly to maintain kinship and friendship, so as to maintain emotional ties amongst themselves and with their relatives (mostly parents) and friends back in China, which was a reasonable motivation given the priority traditional Chinese values attach to filial piety, as emphasized in the Confucianist classic *The Analects of Confucius* (*Lun Yu*) that says "as long as your parents are alive, you should not travel far; if you have to travel far, you must find a solution to take care of them" (*Fu mu zai, bu yuan you*) These represent beliefs and practices of the Chinese for over two thousand years. Therefore, fulfilling of filial duties poses a huge ethical dilemma for such immigrants, that social media mitigates to some extent. Many respondents said that the use of WeChat has greatly resolved this in terms of costs and time taken. The unique technological features of WeChat have played an important role as it transmits information in vivid, multimedia forms; simplifies money transfer procedures through its digital "red packet" configuration;[2] and allows real-time video conversations that include various communicating parties. In other words, WeChat has enabled its immigrant users to perform the customary tasks of emotional connection and companionship to some extent, leading to the digitization of the global Chinese diaspora (Sandel, Ou, Wangchuk, Ju, & Duque, 2019).

Meiling, one of our interviewees, said that she sends messages to her parents through WeChat almost every day and conveys her affection and thereby cares for them primarily through it. As she put it: "In our daily WeChat conversations, I usually ask them how their day went and about their health condition. I also tell them about my life in Switzerland, about my husband and my son … … This way I make my folks worry less about me being in a far-way country" (Meiling, personal communication, February 3, 2017). Another interviewee, Huiling, appreciated WeChat similarly as she said:

> I used to make international calls to my parents when the Internet wasn't this big, which was really expensive, so I could only afford to call them once a week. Now, with WeChat I video chat with them every day and send them voice messages whenever I want to. We talk even more than when I was in China. (Huiling, personal communication, July 11, 2017)

For Meiling and Huiling, by taking full advantage of the technological advances offered by WeChat, physical absence from parents, a symbol of the unfulfilled familial duty enshrined in Chinese culture, was repaired via digital media. As Meiling noted: "This is of course not the same with 'actually being there', but I guess it's better than nothing" (Meiling, personal communication, February 3, 2017).

Besides performing family duties, our respondents also used WeChat for another important purpose: to maintain contact with their social circles back in China via various chatgroups and using the its Facebook-like feature, Moments. This was especially apparent during traditional holidays, such as the Lunar New Year, the Mid-autumn Festival, and the Dragon-Boat Festival, when people in China have days off and spend considerable time communicating on WeChat. For many of our respondents, the traditional holidays were among the loneliest periods as they lived abroad. So, WeChat played a key role in enabling digitized contact with their native culture. Thus, a sense of virtual co-presence became possible, whereby they partook of both their adoptive and native cultures. For example, Feiyan, a 55-year-old woman who had moved to Switzerland in 2003 said that she had joined many different WeChat groups – of families, old colleagues, old friends, and even old school classmates. She said:

> I not only chitchat with old acquaintances in those chatgroups, but also share information and opinions about certain social issues, even political controversies. I guess I'm doing this because I still want to be part of the old life, a life that was much simpler. (Feiyan, personal communication, November 30, 2016)

The second motivation for these immigrant women to use WeChat was more practical, that is, to maintain connections with each other within the local female immigrant community. Compared to neighboring countries such as Germany, France and Austria, the Swiss Chinese community is not only small in size, but also geographically scattered, making it difficult for its members to interact physically such as in a "Chinatown," seen elsewhere in the West. Therefore, WeChat groups naturally become the organizational catalysts of virtual communities for these immigrants in Switzerland. We found almost all Chinese immigrants in Switzerland had joined at least one local WeChat group. These were mostly established and managed by female immigrants, who were also much more active in online chatting than men. On the one hand, it may be argued that female immigrants tend to be more culturally sensitive than their male counterparts in imagining and maintaining a nation-bound community; on the other hand, this may also indicate that female immigrants are generally less satisfied with their living conditions due to their underprivileged positions and therefore seek intensive online communications for emotional catharsis. This was indicated by our inquiries into the 52 respondents' professional lives: most of them have only unstable,

