

Encoding and Decoding Cultural Identity: How Diasporic Communities Reinterpret Media Symbols to Negotiate Belonging and Difference

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Abstract: This article discusses how overseas Chinese in Australia build meaning through Chinese digital media such as WeChat and YouTube, and how these practises are related to a sense of belonging and difference. Based on Stuart Hall's coding/decoding model [12] and the study of digital overseas Chinese and platform transnational communication [11], the following core issues are put forward: the most influential "Chineseness" in daily media consumption, "What is the characteristic? How can the audience decode and evaluate these characteristics across platforms? How to relate decoding behaviour to sharing discussion and other re-coding practices. How do platform conditions shape the process of identity negotiation? This study is designed by a mixed research method, with a short questionnaire (N=109) as a quantitative analysis component. The results show that the respondents have high-frequency cross-platform usage behaviour (the average frequency of WeChat use = 3.76; YouTube = 3.52, both using the 1-5-point system), and the contact intensity is significant (49.54% of the respondents are exposed to Chinese content for more than 1 hour a day). Respondents show active interpretation, often judging narratives based on Australian life experience (mean = 3.78), while admitting that such content affects their sense of belonging (mean = 3.54). This article expands the coding/decoding theory of digital transnationalism by highlighting the recoding mechanism under platform conditions (that is, the conventional path of reconstructing cultural identity and differences of overseas Chinese audiences).

Keywords: Chinese Diaspora; Encoding/Decoding; Digital Transnationalism; Platform Governance; Identity Negotiation

1. Introduction

The lives of overseas Chinese are increasingly organised through platform media, which connect immigrants with the discussion of the motherland, ethnic groups, and the host country society. In Australia, the Chinese ecosystem across WeChat and YouTube provides daily resources for news acquisition, community coordination, and cultural narratives. At the same time, it mediates geopolitical tensions and strives for the definition of "what is Chinese identity"[18]. These environments are not neutral channels: the platform structure and content review mechanism shape the visibility of information, the dissemination path, and the risk of speech, thus determining the expression of identity and the form of controversy [20].

At the empirical level, this paper reports only the quantitative survey component (N = 109) of a broader mixed-methods study.

However, the construction of meaning is not only determined by the medium text or platform. Hall's coding/decoding model emphasises that the audience will take the initiative to interpret information and produce mainstream, consultative, or confrontational interpretations according to social status and life experience [12]. In the digital environment, this interpretation labour is increasingly externalised through comments, sharing, group discussions, and cross-platform comparisons. These "recoding" behaviours can strengthen, soften, or resist the established meaning. For the overseas audience, this recoding is particularly critical, because it is related to the continuous consultation of belonging (belonging, identification) and difference (alienation, contradiction) in multiple public domains [11]. Based on this framework, this study raises four core issues:

- RQ1: Which "Chineseness" characteristics are the most prominent in the Chinese content consumed by overseas Chinese in Australia?

•RQ2: How do participants decode these characteristics on WeChat and YouTube platforms? What standards do they use to evaluate the credibility and position of the content?

•RQ3: How does decoding practice relate to recoding behaviour (such as sharing and discussion) with the sense of belonging and difference reported by the respondents?

•RQ4: How do platform conditions (such as algorithm recommendation, content review, and perception restrictions) shape these interpretations and expression practises?

At the empirical level, this article presents the survey results based on the quantitative part (sample size N=109) in the mixed research design and outlines a concise picture of the media consumption mode and interpretation mode. By regarding recoding as a conventional measurable mechanism for identity consultation in digital transnationalism, this paper expands the platform sensitivity of coding/decoding theory. The remainder of the paper reviews relevant scholarship, outlines the analytic framework and methods, presents results, and discusses theoretical implications for Chinese digital diaspora research in Australia.

