Shanzhai-ed Didi and the "New Chinatown": WeChat-based Ride-Hailing among Chinese International Students in Metro Vancouver

by

Yijia Zhang

B.A., Fudan University, 2015

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in the
School of Communication
Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Fall 2019

Approval

Name:	**Yijia Zhang**
Degree:	**Master of Arts**
Title:	***Shanzhai*-ed Didi and the "New Chinatown": WeChat-based Ride-Hailing among Chinese International Students in Metro Vancouver**
Examining Committee:	**Chair:** Enda Brophy Associate Professor
	Kirsten McAllister Senior Supervisor Associate Professor
	Frederik Lesage Supervisor Associate Professor
	Eugene McCann Examiner Professor Department of Geography
Date Defended/Approved:	November 12, 2019

Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

or has conducted the research

c. as a co-investigator, collaborator, or research assistant in a research project approved in advance.

A copy of the approval letter has been filed with the Theses Office of the University Library at the time of submission of this thesis or project.

The original application for approval and letter of approval are filed with the relevant offices. Inquiries may be directed to those authorities.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

Update Spring 2016

Abstract

This thesis examines the role WeChat plays in the life experience of Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver, Canada, focusing on the use and development of ride-hailing platforms from July to November 2018. By following WeChat-based underground ride-hailing using multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995) and interviewing students working as drivers and using these services, this thesis conceptualize WeChat as an assemblage (Slack, 2012) that combines infrastructures, networks, ideas and spaces, rather than another imported social media application hindering their acculturation. This thesis examines students' economic and social practices in replicating a digitally-connected "Chinese" lifestyle in Canada through "*shanzhai*-ed" platforms on WeChat, which are shaped and restricted by local media discourses and regulations, including BC's long-existing yellow peril discourse (Deer, 2006). Examining ride-hailing as part of the assemblage, this thesis showcases the entanglement of these students' lives with technologies, social networks, labour and spaces in the local negative discursive and regulatory environment.

Keywords: WeChat; Chinese international student; ride-hailing; assemblage; Chinatown; multi-sited ethnography

Dedication

To Resartus

Acknowledgements

First of all, this thesis will not be possible without all the anonymous drivers and passengers from the WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms who generously shared their experience with me, whether they eventually chose to participate in the research project or not. They brought me to a deeper and embodied understanding of the “New Chinatown”. Their stories and their witty expressions added so much to this ethnographic study.

The thesis is a product of my three and a half years’ learning at the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University. My deepest and sincerest gratitude goes to my senior supervisor, Dr. Kirsten McAllister, who encouraged me to engage with the field from the start of the graduate school and guided me throughout the research and writing process. Without her support, in academic and emotional aspects, I would not come back from the field with refreshed understanding of ethnography, as well as the *shanzhai*-ed Didi that this thesis focuses on. This thesis also owes a lot to Dr. Frederik Lesage, who provided detailed and ingenious instructions throughout my research journey. His encouragement and sharing of research strategies helped me to power through the fieldwork and he introduced me to so many great resources and opportunities whose benefits went far beyond this project. I would also like to thank Dr. Eugene McCann, whom I met through articles and books before meeting in person and provided insights that really helped me to look into the future possibilities of my research.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the professors and lecturers I studied under and worked with at the School of Communication. They taught me what a critical scholar of communication should be and offered tremendous insights and support for my study and research: Dr. Svitlana Matviyenko, Dr. Alison Beale, Dr. Sun-ha Hong, Dr. Peter Chow-White, Dr. Maggie MacAulay, Dr. Jody Baker, and Dr. Enda Brophy. I would also like to thank Jason Congdon, Jill Baryluk, Amy Soo, Wendy Addison, Dimple Patel and Lucie Menkveld for their administrative support.

I am grateful to my amazing fellow graduate students: Aimee Rigor, Geneva Nam, Xueqi Wang, Adjua Akinwumi, Tahmina Inoyatova, Taeyoung Kim, Pippa Adams, Jasmine Proctor, Sibo Chen and Ejilayomi Mimiko. For the last three years, I have relied on their wisdom, support and company. They made the School home to me.

Last but not least, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my family. My parents, Linyin Zheng and Yaoping Zhang, who raised me up and had always respected my choices in life. Their dedication to reading and writing inspired me and brought me to where I am today. My parents-in-law, who witnessed my writing phase and supported me throughout my research journey. My husband, Nuo Xu, who has always supported me with his love and humour, and the little one who is about to come and has been staying with me since the revision stage.

Table of Contents

Approval ii
Ethics Statement iii
Abstract iv
Dedication v
Acknowledgements vi
Table of Contents vii
List of Tables ix
List of Figures x
List of Acronyms xi

Introduction 1
Chinese migrants in Vancouver 4
The local controversy over "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" 7
WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver 10
Researching underground ride-hailing on a super app from China in Metro Vancouver 13

Chapter 1. Literature Review 17
1.1. Chinese migrants in Vancouver, Canada 17
1.2. Chinese international students 22
1.3. Digital migrants 31
1.4. Assemblage as a productive framework 39

Chapter 2. Methodology 45
2.1. Researching digital migrants 46
2.2. The initial design 48
2.3. To research, ethically 51
2.4. Challenges of researching Chinese underground ride-hailing 55
2.4.1. The first participant 56
2.4.2. Recruiting participants online and on the rides 59
2.4.3. The field of surprises, in both good and bad ways 65
2.5. "Multi-sited-ness" of WeChat-based ride-hailing revisited 67

Chapter 3. Cultural Assemblage and the New Chinatown 70
3.1. "WeChat is a lifestyle" 70
3.2. WeChat as the technological infrastructures 73
3.2.1. Public account as the service platform 73
3.2.2. The marketing potential of the ride-hailing platform 77
3.2.3. WeChatPay: A variety of payment options 82
3.2.4. The hidden hazards of the platforms on WeChat 85
3.3. People in the WeChat assemblage 87
3.4. A separate mediasphere 94
3.4.1. When an "illegal" ride-hailing driver called the police… 95
3.4.2. The international student radio 97

3.5. Fantasizing/replicating the Chinese life 100
3.6. The New Chinatown 104

Chapter 4. WeChat-based ride-hailing: A corner of the "New Chinatown" 111
4.1. The precarious "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" 112
4.2. Enter the world of ride-hailing from WeChat 116
4.3. Sharing a temporary space with a co-ethnic stranger 123
4.4. International student labour on/beyond the rides 130
4.4.1. Driving through the sleepless nights 131
4.4.2. ZZZZ's job list 132
4.4.3. A "flexible" job 136
4.4.4. For the flexibility, but also for the money 140
4.5. The space of "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" 141
4.5.1. The "underground" business that boldly advertises 141
4.5.2. The boundaries, destinations and routes of the "invisible" rides 146