underpaying jobs, while others had no professional careers at all. Low professional satisfaction coupled with language incompatibility and slow enculturation have vested in them a strong desire to communicate with their female peers to "hug for warmth," as one of them put it. This was evident in our observations of several large WeChat chatgroups of local Chinese immigrants such as the Swiss Chinese Culture & Leisure Support Group and the Swiss Asian Friends Support Group. In these, female members have shown much greater will and mobility than men in posting information, participating in discussions and sharing opinions in strong ways to express affection for, or even dependence on, Chinese culture, and so are more eager to defend and protect their ethnic identities. For example, Qingying came to Switzerland in 2010 through marriage to a Swiss man. Before she moved here, she was a successful businesswoman working for a large multi-national insurance company in Beijing, and now she is a full-time home maker with two children. She said:

> Since I can't find a decent job because I don't speak the local language (German) well, I have to stay at home and be a housewife. In the early days of immigration, I usually had no one to speak to for the whole day when my husband went to work. I was so lonely that sometimes when I met Chinese people in the street, I immediately took the initiative to greet them and ask for their contacts … Later, I discovered the various discussion groups organized by fellow Chinese people in Switzerland on WeChat and I couldn't wait to join them. For me, these groups are a primary social space right now, because people there understand my agony and have compassion for my pain, especially those who also came here after marriage. (Qingying, personal communication, March 30, 2017)

Other respondents shared a similar opinion with Qingying. For them, local WeChat groups have functioned as support groups. In their experience, their Chinese identities, reaffirmed by their online mutual-support activities, served as a "safety net," or means to survive discrimination based on race, gender and language.

WeChat is also popular among Chinese female immigrants for practical reasons. For newcomers, local WeChat groups of immigrants are a first source of information about local politics, culture and customs, and certain legal concerns. From our observations, the confusion new female immigrants may have on their arrival can always be resolved quickly or at least attended to via WeChat groups. Furthermore, older immigrants from time to time organize various events for the newer ones, both online and offline, through WeChat calls, such as free seminars on the immigration policies and German/French courses. All of these are greatly appreciated by the newcomers. It is worth noting that Chinese immigrants in Switzerland also use WeChat for political debates, especially on issues regarding China's foreign policy. For example, in July 2016, the official press release of the South

China Sea Arbitration (PCA, 2016) triggered some very intense discussions in the local groups on whether or not it was just. Many of our respondents participated in these online discussions and considered such activities cultural endeavors to reaffirm their Chinese identities. Lingsu, who arrived in Switzerland at the beginning of 2015, tells us:

> I had never had such strong patriotic feelings before all those discussions that I was part of. For me it was a moment of consolidation, a shared emotion about how Chinese territory is indivisible. I think this emotion has become stronger since I have lived abroad. (Lingsu, personal communication, May 9, 2017)

Hail (2015) finds similar behavioral/cognitive patterns in his study of overseas Chinese students and argues that the explicit expression of patriotism functions as a solidifier of a collective identity that makes overseas Chinese nationals feel psychologically safe.

We also paid attention to the content of communications between Chinese immigrant women in WeChat groups in our observations, wherein we found that in most cases, the information expressed and shared online by them was quite light-hearted and lacked a clear agenda. Some people seemed to be bored with life in Switzerland and posted messages in chatgroups only to kill time. For example, some of our respondents constantly shared "chicken-soup-for-the-soul" style articles[3] or posted funny memes popular on the Chinese Internet. Both were strategies for relieving the pressure and anxieties they experienced due to their vulnerable social situation. As the vast majority of these female immigrants in Switzerland were placed in similar situations, no one complained about such posts being boring or annoying. On the contrary, most of the women consciously continued to share "meaningless" posts and memes in order to obtain emotional comfort from each other. Supported by the findings of our interviews and observations, such mechanisms of communication are of great importance for our respondents to "hang in there" and sustain themselves.