2. Literature Review

The study of diaspora and cultural identity has always rejected the essentialist cultural outlook, but regarded identity as a relational, controversial, and historical product. Stuart Hall pointed out that cultural identity is not the origin of stability, but through the process of characterization and power composition [12]. This emphasis is particularly practical for the life of contemporary Chinese overseas Chinese in colonial societies such as Australia: the sense of belonging is often negotiated through daily differences and the intermediary connection with the "native land". Avtar Brah deepens this theory through the concept of "diaspora space", highlights the coexistence of immigrants and non-immigrants, and reveals how class, gender, and racialization shape the identification of the right of belonging [2]. Therefore, identity consultation is not only related to cultural maintenance but also involves boundary demarcation and exclusion mechanisms. Nira Yuval-Davis distinguishes between emotional attachment (sense of belonging) and "politics of belonging", that is, the social system engineering that controls membership [8]. As a supplement,

Floya Anthias put forward the concept of "translocational positionality" to reveal how identity presents situational and cross-cutting characteristics in different geographical and hierarchical systems [1]. These theories together shift the focus from identity as "possession" to identity as "practice and positioning", which is in line with the academic idea of regarding overseas Chinese as the category of appeal and position rather than a closed group [3]

The second type of research focuses on meaning production and audience dynamism, among which Hall's coding/decoding model is still of groundbreaking significance. Hall pointed out that media information carries a preset meaning (encoding) in production but needs to be interpreted (decoded) through the framework of social positioning, thus producing hegemonic-led, consultative or confrontational interpretations [12] For the overseas Chinese audience, this is very important, because "Chineseness", ethnic identity, and cultural authenticity are often mediated as controversial symbol systems, and different interpretation positions will reflect different identity results (such as identity, contradiction, or exclusion).

The key is that the digital media environment makes the decoding process more observable and influential: through comments, forwarding, editing, subtitle addition, and new context reconstruction, the interpretation of externalized social actions is visible, and private interpretation is transformed into public practice. This visibility prompts the conceptual paradigm to shift from simple decoding to "re-encoding", and the audience takes the initiative to reconstruct the unique moment of meaning for different publics. Participatory and spreadable media research supports this shift by showing how ordinary users increasingly act as cultural intermediaries who circulate and transform content rather than merely consume it [13].

A third body of literature examines digital transnationalism and platform power. Transnationalism research emphasises the continuous cross-border connection of immigrants and the multi-field social space of identity construction [22]. The study of digital immigration pointed out that the ubiquitous connection gave rise to "connected migrants", and its transnational connection was normalised through daily media practice [9]. On this basis, multimedia research emphasises that communication is not only constrained by access

conditions but also depends on platform selection and its social implications [15]. For Chinese immigrant groups, the unique infrastructure of the platform is particularly important: a social media study of Chinese immigrants points out that media connections are increasingly intertwined with the inequality of geopolitics, information control, and cross-platform content migration [18]. Platform research highlights its structural impact by defining the platform as a social and technological infrastructure for organisational visibility and interaction [21]. Algorithmic power research shows that the sorting and recommendation mechanism shapes what kind of content can be "thought" and "shared" [4]. The critical study of algorithm bias reveals how platform logic can reproduce inequality through seemingly neutral technical operations [16]. At the same time, content review research reveals how rules and enforcement practises limit speech and cultural production, often contributing to self-censorship and strategic self-presentation [5].

Gap and positioning. The existing research fully records the negotiation, meaning construction, and platform power of the identity of overseas Chinese, but rarely combines encoding/decoding with the platform mechanism to explain how users switch from interpretation to recoding, and how the process differentiates the sense of belonging and differentiation between different platforms. This research fills this research gap by focusing on the cross-platform dynamics of WeChat and YouTube as a measurable bridge between audience meaning production and platform digital transnationalism [19].

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Hall's encoding/decoding model as the main analytical perspective to explore how cultural meaning flows in the process of communication, and how the identity effect manifests in acceptance and subsequent expression. Hall regards the media text as carrying the predetermined meaning shaped by institutional power and ideological framework, but at the same time, he emphasizes that the audience is not passive recipients: they decode information based on social positioning, which may reproduce the mainstream meaning, consultation meaning or confrontational meaning [12]. In the platform environment, the decoding results are rarely internalized.

Interpretation realizes externalization through interaction (likes, comments), dissemination (sharing, forwarding) and conversion (editing, restructuring, subtitles). This article theatricalizes these observable behaviors into a re-coding process. The audience converts the decoding results into new symbolic forms and redistributes them to different public domains. Therefore, recoding has become a key mechanism for connecting interpretation and identity consultation: it is through it that "what information means to me" is transformed into "how I explain it and to whom I explain it to".