Conclusion 161
"Whitewash" 161
The thesis of this thesis 161
Positionality: Research with participants 169
Limitations 170
Future directions of study 171

Afterword: The assemblage in change 173

References 178

List of Tables

Table 3.1. The list of articles published at Kabu's public account.....79
Table 3.2. A list of Kabu positions advertised in its public account.....90
Table 4.1. The list of frequently visited destinations provided by Raccoon Go.....149

List of Figures

Figure 2.1. The initial design of methodology 50
Figure 2.2. The methodological design adjusted after negotiations with SFU REB...55
Figure 2.3. The methodological design shaped by the fieldwork 67
Figure 2.4. Development of methodological design in the process of research.....69
Figure 3.1. A model for the home interface of a WeChat public account.....74
Figure 4.1. Raccoon Go provides a variety of services in addition to ride-hailing....122
Figure 4.2. The bulletin board at a public university in Metro Vancouver 145
Figure 4.3. The ride-hailing map that DDJ drew during the interview 148
Figure 4.4. Mapping out the frequently visited destinations.....152

List of Acronyms

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BC	British Columbia
BCIT	British Columbia Institute of Technology
CC	Coquitlam College
CPA	Certified Public Accountant
CRA	Canada Revenue Agency
CSSA	Chinese Students and Scholars Associations
DAU	Daily Active Users
GLU	Great Lake University
ICTs	Information and Communication Technologies
KPU	Kwantlen Polytechnic University
NYPD	New York City Police Department
PTB	Passenger Transportation Board
RCMP	Royal Canadian Mounted Police
REB	Research Ethics Board
SFU	Simon Fraser University
UBC	The University of British Columbia
UK	The United Kingdom
US	The United States
VOA	Voice of America
VPC	Vancouver Premier College of Hotel Management

Introduction

"*Shi-san*! *Shi-san-hao hao-le*! Number third-teen!" "*Shi-san*! Number third-teen!"

I was standing at the side of an oily wooden counter of a Cantonese congee and noodle place. Surrounding me were over two dozen of Asian food counters – from spicy Sichuan beef noodles to sweet Singapore laksa – on the second floor of Crystal Mall, a famous Asian-themed two-storied plaza located at the northwest of Metropolis Metrotown in Burnaby, British Columbia (BC). A girl, school-aged and younger than me, was calling out the number of the dish that was ready, in Chinese and English alternatively. But it was not my number. So I kept lingering at the side of the counter.

The menu hung from the ceiling advertised over thirty varieties of Cantonese dishes in mid-sized Chinese characters. Small-sized English letters were jammed underneath for occasional English-speaking food hunters. In addition to the menu hanging at the top, were posters and flyers displayed on the front outward-facing panel of the counter where I was waiting for my order. An image on one of the posters grabbed my attention. It was a photograph focusing on a man's arm in a blue shirt sleeve that was resting on a car's steering wheel with the hand firmly gripping it, as if the man was turning the vehicle. What seemed to be the right hand was holding an iPhone with what looked like an interactive map in the bottom half of its screen. Below this professional-looking picture, was a black background with a cute icon, a few lines in big-sized Chinese characters using three fonts in two colors, and then on the bottom were two QR codes. The first line in orange asked in Chinese, "Why should you choose to join Raccoon Go".[1] The next three lines, in white, answered, "This is a magical money-making tool with a flexible working schedule". "Flexible working schedule" and "magical money-making tool" were both highlighted using a bold and more solid font. I moved closer to scrutinize the QR codes. Under the left QR code it stated, "Contact Customer Service" and under the right one it noted "Add Public Account". I hovered my phone over the right QR code for a few seconds and what popped up in front of me was a window

[1] The poster was originally written in Chinese. Since the thesis is written in English, I translated the text from Chinese to English.

with brief introduction of a public account named “Raccoon Go” and I was able to subscribe to the public account for free right away.

This was one of the posters put on the front panel of the kitchen’s counter, which I would like to call “counter/bulletin board”. Like all the other food outlets, on the counter/bulletin board of this Cantonese congee and noodle kitchen, there were posters advertising platforms for housing rentals, food delivery, a party organized by the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA) for students in colleges and universities across Metro Vancouver, and ride-hailing platforms. Overlapping with each other, these posters’ cartoonish, colorful and professionally rendered designs were screaming for attention. As the wait time for my congee was not short, I had time to read every poster closely. If I wanted, I could sign up to every platform and event advertised.

Most people around me were speaking Mandarin or Cantonese occasionally mixed with English. The food court enlisted a wide range of Chinese cuisines from different parts of China. Given its variety and the authenticity of the food, it rivalled any food court in China. The posters on the counter/bulletin boards, the flyers pressed under the transparent plastic table covers, and even the tableware and takeaway boxes were all printed in Chinese, sometimes with simplified characters and sometimes with traditional ones[2]. After dumping the garbage in the big trash-bin with Chinese signs, I said “thank you” in Mandarin to the cleaner who helped me with the garbage and who was responsible for the sanitary environment of the food court. Don’t get me wrong. I was in Metro Vancouver, Canada, not China. No, I was not at Chinatown either.

The food court and my experience with the posters on the front counter of the kitchen selling Cantonese congee and noodles share something in common with this thesis. This thesis is about the role WeChat plays in the life experience of Chinese international students[3] in Metro Vancouver. My fieldwork focuses on the WeChat-based

[2] The traditional Chinese characters are used in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan and places where Chinese immigrants who left China congregate before the movement to simplify Chinese characters started and was enforced. The simplified Chinese characters are simplified from the traditional Chinese characters, as part of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s measures in 1950s to raise the national literacy and have been accepted and widely used in Mainland China since 1950s.