Therefore, by using WeChat, Chinese immigrant women have managed to collectively build a virtual community wherever possible, in order to find psychological comfort without having to deal with the discriminatory local environment. Without actual physical form, this has become an indispensable emotional comfort zone for these women to deal with their difficult lives in the adopted country.

Identity reaffirmation through self-display

"Moments" is an important feature of WeChat that provides users a personalized space to shape their self-image and publicize their private lives. As a platform for self-display, WeChat has contributed prominently to the gender consciousness of contemporary women in China, enabling them to articulate

Confucianist ideals with feminist sensibilities in everyday life. They can thereby explore possibilities for establishing a new collective identity that is politicized through the active use of digital technologies (Chang & Tian, 2020; Chang, Ren, & Yang, 2018). For female immigrants, however, their uncertain and shaky identities posed a serious obstacle in adapting to host societies and cultures. The transnational relocation process separated them from their native cultural environments and forced them to live in an almost completely isolated way like never before, in which their original political, cultural, social, gender and geographical identities are either disorganized or absent, causing them confusion, bewilderment and disorientation (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990). However, in our interviews and observations, we found that the self-display function of WeChat Moments helps them allay anxieties and reconfigure their identities after arriving in a new cultural environment. The patterns of communication by Chinese female immigrants in Switzerland alter along with changes in their immigration statuses. First, we found that those who had moved here after marriage like to post things via Moments about its picturesque landscapes, high standards of living, and prosperous luxury goods market. Such posts may elicit criticism from the overseas Chinese community for being superficial or propagating materialistic values. Nevertheless, this also provided an important means for newcomers to deal with the perplexity they experienced regarding ethnic and gender factors, as they sought emotional and psychological comfort from people back home.

Due to the differences between Switzerland and China in levels of economic and social development, our respondents often received complimentary feedback from their contacts, which compensated for their anxieties, giving them a sense of accomplishment and reassurance that they had made the "right choice" by coming here. In this way, the women managed to attain some stability during the initial days of their emotionally stressful migrant lives. One interviewee, Susu, told us that she preferred showing "the bright side" of her life in Switzerland on Moments, which she explained as:

> I'm doing this first to comfort my parents, who are always worried about me being mistreated. Another important reason for this is that I want to let my old friends know that I'm good and happy here. When they post comments under my posts saying that they'd also like to be living in Switzerland someday, I feel very satisfied, and it helps me feel at ease in my new life. (Susu, personal communication, October 2, 2016)

This digitalized cultural mechanism of "demand-satisfaction-identification" in Susu's account resembles those seen in earlier studies on the use of the Internet by young women and college students (Bessenoff, 2006; Hawi & Samaha, 2016). In a way, we consider these to be discursive strategies employed by such women to legitimize their new cultural identities of being immigrants,

by exhibiting their new economic capital and relatively affluent lives in Switzerland. The cultural and psychological effects of such strategies reflect the complexity and nuances of various intersectional social factors that impact female immigrant identities.

Second, with time these women adapted to local society and their posts on Moments changed. Gradually, rather than exhibiting the material conditions of their lives in Switzerland, they tend to reflect the more cultural aspects of customs and lifestyles here and in other European countries. Given the strong desire of the Chinese middle class for international travel, following the country's long history of isolation (Zhang & Heung, 2002), the women immigrants in Switzerland were mostly from middle-class backgrounds. As such, their displays often triggered conversations with and attracted feedback from relatives and friends in China. As one of our interviewees, Jolene, put it: "I don't mind being a travel consultant, at least I'm trusted and that is precious" (Jolene, personal communication, January 15, 2017). It is worth mentioning here that in the effort to seek a new, yet steady identity on social media after migrating to Switzerland, our respondents seldom attached importance to their gender identity, but referred largely to their economic and ethnic identities such as their (former) middle-class and Chinese national identities. We did not find clear signs of feminist sensibilities in our respondents' acts of crafting their digital identities, let alone related activities as such, given that a great part of their uneasiness and anxiety were due to structural and gender-based discrimination evident in the local labor market.