The theory of digital transnationalism explains why such recoding practises are crucial to the sense of belonging of overseas Chinese. Transnational connection is not an occasional existence, but continuous and multidimensional, shaping daily identity construction [23]. "The theory of "connected migrant" further points out that daily connection allows immigrants to live in an overlapping social world and switch between them through the use of conventional media [9]. In the context of Chinese discrete groups, this connection is often realised through the integration of Chinese infrastructure and the ecosystem of global platforms, making cross-platform communication the norm rather than an exception [18]. Under this framework, identity consultation is conceptualised as a dynamic balance between a sense of belonging and alienation, which is realised through selective contact with cultural content and strategic recoding for different imaginary audiences.

Finally, platform power is regarded as the structural conditions for shaping decoding and recoding. The platform organizes user attention and participation through algorithm sorting and recommendation mechanism, thus affecting the effect of content exposure and dissemination [6]. Algorithm systems may embed biases and visibility differences, making some characterizations easier to obtain and amplify [17]. In addition to algorithms, the governance mechanism is also crucial: content review and execution practices define the boundaries of speech, especially in the context of geopolitical sensitivity and cross-border risk, which may promote self-censorship [11]. The joint role of these platforms explains why the "same" cultural content will produce differentiated meanings and identity results on different platforms: not only because of different user interpretations, but also

because the platform has built the structure of content exposure, interactive participation and speech costs in a differentiated way.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Rationale

This paper reports only the quantitative survey component of a broader mixed-methods research design, which also includes platform text analysis, computational semantic/sentiment analysis, and semi-structured interviews. The hybrid method strategy is suitable for explaining the identity construction of overseas Chinese, because it can connect (1) individual meaning construction and self-positioning, and (2) the platform's unique constraints and empowerment mechanisms. These mechanisms together form the boundaries of visibility, communication and speech [7]. Under this overall design framework, the questionnaire survey provides a feasible way to capture the self-reporting model of large-scale samples: how participants can contact Chinese content across platforms, how to interpret the content (decode), and how to respond (re-coding) through interaction, re-propagation or silence. In other words, the questionnaire is not a tool to measure the "effect" independently, but a benchmark stage for mapping and interpreting orientation and behavioural response distribution. Subsequent qualitative research will explain this in depth.

4.2 Instrument and Measures Mapping

The questionnaire was organised into modules that follow the project's theoretical chain. Module A (screening) confirmed that respondents live in Australia and consume Chinese-language digital content. Module B (platform use) measured how often they use major platforms (from never to daily) and what they usually do there (watch, read, share, discuss). This defines their cross-platform "media diet" as the context where they encounter meanings. Module C (themes encountered) asked how often they see content about cultural traditions/festivals and national-image narratives, showing what is commonly presented in their feeds. Module D (decoding) used Likert-scale agreement items to measure how respondents interpret content, including awareness of framing and how life in Australia shapes understanding; Likert scales are suitable for measuring attitudes [14]. Module E (re-encoding)

measured what people do when they disagree (ignore, discuss privately, repost with comments, create content) and how often they have discussed such content recently, linking interpretation to expression. Module F (belonging/difference) measured perceived effects on belonging and perceived distance from certain narratives. Module G (platform factors) captured perceived constraints and platform influences (e.g., what makes people cautious and how platforms shape expression), reflecting the project's view that platforms actively shape meaning rather than simply transmit it.

4.3 Sample and Recruitment

In this survey, 110 valid questionnaires were collected online through the convenient sampling method of the Chinese digital network. One of the respondents indicated that he did not live in Australia, so he was excluded. The final analysis sample included N=109 Australian respondents. All analysis objects are Chinese content users. The sample covers different stages of immigration (ranging from less than six months to more than three years of residence in Australia), which supports a descriptive comparison of the situation of different overseas Chinese. Demographic variables (age and related background variables) are only used to explain contextual interpretation and expression patterns, not to claim to be representative of the population.