[3] By “Chinese international students”, I refer to students coming from the Greater China region, which includes China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan. Although most of the participants I encountered in the field are from mainland China, the stories they told about ride-hailing did have

ride-hailing platforms that these students use, which has been a controversial phenomenon in the context of BC's regulations banning Uber and other ride-hailing companies. As the ads at Crystal Mall show, despite its ambiguous legal status, the WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms are part of my everyday encounters. When I read articles on WeChat, some of the most popular articles are actually from one of the ride-hailing platforms' public accounts. My friends around me, who are also international students, often know about such platforms, use them from time to time and even register as drivers. Just like the fantastic Cantonese congee and noodles kitchen that remains a hidden gem for most people passing by Crystal Mall – an Asian-themed mall that is just two to three minutes' walk from Metropolis Metrotown or the Burnaby Public Library – the ride-hailing platforms, without in-depth research and patient description, would also remain a mysterious "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" business. The local English media missed WeChat's ride-hailing platforms' multifacetedness and situatedness as they focused on illegality and ethnic-exclusiveness[4]. Aiming to approach WeChat as something deeply entangled with various aspects of life for international students in Metro Vancouver, this thesis examines WeChat as an assemblage and describes how it has become the basis for the formation of a "New Chinatown". More specifically, by using the methodology developed by mobility scholars like Büscher and Urry (2009), for my research, I "follow" the WeChat-based ride-hailing as a corner of this assemblage using multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995).

Before diving deep into the research, however, I would like to present the context of Chinese migration and diasporic communities in Metro Vancouver, a metropolis where over 2,463,000 residents of the province of British Columbia live in Canada, which is the setting for my research story.

---

connections with students from Hong Kong, Macao or Taiwan. Thus it is difficult in the context of this study to distinguish students from mainland China and those from other areas as clearly defined categories.

[4] Throughout this thesis, I will describe the Chinese-language ride-hailing services on WeChat as "unregulated" rather than "illegal". Even though as the Research Ethics Board (REB) indicated, the service was illegal in Metro Vancouver and drivers could face fines up to $1150, I tried not to add to the pejorative framing found in local English media to the story. Especially since part of the aim of this thesis is to look beyond the crackdown narrative around WeChat-based ride-hailing and the reiteration of the yellow peril discourse in the media and to unveil the multi-layered phenomenon as embedded in the lived ethnic communities and Metro Vancouver, I will refer to it as unregulated and underground, rather than illegal, though I also problematize "underground" in Chapter 4.

Chinese migrants in Vancouver

Immigration from China can be traced back to the early development of British Columbia. The earliest arrival of Chinese on the west coast of Canada was in the 1780s, when the British fur trader and retired naval officer Captain John Meares recruited over one hundred Chinese laborers from Macao and Guangzhou to work on the Vancouver Island. Large number of Chinese immigrants came in the 1850s and in the 1880s, which were the periods that were closely connected with the gold rushes and the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway in British Columbia (Lai, 2003). In 1967, the Immigration Act passed led to a large increase of Chinese immigrants in Canada, after years of discriminatory laws that restricted immigration, for example, through head tax or a complete ban on Chinese immigration.

The more open and less discriminatory immigration laws have been a major force shaping the more diverse racial-ethnic composition of the Canadian population since 1967, increasing the Asians in British Columbia's demographic composition. According to the Canadian government's National Household Survey (2013), over 167,500 (30.7%) immigrants from Mainland China live in British Columbia and 159,200 (95%) of them reside in the Greater Vancouver Area. Besides the long history and large volume of Chinese immigrants around the turn of the 19th century, Vancouver became home to one of the largest booming Chinatowns on the west coast of Canada, which was rejuvenated in 1980s with more investment and a larger and more diverse Chinese labour forces. There was the increased market potential brought by the business immigrants from Hong Kong in the 1990s as well (Lai, 2003). Meanwhile, as these post-1967 Chinese immigrants expanded from the city-center Chinatown to the suburbs, they began to reshape the geography of the suburban areas. A great number of Chinese-themed suburban malls and plazas have been erected and have functioned as alternative Chinatowns, serving as centres for the exchange of goods, information and networking opportunities for Chinese immigrants in the neighborhood. The spread of Chinese restaurants and Taiwanese bubble tea shops, supermarkets, immigration services and other middleman agencies for Chinese-speaking migrants, and "monster homes" (Madokoro, 2011) became signs of post-1967 Chinese settlement in Vancouver's increasingly multicultural neighborhoods (Hiebert, 1999), even if the anti-Asian hostility is still evident here and there (Deer, 2006).

In addition to reshaping the physical landscape of the region, these diverse Chinese-speaking communities created one of the biggest ethnic mediaspheres in Vancouver, BC. Chinese ethnic media has the longest history in Vancouver, where there are 25 different outlets, providing services in various languages and dialects, serving Chinese populations of diverse backgrounds (Murray, Yu & Ahadi, 2007). In Zhang and Hao's (1999) review of the ethnic Chinese press in the United States (US), they quoted an earlier study on ethnic publications by Singer (1978) who observed that the insufficiently funded ethnic publications had extremely high mortality rate as they suffered from a series of difficulties including censorship from the local government. In contrast to the crisis faced by ethnic Chinese presses at the end of 1990s in the US, a great number of ethnic media outlets in Vancouver, for example, *Ming Pao*, *Sing Tao*, Talentvision and Fairchild TV, have been leaders of the local ethnic media industry for over twenty years and have developed into large-scale privately-owned enterprises maintaining huge influence in both the ethnic communities and the host society[5] in general (Murray et al., 2007). These channels of ethnic media play an important role in helping immigrants settle, supporting their identity transition from being a foreigner to becoming a local resident in their new host society, providing local information on immigration policies, employment opportunities and other key aspects of migrants' life, as well as presenting important news from their homelands and translating local news into the ethnic languages (See also Kong, 2014; Matsaganis, Katz, & Ball-Rokeach, 2011; Murray et al., 2007; Yang, Wu, Zhu, Brian, & Southwell, 2004).

Now aided by the Internet, immigrants no longer have to resort to paper-based ethnic media to know what is happening in their homelands. In the case of immigrants from China, for instance, even though they reside outside China, they can share the same news stories, entertainment content and ideologies simultaneously with Chinese citizens residing inside the borders of People's Republic of China (PRC) and participate in political discussions in online forums, where they are not identified as emigrants or

[5] The idea of a "host" society and the implications behind this term, including how immigrants are supposed to acculturate, become increasingly questionable. As will be more explicitly discussed in Chapter 3 and 4, this thesis does not agree that immigrants should by default integrate to the local mainstream society where they choose to live. At least, it should not be viewed as a unidirectional process. However, due to the limited length of this thesis, I will not discuss how questionable terms like "host" society are, let alone propose some alternatives. Instead, I will continue to use the term "host society", sometimes in quotation marks, to refer to the society where the international students and immigrants have chosen to live.

foreigners, but as “Chinese” (Yin, 2015). According to research (Chen & Hanasono, 2016; Kong, 2005; Ong, 2003; Yin, 2015), however, this immediate accessibility to homeland media through Internet can deter the migrants’ motivation to acculturate to their new homeland and reduce opportunities to improve their local language proficiency. As a result, migrants may encounter challenges in developing local networks, accessing mainstream job market and engaging in local political, social and cultural dynamics. On the other hand, modern transportation innovations have made transnational travel and thus life comparatively easy and affordable. According to Ong (2003), this increased mobility signifies a change of paradigm for research on the Chinese immigrant communities, as the current migrants are no longer embarking on a journey with no hope of return. Rather, they are dis-embedding from localized relations in their homeland to re-embed in new networks that overlap with old ones and cut across the border between their “home” and the “host” societies (Ong, 2003, p.87).

