

Why Australian politicians are flocking to 'Little Red Book' to engage with Chinese voters

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Wen Li, a graduate student living in Brisbane, ran for the seat of Mansfield as a Greens candidate in the recent Queensland election. Li promoted his policies on Xiaohongshu, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms. When he lost, he posted a [message](#) on the platform announcing his desire to run in the next federal election.

Responses were mixed. Some were supportive, others downright hostile.

Someone said, 'Greens are monsters', to which Li replied, 'I disagree but I respect your opinion'. Another user said, 'You represent Greens? Well, I'm out of here', to which Li replied, 'No worries, 3,000 people voted for me'. All of the conversations were in Chinese.

Politicians across the political spectrum are now using Xiaohongshu to connect with Chinese-Australian voters. In fact, it's replacing WeChat as the preferred Chinese platform for some. So, what exactly is it?

Red's Chinese business model

Xiaohongshu means 'little red book' in Mandarin (it's often referred to as Red for short). Some users also call it 'small sweet potato', which is pronounced the same in Mandarin but with different tones.

Red was started in 2013 by two young entrepreneurs in Shanghai who wanted to create a shopping guide platform catering mainly to young women. The platform quickly gained a phenomenal user base – it [currently has](#) 218 million monthly active users, including around [700,000](#) in Australia. It mostly features posts about cooking, fashion, shopping, travelling, health and everyday daily life.

There are now even [some suggestions](#) that Red is replacing Baidu, the Chinese equivalent of Google.

Like WeChat, the other popular Chinese messaging app, Red is wholly Chinese-owned. Tech giants Tencent (WeChat's owner) and Alibaba (AliPay's owner) are both shareholders.

WeChat has adopted a 'one app, two systems' [policy](#), which means it directs its censorship efforts only to domestically registered users on Weixin (the China-focused version of WeChat).

Unlike WeChat, Red is subject to one overarching censorship mechanism. Acutely [aware](#) of this, political candidates in Australia mostly focus on issues that are of interest to Chinese-Australian communities and avoid posting material that would be deemed '[undesirable information](#)' by the platform.

Who's on it?

Keen to win back Chinese–Australian voters, Liberal MPs are taking to Red with enthusiasm. Keith Wolahan, the incumbent MP for Menzies in Victoria, has a huge following on Red. Around 27 percent of his electorate are people of Chinese origin. Jess Wilson (Kew) and Michael Sukkar (Deakin) are also on the platform.

Interestingly, Liberal MP Jason Wood (La Trobe, Victoria), who was [accused of fear-mongering](#) with his comments about Asian food during the COVID-19 pandemic, makes a point of saying in his Red bio that he's married to a woman from Hong Kong.

Labor MPs such as Sam Lim (Tangney, WA), Sally Sitou (Reid, NSW), Carina Garland (Chisholm, Victoria), Jerome Laxale (Bennelong, NSW) were also early adopters of Red. All four displaced Liberals at the last election, in part due to the Liberals' more hawkish [stand](#) on China.

Scott Yung, a Chinese–Australian Liberal candidate for Bennelong, has been vying for voters' attention on Red in an attempt to wrestle the seat back from Labor at the next election.

Teal MPs such as Monique Ryan (Kooyong, Victoria) are also actively posting videos on Red. As the federal election draws closer, we can expect to see more candidates doing likewise.

How Red works

Red functions similarly to Instagram – users can post photos or videos and comment on other people's posts. Politicians regularly upload short videos of themselves speaking directly to Chinese voters on issues that might concern them. When asked why he chooses Red instead of WeChat as a platform for campaigning, Wen Li's answer is simple: 'More open discussion. More influence.'

Non-Chinese-speaking politicians seem to find it much easier to navigate than WeChat. While any Australian candidate can create a WeChat account, their capacity to directly target Chinese voters is somewhat limited. To attract followers, you need to send a request and be accepted as someone's 'friend'.

And to become a member of a WeChat group, you need to be invited. How diverse and vigorous the discussions are depends on the membership of the group. The semi-private nature of WeChat groups means they often become echo chambers.

This is not to say Red is as easy to navigate as Instagram, though. Growing a support base on Red can take time and require language proficiency, cultural knowledge and technical know-how. Most English-speaking politicians employ Chinese-speaking assistants who are familiar with the platform functions and user practices and can translate English content into Chinese.

These obstacles are less of an issue for Chinese-speaking candidates who already have substantial followers.

Engagement outweighs any downsides

There is [evidence](#) of misinformation and disinformation on both WeChat and Red.

Commentators [have also pointed out](#) the risk of politicians 'narrow-casting' to Chinese–Australian voters when they speak to Chinese voters on Chinese platforms in order to avoid the attention of the broader electorate, who may see them as too pro-China.

Despite these concerns, both platforms are useful [spaces](#) for Chinese-speaking voters to engage with politics. They can use the platforms to find out where to register as voters, when to vote, and how to ensure their vote is valid – an important question for non-English-speaking [voters](#).

Wen Li gained quite a lot of new followers by posting a message on Red explaining how preferential voting works.

Encouraging political participation is not just about informing voters. It's also about dialogue and persuasion, exchanging ideas and opinions. Red offers a more open space than WeChat for competing ideas to be heard. This means voters are more likely to be exposed to different opinions, which is healthy for democracy.

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