4.4 Analysis Plan

Analyses prioritised descriptive statistics: Proportions for categorical responses and means for Likert-type items/indices. This is in line with the guiding principles of investigation methodology for exploratory research. It aims to record patterns and generate mechanism-oriented explanations, rather than estimating overall parameters [10]. The study found that it was organised according to the logic of the research problem: (RQ1) contact and platform use; (RQ2) decoding orientation; (RQ3) re-coding practice and interaction field; (RQ4) perception platform conditions. In order to improve rigour and avoid overemphasis on cause and effect, the analysis scheme also stipulates the use of exploratory cross-sections as a robustness test (such as comparing the perceived caution/self-censorship between different residence times or identity groups), while

recognising that small-scale subgroups and non-probabilistic sampling will limit the scope of inferences.

4.5 Ethics and Methodological Limitations

Participation is completely anonymous and voluntary. The landing page provides research information, emphasising that respondents can exit at any time, and submitting is considered as consent; no direct identification information is collected. This method is in line with the good practises of reducing the burden and risk of respondents in online surveys, and is especially suitable for potentially sensitive topics. Research limitations include: convenient sampling (limited universality), self-reporting bias, and cross-sectional design that cannot establish a causal relationship. The project responds to the above restrictions through the planned triangle verification method of platform text analysis and interview.

5. Findings / Results

5.1 Sample Snapshot and Media Diet

The analyzed sample covers 109 Chinese content users living in Australia. The age distribution is concentrated in the young group: 18-24 years old and 25-34 years old accounted for 38.53% of the respondents, 35-44 years old accounted for 11.93%, and those over 45 years old accounted for 11.01%. Respondents lived in Australia for a period ranging from <6 months (13.76%) to >3 years (35.78%), indicating that the data set covers both new immigrants and long-term settlers. This is crucial to the construction of identity. Different settlement stages will shape the cognitive boundaries of "common sense" and affect the judgement of doubt when comparing Chinese narratives with Australia's daily experience.

In terms of platform usage habits, respondents frequently use multiple platforms, especially the mainstream cross-platform combination has a high degree of participation. The average frequency of WeChat use is 3.76 and that of YouTube is 3.52 (calculated according to the survey frequency scale), indicating that the "inner group" platform of the discrete group and the global video platform together constitute the core of daily media consumption. The contact time is also significant: 49.54% of the respondents consume more than one hour of Chinese content every day. Chinese content

sources show strong social network characteristics: respondents rely most on group chat (58.72%), followed by official accounts (46.79%) and overseas Chinese media (41.28%). Taken together, the sample's media diet is characterized by (1) frequent use, (2) networked circulation, and (3) a hybrid informational environment where content is encountered through both interpersonal flows and media outlets.

5.2 What is Being Encoded: Themes Encountered

Respondents reported that they were frequently exposed to topics related to identity, which can be understood as "encoded" meanings circulating in the media environment of overseas Chinese. The most prominent categories are traditional culture and festivals, and 63.30% of the respondents said that they were "often" exposed to such content. The second high-visibility theme is the national image/country-related narrative, and 45.87% of the respondents said they often encountered this topic. These distributions show that Australia's Chinese information flow is not simply a practical "immigrant information channel": they repeatedly present cultural continuity (through traditional/festival content) and national collective imagination (through national image content). In the logic of the proposal, the exposure of these topics constitutes how the subsequent audience interprets the meaning of these themes in the Australian context, and whether they will reproduce, correct or resist these themes.

5.3 Decoding Patterns

The survey results show that the respondents showed the dynamicity of interpretation rather than a unified acceptance attitude. First, the respondents' recognition of "Chinese content often shapes a specific Chinese image/culture" is moderate, with an average value of 3.42. This shows that the participants are aware of the characterization framework: the content is regarded as doing "image work" rather than simply describing reality. Secondly, the respondents more strongly agreed with the experience-based interpretation position. The item indicating that respondents combine Australian lived experience to understand content—rather than "taking it as given"—had a mean of 3.78, with 42.2% selecting "strongly

agree". This provides a key empirical basis for the core mechanism of this proposal: the overseas Chinese audience is not the terminal of passive decoding, and decoding is an active situational practice shaped by Australian daily life. On a practical level, this means that the same narrative about culture or ethnicity can be interpreted through comparison, tension and selective acceptance. It lays the foundation for consultative interpretation and may give rise to opposition in specific contexts.