The international student, who has been frequently associated with this transnational mobility (King & Raghuram, 2013), makes a promising case to examine the impact that transnationalism has upon ethnic communities who are situated in-between their host societies and homelands. Compared to immigrants who arrive in their new host society aiming to work, reside and raise families, international students experience relatively greater physical and social mobility after graduation – in addition to the choice of staying in the country where they attained their education, many of them choose to go home or continue their studies or look for job opportunities in a third country (Gomes, 2018). Nevertheless, similar to other immigrants, international students are found to be subject to various forms of discrimination and abuse, which often lead to clustering with co-nationals and estrangement from their host society (Lim & Pham, 2016). In the case of Chinese international students, a great deal of research has been done on various aspects of acculturation, from English as Second Language (ESL) studies, cross-cultural adaptation to new learning and living environments, to their psychological well-being (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Brunton, 2007; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Yet other aspects of life for international students as potential immigrants and active participants in local Chinese communities are rarely studied, with only a few exceptions examining their use of polymedia (Peng, 2016), their initiatives in structuring local supporting groups (Ye, 2006a, 2006b), the pressures when they return to the domestic labour market (Hao & Welch, 2012), and their involvement in parallel trading (Martin, 2017).

This thesis hopes to contribute to these studies that have added complexity to what had been unidimensional depiction of Chinese international students according to their ability to acculturate to their host societies' education systems by researching the involvement of international students in the WeChat-based ride-hailing, against BC's Uber-ban regulation. A clearer understanding of their activities and experiences in the multicultural metropolis of Vancouver helps to tell a story about international students as engaged participants in the thriving local ethnic economies, who not only reside in the city and adapt to it, but also redefine it in their own ways.

The local controversy over "illegal Richmond ride-hailing"

Vancouver is one of the few metropolitan areas globally that has not legalized ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft. Amid the polarized debate on whether and how should global ride-hailing companies enter the market of the Greater Vancouver Area and other municipalities in British Columbia, the local English media have been active in the debate that has focused on, for instance, the impact on local taxi industries, potential congestion and safety issues as well as potential problems for transport businesses crossing regional boundaries (Ip, 2017, March 21; Lee, 2016, March 1; Saltman, 2017, March 14; Smith, 2017, March 8). Since July 2017, however, another key theme emerged in the debate and soon became a prominent theme in discussions about the regulatory challenges and prospects of ride-hailing in Vancouver: the Chinese-language ride-hailing services that operate in the Greater Vancouver Area despite provincial government's Uber-ban. For example, *The Globe and Mail* reported that while Uber was facing pressures from local regulatory policies and institutions, several small ride-hailing companies had been operating in the Vancouver region that were primarily catering to Chinese consumers (Xu, 2017, July 3). As one of the earliest spotlights on the Chinese-language ride-hailing services, this report soon clapped hands with a series of follow-up articles across local English media that framed the Chinese-language ride-hailing services as illegal in Metro Vancouver. These articles discussed how these illegal services were run by and served the Chinese community, as well as how they should be eradicated, though since the services were accessible only through the Chinese platform WeChat they were particularly difficult to "crack down" (Hennig, 2018, January 13).

This "crackdown narrative" was circulating widely when one of *Global News*' reporters experimented with one of the Chinese-language ride-hailing platforms, Kabu,

in January 2018, and the driver refused to take the reporter, explaining, as paraphrased in the coverage of *Global News*, that according to the company's policy they could not take non-Chinese (Ferreras, 2018, January 8). The story about his rejection by the driver from the Chinese-language ride-hailing platform was soon posted on *Global News*' website. It was titled "The illegal Richmond ride-hailing app that allegedly won't take non-Chinese fares". The report stirred a great deal of discussion in follow-up coverage as well as experiments that were reported in both news media and social media. Since then, discussion of the unregulated ride-hailing services has gone beyond the crackdown narrative, which was mainly about what measures should be taken to eliminate the illegal activities. It transformed into an interrogation of the local Chinese community who built platforms to share rides and mobility just with ethnic Chinese, emphasizing how their doors were to the rest of the local population based on language, ethnicity and race.

The narrative now identifies Chinese-language ride-hailing service as an example of the exclusive nature of the Chinese community. Around the same time that *Global News* reported on the "Chinese-only policy" of Kabu Go (Ferreras, 2018, January 8; Ferreras & Beja, 2018, January 9), *Vancouver Sun* published Douglas Todd's (2018, February 23) editorial on the rapid expansion of Chinese "ethnic economies" in Metro Vancouver.

> "In highly diverse Metro Vancouver, it is ethnic Chinese economies that are beginning to draw attention. News stories are emerging about a Chinese housing market, Chinese signs on retail outlets, Chinese-specific hiring practices, Chinese malls (there are more than 100 in Canada), a Chinese rental market and Chinese ride-for-hire programs, many of which are exclusive to ethnic Chinese."

Todd urged readers to consider the ethical, legal and cultural impacts of these ethnic economies, which includes but is not limited to the Chinese-language ride-hailing service. He stressed the issues they would raise about integration and exclusivity, which, according to him, are fundamental principles "near to the heart of most Canadians" (Todd, 2018, February 23).

Research on the controversy of Chinese-language ride-hailing sits at the intersection of multiple fields that have long histories and are themselves in polarized debates. In the field of migration, there are debates between the exclusionary nationalist

and the contemporary, critical and anti-racist positions on immigration, integration and multicultural society. Historically speaking, different approaches have been taken to examine the 19th and 20th century Chinese migrants and the more recent waves of transnational migration from the Greater China region[6], especially international students. In terms of platform economy, there has been polarized debates on the nature of "sharing economy", gig labour and exploitation in the rise of this seemingly new type of economy having its roots in platform capitalism (Chee, 2018; Rosenblat, 2018). This small-scale study does not have the ambition to address all the issues raised in these fields. Instead, it is situated in an emerging field at the confluence of an array of different studies concerned with diasporic communities, international students and platforms, as I describe below. By following the WeChat-based ride-hailing that is popular among Chinese international students who compose the majority of the passengers and a significant portion of the drivers on these unregulated ride-hailing platforms, this study examines WeChat as an assemblage in order to explore the activities and life experiences of international students in Metro Vancouver from their perspectives.