Third, for those who already had footholds in Switzerland, children and had built careers here, the content of their Moments posts become "ordinary." That is, they mainly posted photos of their lives and families, shared opinions, discussed certain social affairs, or re-posted online news reports and practical information they found useful or interesting. This was more or less how most people used Moments in China. At this stage, our respondents posted more "feminine" information, mainly on topics of childcare, family relationships and women's personal wellbeing, while posts purely for display such as pictures of luxury items and ski trips became limited. This indicated that when these immigrant women had finally overcome anxieties about losing their former identities, they started to re-explore and re-affirm the gender dimensions of their new immigrant statuses.

In many ways, the social lives of the immigrant women in the new environment actually proceeded slowly as they resolved their anxieties and reaffirmed new intersectional identities, in which the use of social media played a role for mitigating anxiety. By using WeChat and its technological configurations, especially the feature of Moments, our respondents underwent this process in a much smoother way than immigrants were able to earlier. In the past they could only depend on migrant newspapers and the

radio, which were subject to greater local political and cultural control (Hickerson & Gustafson, 2016). The newer digitized pattern of acculturation, however, strengthened rather than disengaged social and psychological ties between the female migrants and their earlier lives and networks in China. For our WeChat user respondents, a strong recognition of their ethnicity triumphed over other cultural factors in their forming new immigrant identities, wherein they could be immigrants in the physical world and Chinese in the digital world at the same time. From our online observations, we were able to observe a very similar collective attitude between Chinese immigrants and overseas Chinese students towards certain international political controversies involving their country, in which the explicit articulation of patriotism was a major indicator. Thus, it is reasonable to say that WeChat, the most popular social media platform with an overreaching influence in the lives of global Chinese nationals, has successfully facilitated a transnational and transcultural digital Chinese diaspora within the global sphere.

The very fact that Chinese immigrants rely greatly on WeChat for identification and community building has led to the decline of other types of migrant media in Switzerland, especially local community-based Chinese language newspapers, possibly leading to somewhat homogeneous identities for the Swiss Chinese who obviously share more similarities rather than differences with their counterparts in other countries. It has been difficult for local, community based, Chinese immigrant cultures to be sustained in Switzerland, which may be different from the situation of countries that have more established immigrant groups such as the US, the UK and neighboring France, a subject that would be worthy of in-depth research in future.

Female e-commerce as an economic basis for identity development

While being one of the most developed economies in the world, Switzerland has a less than satisfactory performance in promoting domestic gender equality. According to *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018*, released by the World Economy Forum (2019), the gender pay gap is not only larger in Switzerland than in many other European countries such as Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the UK, France and Germany, but also larger than in some much less developed countries such as Nicaragua, Rwanda and South Africa. In 2016, after conducting a series of investigations, the UN concluded that there were serious gender inequality issues in Switzerland, especially with regard to the various types of explicit and implicit discrimination against immigrant women and those of ethnic minorities. As such the Swiss government was urged to reform its domestic and immigration policies to change this (Bradley, 2016). According to data released by the Federal Statistical Office (2019) of Switzerland, in the 2018 job market, 82.4% of men in Switzerland had full-time jobs, compared with 41% of women, less than half that of

men. This situation presumably is only worse among female immigrant groups. Many women move to Switzerland following transnational marriage, with no previous business connections or interests here, whereby they may rebuild their careers. Coupled with the limited recognition in the Swiss job market of their higher education and work experience gained in third world countries, most immigrant women can only choose to be full-time housewives or engage in unstable part-time work (Weins, 2010). Therefore, they generally have a lower status in Swiss society and in their families, given their economic vulnerability due to underemployment (Ratcliff, Bolzman, & Gakuba, 2014). Many of our respondents were in predicaments stemming out of such situations. Mochou, a respondent from Zurich, complained to us about her boredom as she stayed at home all the time doing nothing. She used to be a marketing expert in a multinational company in Beijing, but now felt deprived of her social status because it was almost impossible for her to find a job in Switzerland that equaled her previous one. She said:

> It is very difficult if not impossible to find a decent job here. I think I'm not hired simply because I'm an immigrant woman, and I often feel underprivileged in my family as well. My husband seldom takes my word seriously. (Mochou, personal communication, June 22, 2017)

Like many other Chinese immigrant women frustrated by the local labor market, she started looking for financial opportunities on the Internet and it did not take long for her to join the big army of *wangluo daigou*, literally translated as "overseas shopping agents who receive orders online." An increasingly popular means of self-employment for overseas Chinese people, *wangluo daigou* is a for-profit business model based on the opportunities provided by social media, whereby individuals living abroad took orders from contacts in China, purchase goods in overseas markets on their behalf, and then send these to them by mail or carry them across personally. This has proliferated with the fast development of large social platforms, especially WeChat, and the high tariffs imposed by the Chinese government on imported luxury goods, which guarantee a more than decent income for such commissioned buyers. The *wangluo daigou* business has flourished in Switzerland, especially as the country produces some of the finest luxury goods in the world, such as high-end mechanical watches. These are often priced twice as much in China and are extremely popular among its affluent groups. Then it is only natural for many Chinese immigrant women in Switzerland to take advantage of the strong consumer demands at home and their own immigrant status, to start such self-employed businesses that are feasible thanks to social media.

WeChat has become a universal platform for overseas Chinese women to manage their *wangluo daigou* businesses because it offers packaged

solutions to almost every possible problem that may arise in its course. It not only enables real-time communication between agents in Switzerland and buyers in China at virtually no cost, but also facilitates cross-border payments through its convenient e-finance services for which neither party needs to go to the bank for money transfers. Qiong, a 36-year-old mother with two children, tells us how she entered this business by chance:

> Several years ago, a friend of mine in China asked me to buy some baby formula here for her, because she was worried about the quality of baby formula in China. I did it for her and was surprised by how ridiculously overpriced imported products are in China. So, I started to buy this stuff for my Chinese friends for a reasonable charge as a subsidy for my family, and eventually I made it a business. WeChat is what makes this possible, it helps me go through all the procedures without spending too much time. I'm a mother, I have kids to take care of and I need this business to be flexible. (Qiong, personal communication, August 24, 2016)

In our observations of Qiong's daily use of WeChat for her *wangluo daigou* business, we see that she generally used Moments as a window for product displays, and when contacts showed interest in these products in their comments, she sent them private messages to talk about purchase details. For Qiong, being a shopping agent was practical because of its flexibility regarding time and energy required and its financial promise. She usually bought a stock of goods that were popular among Chinese buyers during discount seasons at local shopping malls, then posted pictures of these on Moments and various chat groups for promotional purposes, while waiting for possible consultation and orders. In most cases, the goods were delivered to buyers through postal courier services, with profits from sales being more than enough to offset all costs. Qiong and some other respondents also told us that due to its customer-to-customer nature, with normally small numbers of objects for international deliveries, it is quite uncommon for such businesses to be seized and taxed by Chinese customs, while they almost always ensured handsome net profits.

Even though it is not necessary for all Chinese immigrant women to earn extra income for survival, the *wangluo daigou* business is convenient and helps improve these women's status in their families. It relieved many of them of the anxieties of being financially dependent on their husbands, encouraged them to be confident about their cultural origins and strengthened their newly re-affirmed female immigrant identities. As an interviewee, Jill said: "The economic foundation determines the superstructure, as was told by Marx" "I have to say that it's true. I do feel much more at ease at home since I'm earning more money" (Jill, personal communication, April 5, 2017). It is also worth mentioning that because many of our respondents had worked as professionals in marketing, sales or public relations before moving to Switzerland, their work experience and skills played a crucial

role in their management of businesses, even if they were not valued in the local job market. Some of our respondents were so successful that they needed to hire personal assistants to help with orders and logistics.