5.4 Re-encoding Practices and Interaction Venues

When the respondents objected to the content, the most common reaction was to choose to ignore it (40.37%), indicating that silence is the main manifestation of "disagreement" in daily platform life. However, the second most common reaction is private discussion (23.85%), indicating that differences often lead to interpersonal meaning construction rather than public debate. More open recoding behaviour is relatively rare: 9.17% of the respondents said they would forward and add personal views, and 2.75% chose to create original content in response. On the surface, these data seem to indicate limited recoding behaviour, but the interaction indicators of the survey show that such behaviour often occurs in semi-private spaces. These spaces are still of great social and political significance in the overseas Chinese network. In the past month, 54.13% of the respondents said that they had discussed Chinese content three times or more in WeChat groups or private chats. In addition, the most comfortable place to express "true views" is WeChat private chat/group chat (56.88%), which further confirms that explanatory results are often presented in the form of selective sharing and discussion in a reliable micro-public domain rather than an open platform. The empirical results support the core argument of this proposal: the key issue is not only how the audience "thinks", but also interprets how to translate into action. Whether it is selective neglect, privately reconstructing the discourse framework, or occasionally making rebuttal comments.

6. Discussion

This study answers four research questions by tracing the mechanism from exposure to decoding, recoding and identity consultation in

the platform-based transnational environment. RQ1 asked what is most salient in everyday feeds. The survey indicates that cultural continuity and national imaginaries are especially visible: traditional culture/festivals are frequently encountered (63.30%), alongside national-image narratives (45.87%). Such themes function as recurring symbolic resources through which "Chineseness" is offered for recognition and evaluation [12]. RQ2 concerned how participants decode these representations across platforms. Respondents moderately agreed that content constructs a particular image of Chinese culture (mean 3.42) and more strongly endorsed interpreting through Australian lived experience (mean 3.78), consistent with Hall's argument that decoding is socially situated rather than text-determined [12]. RQ3 asked how decoding relates to re-encoding and belonging/difference. Disagreement most often produced silence (ignore: 40.37%) or private discussion (23.85%), while visible counter-framing through reposting (9.17%) or content creation (2.75%) was rarer. Yet semi-private talk was intensive (54.13% discussed content 3+ times in a month), and identity consequences were measurable: belonging was influenced (mean 3.54) while Australian experience also generated distance (mean 3.79). This suggests a negotiated pattern in which interpretation is externalised as selective re-encoding in trusted micro-publics, aligning with scholarship on mediated diaspora "spaces" of belonging. RQ4 addressed platform conditions. Perceived algorithmic shaping (mean 3.59), self-censorship (3.88), and geopolitically inflected judgement (3.55) indicate that governance and risk perceptions delimit expressive options, making re-encoding strategically channelled into less visible venues. Research limitations include convenient sampling, self-reporting scale and cross-sectional design. In the subsequent stage, triangular verification will be carried out through platform text analysis, computational semantics/emotional analysis, and interviews to explain how specific discourse frameworks can be disseminated and reconstructed between WeChat and YouTube platforms.

7. Conclusion

This article discusses how the Australian Chinese immigrant group contacts, interprets and responds to Chinese digital media on

WeChat and YouTube platforms, and how these practises relate a sense of belonging and differences. The survey results show that network communication and high-frequency contact have shaped the hybrid media consumption model, among which cultural traditions and national image narratives are particularly prominent. The decoding mode reveals the activeness of interpretation: participants can identify the characterisation framework and generally interpret through the perspective of Australian life experience, rather than passively accepting information. This interpretation is transformed into a cautious and relationship-oriented recoding strategy (often presented in the form of silence or private discussion rather than public struggle), but it still constitutes a meaningful social action, which is externalised into a micro-public domain through sharing and conversation. At the level of identity, participants both report a sense of connection and express a sense of alienation: Chinese content triggers a change in the sense of belonging, and the Australian experience also gives rise to critical distance from certain narratives. Finally, the perceived platform power (algorithm shaping, self-examination and judgement of geopolitical tendencies) shows that the boundaries of expression are constructed by platform governance and risk, which helps to explain why re-coding behaviour turns to hidden space.

This article provides an extension of platform sensitivity for Hall's coding/decoding model by highlighting recoding as a regular mechanism for discrete group identity negotiation in digital transnationalism. At the practical level, the study emphasises that cross-cultural understanding should not only pay attention to the media text, but also examine the platform conditions for discrete groups to speak out or remain silent.

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