"Assemblage" is a theoretical construct from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which was originally written in French. Partly given the extended discussion needed to explain how I aim to use this abstract philosophical term to help give insights into the complexity of lived realities of research participants, I will provide an accessible definition offered by Slack here and provide a longer discussion in Chapter 1. Assemblage is "the dynamic collection or arrangement of heterogeneous elements (structures, practices, materials, affects, and enunciations) that expresses a character or identity and asserts a territory" (Slack, 2012, p.152).

In this thesis, the WeChat assemblage has become visible through its collision with the local regulatory, social and political landscapes, as captured by the controversy of "illegal Richmond ride-hailing". As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the popularized names local English media have given these WeChat-based ride-hailing services, whether "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" or "secret Chinese ridesharing", cannot do the work to articulate the WeChat assemblage, which includes everything from the technologies, labour, the practices, the spaces, and the above-mentioned controversy around

[6] "Greater China" generally refers to mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan.

WeChat-based ride-hailing. Through this study, as a Chinese international student who came to Vancouver three years ago, I aim to contribute to the exploration of migration and digitization in an age where they often inevitably intersected through digital communication technologies, as in the case study of WeChat-based ride-hailing.

WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver

Underlying the unregulated Chinese ride-hailing services is WeChat, the technological infrastructure that makes it possible to build ride-hailing and other service platforms without requesting the programming knowledge to develop an IOS or Android app, while making it extremely challenging for police to track, trap and stop the illegal activities. More generally, WeChat is a social networking app that allows users to easily connect with family and friends across different countries. It was developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd., a Chinese tech giant headquartered in Shenzhen, and was first released on January 19, 2011 under the name “Weixin”, which means micro-messages in Chinese (Chen, Mao and Qiu, 2018, p.3). By the end of 2017, it accumulated 980 million monthly active users worldwide, which means a penetration rate of over 95% among Chinese Internet users (Chen et al., 2018, p.43). Besides being the most popular social media app in China, WeChat grew beyond the conventional boundary that media scholars set for social media as a medium for social exchanges (Ellison & Boyd, 2013) and transformed into a super app. In China, WeChat is “a one-stop gateway” (Chen et al., 2018, p.5) to numerous everyday services from food delivery, taxi and ride-hailing, to flight booking, utility payment, tax filing, investment consultation and portfolio purchasing, and so forth.

When brought outside the borders of China, recently, WeChat exhibited a fate different from previous homeland social media, which were brought by international students and immigrants to their host societies and were eventually sidelined by local popular social media. According to previous literature, these imported social media and websites from students’ and immigrants’ homelands were often retained to counter the acculturative stress (Chen & Hanasono, 2016). As international students’ and immigrants’ English language proficiency improves, they would spend less proportion of their time on home social media and more time on local social media, to expand their local networks, seek local information and integrate to local culture (Chen & Hanasono,

2016)[7]. WeChat, however, is different. For example, Martin (2017) studied the female Chinese international students in Melbourne, Australia who used WeChat to do parallel trading. In her research, WeChat is not only the communication channel between the parallel trader in Australia and the customer in China. More importantly, it is where the inventory is listed, where the ads are posted and circulated, where the client-seller trust comes from and develops, and where the transaction takes place. From Martin's (2017) research, it is obvious that WeChat is more than a social messaging app used to contact family and friends. Rather, its combination of infrastructures makes it a perfect platform to suit the local needs of its users, even if they are out of China, in a creative way.

In Vancouver, similarly, WeChat is not only a popular app retained by international students and immigrants for social connections, but a "platform of platforms" that has exemplified its "super-ness" in the digitally-connected Chinese society. WeChat in Metro Vancouver offers technological infrastructures for a myriad of local services. In Metro Vancouver, WeChat is home to various local services from ride-hailing, food delivery, online supermarket, information exchange in leasing, loans, employment opportunities, to a plethora of channels updating local and global news. None of these services are directly created, operated, or monitored by Tencent. Rather, they are built by Chinese-speaking individuals and organizations including ethnic media, local Chinese startups, broker agencies, student unions, and individual students and immigrants in the Lower Mainland of BC. In other words, local WeChat-users have utilized the technological possibilities of WeChat and proactively shaped it into something Tencent did not expect WeChat to evolve into – a gateway to the Chinese ethnic economies, networks, communities and ideologies in Metro Vancouver. This assemblage of ethnic technologies, resources and identities kept growing, until it clashed with the interests of individuals and communities outside the assemblage.

At another level, WeChat, as suggested, changes the dynamics and even appearance of the city. In the case of WeChat-based ride-hailing, the service connected previously disconnected places or nodes in the local landscape that are socially and culturally significant for Chinese international students and immigrants. In Metro Vancouver, ride-hailing is one of the most popular services available through WeChat.

[7] Chen and Hanasono (2016) also find that since contacting family and friends is not considered urgent, some international students would prioritize their local acculturation by increasing usage of local social media like Facebook.

Up to January 2018, at least seven platforms have been identified by Passenger Transportation Board (PTB) as operating Uber-like ride-hailing and most of them are Chinese-language platforms built on WeChat (Xu, 2018, January 29).

Replicating the interfaces of ride-hailing services operated by Chinese companies in China, for instance, Didi Chuxing[8] as owned by Alibaba, these unregulated ride-hailing platforms let the registered drivers to decide when, where and how many orders they would like to take, and allow them to "grab"[9] and complete an order with a few taps on their mobile screens. For passengers, these ride-hailing platforms are easy to use, since as long as they stay as subscribers of the corresponding public account, they can use the service anytime. Especially for Chinese-language users, it would be much easier than searching for the correct hotline number of taxi companies, or encountering challenges when trying to describe their exact location in a second language to older taxi drivers who may not be familiar with the destinations they are going to visit. In contrast, they just need to click "I want a ride"[10] on the menu bar at the bottom of the interface of the public account, key in pick-up and drop-off addresses in the questionnaire, or pin down the locations on the interactive map embedded in several ride-hailing platforms. After submitting their orders, they would see an estimation of the duration of the ride and a suggested amount of money to be paid to the driver.