Some women expressed concern about the sustainability of the *wangluo daigou* business model as it belonged to the grey zone. Given that China's increasingly stringent tariff and foreign exchange policies would lead to obstacles in the future, improving the lives and social status of these women would ultimately depend on reform in Swiss immigration policies. Therefore, it was not possible for these women to expect their financial success and status to be sustainable. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that, as a pattern of female e-commerce widely practiced by Chinese immigrant women in Switzerland, *wangluo daigou* has provided an economic basis for developing new intersectional identities to these women. They were thus able to circumvent the discriminatory local labor market and deal with the uneven power balance in their domestic lives. As a respondent, Lele, put it: "The importance of *wangluo daigou* can never be overemphasized. It makes us who we are today, and today we maintain our strength as Chinese women" (Lele, personal communication, October 2, 2017).

Discussion and conclusion

In this study, we explore the use of a popular Chinese social media platform, WeChat, by immigrant women of Chinese origin in Switzerland. Through qualitative methods of in-depth interview and online observation, we have sought to understand the role of social media in the forming of intersectional, diasporic Chinese identities among our sample of 52 respondents, with a particular focus on gender. By doing a thematic examination of our qualitative data, we identified three patterns of social media usage among Chinese immigrant women in Switzerland. These were not mutually exclusive, but had rather blurry borderlines in both discursive and practical contexts. As we discovered from our interviewees and observations, the financial success of Chinese immigrant women's *wangluo daigou* activities were sustained, thanks to the digital red packet and online banking services of WeChat, which was also used to sustain their networks with families and friends in China. The rationale behind the practice of self-display, via the Moments feature of WeChat to curate social and personal lives in Switzerland to impress friends and relatives, is similar to the affective force enabled by virtual co-presence with loved ones. Both of these enable and support female immigrants to survive psychologically and economically in a remote country.

Regarding the structural dimensions of understanding the identities/identifications of female immigrants, there were some key issues that needed in-depth discussion. First, we found that social media played a vital

role in the identification process of Chinese female immigrants, one that was largely built via WeChat's specific technological features offered to users. Papacharissi (2015) attributes the technological affordances of social media to four aspects: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. These characteristics determine the capacities of the social media platform to organize or even mobilize their users in an effective way. In our study of the Swiss case, the various configurations of WeChat, especially of Moments, provide important enabling mechanisms for the formation of the Chinese digital diaspora in the country. By facilitating almost all formats of interpersonal communication between Chinese immigrants and their contacts back at home, WeChat effectively supports their needs of self-display and self-employment. It thereby plays an ecological rather than an instrumental role in the identification work of Chinese immigrant women, implying that it breeds, cultivates and sustains rather than merely facilitate new patterns of identification. It helps create a digitized form of enculturation wherein the immigrants' native and host cultures can coexist harmoniously. Chinese culture, through WeChat, has functioned as a cultural filter whereby immigrant women manage to adapt to the host society without actually blending into it. Given its standardization and global outreach, WeChat enables the integration of Chinese immigrants scattered across different countries into a global digital diaspora, without loss of their original culture that is a source of emotional safety and a shared ethos that shapes and mobilizes them. There are indications that due to the involvement of digital media, the shared culture and identities of Chinese immigrants around the world will present new characteristics that are more monolithic and more tradition-oriented. This, however, deserves more in-depth inquiry.

Second, in the use of WeChat by Chinese female immigrants in Switzerland, we clearly discovered a behavioral pattern among them, as they strived to attain a higher politico-cultural status via economic capital by using skills and networks they possessed earlier. In most cases, these women were professionals in China before moving to Switzerland, where they started to face serious discrimination because of their status in the local labor market. Their loss of economic privilege caused existential identity crises for them and they had to then probe questions such as "who are we?" and "what should we do?" However, the virtual co-existence of their native and host cultures and the easy-to-go business model of *wangluo daigou* enabled by the technological configurations of WeChat mitigated some of these problems. Their socio-economic capital in China was thereby partially maintained or even transferred to their new lives in Switzerland. This became a dependable foundation and smoothened their process of cultural identification. Such a process was manifest in our respondents' efforts for maintaining their old social networks back in China in order to establish new businesses and reap commercial benefits. These, in turn, sustained