Although most of these platforms replicate the service procedures, interface designs and sometimes even color schemes of popular ride-hailing apps like Uber and Didi, they have adapted these platforms to the local needs of immigrants. For example, many platforms feature a list of frequently visited destinations, including educational institutions, shopping malls and plazas, transportation junctions like the airport and the ferry terminals, and ethnic destinations like the Chinese student tutoring center near one of the public universities in Burnaby (see Chapter 4).

---

[8] In this thesis, I will refer to the platform of Didi Chuxing as "Didi".

[9] To "grab" an order relates to a competitive algorithmic system adopted by a number of ride-hailing platforms and this system distributes orders to drivers on a first-come first-serve basis.

[10] The text on the button, and actually most texts inside the ride-hailing platforms, is originally written in Chinese (except for certain names of destinations, such as "YVR airport"). Since the thesis is written in English, I translated the text (as well as texts explaining the functions of other buttons and menus in the platforms) from Chinese to English.

On the other hand, thanks to the high volume of subscribers, the creators and operation teams of these platforms realized that they could use the platform for something beyond ride-hailing services. Two most popular platforms providing Chinese ride-hailing services in Metro Vancouver have long ago turned themselves into marketing platforms, selling spaces on their public accounts to local businesses for advertisement. One of them has also collaborated with student associations, media groups and local businesses to launch a podcast for sharing stories of Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver. Features like this may be left out of the discourses and debates in the local English media about what they call “illegal Richmond ride-hailing”. Yet they showcase the multiple roles these platforms aspire to play in the local Chinese community, whose needs are far from being fully addressed by existing local (including other diasporic) resources and support systems.

Researching underground ride-hailing on a super app from China in Metro Vancouver

The goal of this thesis is to explore how WeChat mediates the Chinese-speaking international students’ experience of living in Vancouver. Brought in by transnational flows of people, capital and media, WeChat, especially after local users expanded its use and adapted it to local needs, is now playing an increasingly essential role in these students’ lives. As suggested by Beer (2013), when studying new media, like WeChat, it is productive to approach it as a cultural assemblage composed of infrastructures, algorithms and bodies, rather than just an app, software or electronic platform. In other words, it is important to study the objects, the people, the ideas and the spaces, which are so important to the phenomenal rise of the app, as an assemblage. Therefore, instead of focusing on WeChat the app, this thesis sets out to study the WeChat assemblage and examine closely the ways that this app is embedded in the everyday practices of Chinese international students living in the Greater Vancouver Area.

To explore this emerging, underground, mobile and multi-faceted phenomenon, this study borrows Marcus (1995)’ multi-sited ethnography as the guiding methodological framework and follows the phenomenon in its miscellaneous manifesting ways. The study consists of 12 in-depth interviews conducted with users of the platforms, most of whom are students currently enrolled in or recently graduated from universities or colleges in the Lower Mainland, including 6 drivers and 6 passengers. In addition, the

study draws on participant observation of 15 rides that were hailed on 2 popular platforms from July to November 2018. To situate the phenomenon in its controversial context, the study also tracks local media coverage on Chinese-language ride-hailing in BC, along with analyzing the design and content of the WeChat public accounts supporting this service. This thesis explores the experiences from the perspectives of the participants in the WeChat-based underground platform economy, which has been tagged as "Chinese-only" in local media discourses. As indicated above, the primary users of ride-hailing services have been Chinese international students from PRC. The study scrutinizes their motivations for working for such services as well as using them, the social challenges they face, as well as their aspirations. Through their accounts, it is possible to gain more understanding of how the Chinese ride-hailing, as well as the controversy around it, shapes the broader aspects of their life experiences in Metro Vancouver. One of the key results from this thesis is that the Chinese ride-hailing controversy is a complex field deserving nuanced research that goes beyond the discourse circulating in mainstream media that depicts it as another piece of evidence for the spread of inassimilable Chinese, invading Vancouver, participating in illegal activities that steal jobs from local law-abiding citizens and disrespecting local regulations. The open platform design of WeChat offers the tools and resources to Chinese international students and immigrants in Lower Mainland of BC, which has allowed the creation and further development of ride-hailing platforms that are easily accessible to Chinese-speaking WeChat users scattered across the multicultural landscape. Through these ride-hailing platforms, local Chinese-speakers obtained mobilities that the existing local transport services could not offer. Nevertheless, having everything needed by "Chinese" on a "Chinese" platform may risk creating an ethnic bubble in the long run intensifying the anti-Asian narratives as well as the marginalization of the local and transnational Chinese community.

The thesis is composed of an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion and an afterword. Following a brief outline of the context, framework and methodology of this study in the Introduction, Chapter 1 situates the exploration of the relatively new phenomenon of WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver at the intersection of existing fields that, for instance, focus on the Chinese immigrants in the Lower Mainland of BC, Chinese international students, and migrants' use of media which includes the more recent use of WeChat at popular immigrant destinations. Though many studies

reviewed in this chapter adopted Berry's (1997) adaptation framework, this chapter brings into question whether such framework would be productive to examine the migrants, international students and their digitally-mediated life in a transnational context. Chapter 1 ends with an introduction of my use of the concept of assemblage, which, as the theoretical framework of this thesis, steers the wheel for this exploration of WeChat-based ride-hailing that strives to restore its nuanced and multifaceted realities beyond the crackdown discourse for "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" and the age-old anti-Asian discourse in the Lower Mainland of BC.

After articulating the situatedness of this study in relation to these fields and the importance of studying the phenomenon as an assemblage, Chapter 2 tells the story of researching the "illegal Richmond ride-hailing". It highlights the challenges that I faced as a researcher in terms of methodological design and empirical fieldwork and reflects how these challenges were incorporated as critical aspects in the study through a series of methodological adjustments.

In Chapter 3, I explain why assemblage is a particularly fitting concept to describe and explain the "New Chinatown", which, as will be elaborated in Chapter 4, WeChat-based ride-hailing is just a small corner. In this chapter, I discuss how the WeChat assemblage (metaphorically called "New Chinatown" in this study) showcases the change of conditions of migration today. As a result, I question Berry's (1997) adaptation framework as applied in ethnic media studies and a number of more recent digital ethnic media studies. As is shown in the case of WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, international students transplanted business models and lifestyles from the "home" country to the "host" country and were not necessarily inclined to integrate or assimilate to the mainstream of the latter.

Chapter 4 provides a detailed description of the WeChat-based ride-hailing among Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver. As a corner of the "New Chinatown" described in Chapter 3, WeChat-based ride-hailing far exceeds the boundaries of what one would expect from a ride-hailing service as they are understood as services on Uber or Didi. This chapter describes aspects of the multifaceted phenomenon from multiple angles that illustrate how it affects the experiences of Chinese students: the various kinds of precariousness the drivers endure on a daily basis, the WeChat infrastructure as a technological wall against the outside world where

such services would be shut down as illegal activities and students would not be able to enjoy them, the temporary sharing of space with a co-ethnic stranger that is likely to lead to future social networks, the "flexible" strategies international students create or adopt to make the ride-hailing part-time job serve their school and life schedule, and lastly the spaces where the "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" frequently visit, move across and where they boldly advertise. In brief, this chapter aims to describe the WeChat-based ride-hailing as a corner of the WeChat assemblage that is situated in the *locale* of Metro Vancouver in the globalized and digitized world today.

* * *

It is important to note that the illegal status of WeChat-based ride-hailing services in the Lower Mainland of BC could be temporary. Though legally sanctioned ride-hailing services did not hit the ground of British Columbia in September 2019 as expected, hopes have been in the air that Vancouver's status as a "pre-Uber" city (Rosenblat, 2018) will change sooner or later. With the local authorities' plans to legalize ride-hailing in the near future, WeChat-based ride-hailing may no longer be a legal issue. However, the experiences of the participants in the local ride-hailing economy who have primarily been international students, the controversy that the services they established have aroused at this particular "pre-Uber" moment, as well as the discourses circulating in local media that constructs the local Chinese community as exclusive, non-integrating and disrespectful of local regulations, are all important issues to be investigated. WeChat, as a key mediator of the collisions between the ethnic economies structured by Chinese technologies and the regulatory, social and cultural landscapes of the host country of Canada, gives us a magnifying glass from the migrants' perspectives about the challenges they face in the so-called "host" society. By conducting this study, I am to invite reinterpretations of the concepts that have been used to construct Chinese migrants, and in particular, Chinese international students, in a world that is now frequently described as fluid, mobile and transnational.

Chapter 1.

Literature Review

1.1. Chinese migrants in Vancouver, Canada

Starting from the late 1960s and 1970s, the combination of PRC's "Opening-up" policy to emigration[11] and the Canadian government's change in its race-based immigration policy and its multicultural policies gave rise to the dramatic increase of Chinese immigrants in Canada. A great proportion of these immigrants embarked on their Canadian settlement journey at the gateway city of Vancouver. With the discriminatory laws that restricted previous Chinese immigrants gone, this group has a stronger presence in Vancouver's economic, political and urban landscape and a number of studies have been conducted on this unique wave of immigrants who exhibit both distance and affinity with earlier generations of Cantonese-speaking migrants. To distinguish, these new generations of immigrants, a significant portion of which are from Mainland China, are named "new immigrants", as opposed to *loh wah kiu* (oldtimers, literarily translating to earlier generations of Chinese settlers in Cantonese) (Wickberg, 2007). According to the existing research in the field, "new immigrants" in Vancouver bring "new" phenomena, "new" problems, "new" identities, as well as "new" questions, which to some extent may be related to the "old" struggles. To pave the way to explore the questions central to this study, the main task of this section is to present the findings of the relevant fields and explain how it leads to the unsolved questions handed down to the "new immigrants".

Perhaps owing to the scale, diversity and dynamism of Vancouver's Chineseness, the recent research on Chinese immigrants in Vancouver has been quite vibrant. Researchers from disciplines including Communication, Sociology, Geography, Education, History and Asian Studies have contributed insightful observations and thought-provoking theorizations on a myriad of key aspects of the Chinese immigrant experience. In addition to examining the motivations of immigrants, their acculturative

[11] "Opening-up" is part of the Chinese economic reform starting 1978. Since 1978, not only have more foreign investments and businesses been allowed in PRC, but more Chinese citizens have been also allowed to go abroad to study, work and live.

stresses as well as coping strategies, these scholars examine issues immigrants encounter in labour, family, immigration policy, ethnic mediascapes, identity and culture, as well as urban space. These studies could be read as efforts to demystify the "Chineseness" and the contemporary Chinese migrants' life in the "Global City" of Vancouver.

To start, although the Canadian scholars do not adopt Berry's (1997) adaptation theory as often as their American counterparts, several Canadian scholars have based their investigations of recent Chinese immigrant life on his four models of adaptation and organized their studies according to assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. Often identified as one of the most difficult groups to integrate into the local society, the Chinese immigrants in such narratives were often tagged as failures in integration. To further explore the specifics and nuances behind such instances of "failures", Lo, Gidlow and Cushman (2014), for instance, uses the concept of "selective adaptation" (p.123) in his research on Chinese parents who screen Adventure Education programs in Canada as an act to negotiate between their adherence to the Chinese values including collectivism, responsibility and discipline and the perceived need to let their migrant children integrate into the local society underscoring values like "individuality" and "independence". Moreover, in Guo's (2014) in-depth research into S.U.C.C.E.S.S. – one of the largest social service organization in Vancouver that provides support for both ethnic communities and newcomers – he points out that the definition of "participation" should be broadened and not limited to civic participation, in which the "new immigrants" did not take an active role until recently. Guo (2014) finds that volunteering activities not only offer direct benefits to those in need, but is an effective way for immigrants to participate in the construction of the community, find a sense of belonging and navigate towards full citizenship as an active citizen (p.51).

The Chinese' experience, or in Berry's (1997) words, adaptation, in Vancouver, may not always be smooth. In Yu's (2008) empirical review of recent Mainland Chinese migration to Vancouver, she identifies the following aspects as pulling forces that draw them to Canada: 1) the clean natural and social environments in Canada; 2) the good quality of life that Vancouver is famous for; 3) the country's high quality and less competitive education for their children. These pulling forces set up expectations for the immigrant life in Vancouver. They may come, however, with unexpected problems. For example, Waters (2002) follows 34 "astronaut families" – immigrant family households in

which one family member (usually the husband) spends most of his time in China making money to support the rest of their family (usually the mother and the child) living in Vancouver. This unique structure of family life has been widely observed in Vancouver, Sydney and Auckland, which are all popular destinations for middle and upper class Chinese family household migrants. In Waters' (2002) research, she interviews the "lone mothers" left in Vancouver and finds that they often have given up their promising careers in the home country and experienced intensive stresses from their deskilling of labour in Vancouver. She calls attention to such "friction of distance" resulting from neoliberal policies and practices, which are often downplayed in the existing literature on transnationalism (p.129).