their need for self-esteem and self-sufficiency. The powerful features of WeChat made it unnecessary for the immigrant women to integrate into Swiss society in an overly compromised way. The affective support and economic opportunities provided by their mother culture through this digital channel allowed them to move on with their lives in the host society without having to go through painful, often depressing and old-fashioned enculturation processes. Their new intersectional identities of "Chinese first, female second" were thus established, based on a wide range of choices.

Third, the starting point of this research was concern about the discriminatory social life that female immigrants endure in developed countries. Although improving both social and family status was a key motivation for using social media by Chinese immigrant women, no signs of feminist sensibilities were evident in their identification processes, which meant that these women would seek no radical change to resolve their daily pain and agony. Very few considered divorce to be a rational choice even if they had a clear understanding of their underprivileged statuses in their families. The vast majority of the respondents did not have critical understanding about the power structures that underlay the oppressions they encountered as women in their new lives, where xenophobia and patriarchy collude with and sustain each other (De Luca & Carballo, 2014). While overcoming the anxiety caused by their loss of identities, they referred to and depended on their pre-existing cultural resources of being Chinese more so, rather than those of female gender. Although a number of our respondents were in an underprivileged position in their marital lives, they did not seem to question the rationale of marriage as a social institution. What they strived to do was improve and enhance themselves for better personal well-being. Such a mentality was in line with traditional thinking regarding women's roles in Chinese culture where temperateness is both expected and highly valued as a feminine characteristic (Li, 2000). The non-radical and non-political temperament of such a mentality nevertheless exerts little influence on pushing legal and political reforms aimed at altering the current immigration policy in Switzerland, let alone contributing to the macro political agenda of gender equality that benefits not just female immigrants but all women.

The use of social media has improved the living conditions of Chinese female immigrants in Switzerland, facilitating their diasporic identification processes through both practical and affective means. At the same time, due to the unique and powerful technological features of social platforms such as WeChat, the culture of the digitized Chinese diaspora increasingly leans towards their native culture and has been reluctant to articulate the political realities of the host society. To what extent can such an attempt for resolving structural problems through individualized, personal experience-based identification approaches contribute to change in the disadvantaged

social status of female immigrants globally? Does the affective satisfaction that these Chinese immigrant women achieved thanks to digitally mediated processes represent a kind of escapism aimed at avoiding structural social reform? Some of these issues may need to be discussed from critical perspectives in the future.

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Notes

1. Data retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/.
2. Senior persons traditionally give red packets to junior ones, for example, parents to children or managers to staff for the Chinese New Year, representing expressions of intergenerational care and love. The WeChat feature of "red packets" allows money transfers among contacts, but is generally used by adult children to send money to their aging parents.
3. *Chicken Soup for the Soul* is an American book series based on true inspirational stories about ordinary people's lives. The series is so popular in China that many we-medias copy its narratives and fabricate similar touching stories and attract wide attention to pursue commercial benefits. Thus, the "chicken-soup-for-the-soul stories" have now become part of widely used internet slang among Chinese netizens that refer satirically to fake anonymously written stories that induce the tears of gullible readers.

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ABSTRACT IN CHINESE

通过深度访谈和线上观察的方法，本文分析了瑞士的中国女性移民在日常生活中使用中国主流社交媒体平台微信的动机、目的、策略和结果。借助主题分析，文章归纳出瑞士中国女性移民微信使用的三种类型。首先，文章探讨了这些女性是如何利用微信的技术可供性与其母文化保持联系的；其次，文章分析了一种稳定的交叉身份是如何在这些女性获取了新的经济资本后得以形成的；最后，文章对这些女性争取社会平等的策略进行了理论反思。

KEYWORDS 移民; 社交媒体; 数字技术; 中国流散