Waters is not the only scholar investigating into the practice of the so-called "hypermobile elite" (Waters, 2002, p.119) in the transnational age, Li, Li and Zong (2016) scrutinize the impact transnationalism has on ethnic enclave economy. Through a close examination of the advertisement data in *The Sing Tao Daily*, they bring light to the oft-underestimated buying power of immigrant audiences. Furthermore, they point out that since 1990s the major sectors of the Chinese enclave economy – meaning economic activities where both the employers and the employees are predominantly Chinese – have changed from the retail and food services characterizing old Chinatowns to construction and trade, which suggest a transformation from ethnic-family-centred businesses to a more professional business model with abundant capital. Their investigation echoes an earlier study conducted by Wong and Ng (2002), who suggest that global flows of capital, talents and information would necessarily lead transnational migrant entrepreneurs to an integrationist identity, rather than a sojourner one. At the same time, they would no longer rely entirely on co-ethnic Chinese as contacts and clients but open up to the multicultural local market.

The Chinese-language ride-hailing controversy in Vancouver, nevertheless, seems to tell a story different from Wong and Ng's (2002) research. The transnational free flow of information, technologies, human resources and capital have paved the way for the adoption of WeChat. However, the creative appropriation of WeChat also shaped the ride-hailing platforms, which target almost exclusively Chinese-speakers, and frequently Chinese international students as their users.

In their report of “Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Media in BC” for the Canadian Heritage Western Regional Office, Murray, Yu and Ahadi (2007) map out the ethnic mediascape in British Columbia. According to them, there are 24 Chinese media outlets in Vancouver and they comprise the biggest ethnic media market (Murray, Yu, & Ahadi, 2007, p.29), which includes two radio channels, three television channels, three large Chinese newspapers catering immigrant readers from Taiwan or Hong Kong and a number of smaller ones targeting Mainland Chinese. Yu (2008) also points out that Chinese immigrants have built and maintained many websites and Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) in Vancouver and many of them became key hubs of information for immigrants, especially those who were not proficient in English (p.191). On the one hand, such ethnic media have been depicted as potential obstructions for immigrants to learn the local language, participate in local community and integrate into the host society. On the other hand, research shows that ethnic media could reduce acculturative stresses by providing informational as well as emotional support.

This double-edged characteristic of local ethnic media is magnified and further problematized after the popularization of the Internet. Although there has been massive research on how the Internet could keep the immigrants in the comfort zone of their mother tongue and home-related news thus foreclosing their deeper contact with the host society, Wickberg (2007) regards the Internet as a space for constant negotiation and reproduction of identity between the local and “the global cyber-communities of Chinese” (p.178). For Wickberg, life in Vancouver is increasingly synonymous with multiculturalism and diversity. With multiculturalism rehearsed not just in public policies but many aspects of life, ethnic communities and individuals must face and deal with it in order to “succeed” (p.177). Pottie-Sherman and Hiebert’s (2015) study on the transformation of Richmond Night Market is an example. When the night market was firstly established in the 1990s, it opened only briefly on weekend and served as a public market for Chinese immigrants to buy Chinese-themed commodities. Recently, the organizers rebranded the night market as a celebration of the multiculturalism of British Columbia and welcomed not only Chinese immigrants to purchase things they need, but immigrants from other ethnic communities as well as local citizens who would like to tour and taste the “authentic” flavor of the Asian Night Market.

Though it may not be the aim of Pottie-Sherman and Hiebert, their qualitative study of the Richmond Night Market showcases how immigration shapes the local

landscapes. Hiebert (1999) points out that it would no longer be statistically relevant to call Chinese, Korean and South Asians visible “minorities” due to their growth in the region. He argues that what accompanies such demographic increase is the change in how the so-called mainstream communities view immigrants. Previously, non-European groups were perceived as “exotic” “other” and “different” but at the time of his writing, he maintains that, these groups already play a crucial role in local economic-political systems. Although it is debatable whether the discriminatory perceptions of immigrants have decreased, Hiebert (1999) has made an interesting observation that “[non-European groups] do not just fit in to what is here but participate in the process of defining what is here” (p.79).

The re-defining process of the local geography, however, is extremely challenging. As documented in Deer’s (2006) discussion of the “conversation on race relations” moderated by CBC’s “News Forum”, the yellow peril discourse keeps circulating and re-surfacing whenever Vancouver’s mainstream feels threatened by the loss of place and power, which according to Hiebert (1999), is an immigrant society based on White ancestries (Hiebert, 1999, p.79).

The review of the literature above shows how recent Chinese immigrants constantly negotiate the meaning of being “Chinese” in Vancouver, Canada. As Ng (2000) asks in the opening story of his *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80: The Pursuit of Identity and Power*, “What should be the content of ethnic Chinese culture in a Canadian context?” (p.4). Ng (2000) alludes to not just the negotiations but the constant contestations that Chinese immigrants face in his study of the controversial election of Vancouver’s Chinese Culture Centre (CCC) board of directors. The tremendous influx of immigrants from the PRC shifted the composition of Vancouver’s Chinese population and the existing immigrants feared that the CCC would no longer be able to represent their interests and experiences of the older Chinese Canadian community (p.4). Such conflicts between Chinese immigrants have been mentioned in several studies. Recent publications like Gomes’s (2018) *Siloed Diversity*, in the context of Singapore, has also urged attention to the diversities among immigrations coming from the same country, who are often misunderstood as a homogeneous whole without distinguishing their differences (p.68). Due to the complexity of overseas Chinese, I will focus on the Chinese-speaking international students in the Greater Vancouver Area in this study and it will not look at the international students as a homogeneous group. Using

ethnographic methods, the study looks into the differences amongst Chinese international students studying, working and living in the Lower Mainland of BC, Canada, though a more extended ethnographic study would be needed to have a more conclusive analysis of the diversity amongst these students.

1.2. Chinese international students

The history of students from China who were sent to study in the so-called Western countries – the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Japan, to name a few – can be traced back to the 19th century. After realizing the power of modern military systems and weapons from the Opium Wars, an increasing number of Chinese youth embarked on a journey to the West, hoping to learn about the advanced science and technologies from the West to resist future imperial invasions. The flows of Chinese students to the West were suspended a few times due to wars like World War II and migration regulations in both China and the western countries (for example, the head tax in Canada). Thanks to the amelioration of Sino-US diplomatic relations and the Opening-Up policy in 1970s, Chinese students have been able to study overseas as individual self-financing students. The past forty years have witnessed a large growth in the quantity of students leaving China to study in other countries. In 2018, the number of Chinese students pursuing overseas education reached 662,100 (Shi, 2019, March 27). At the same time, China has also become the largest sending country for international students in popular overseas education destinations. Accompanying the growth of Chinese international students across the globe, the field of overseas education and international student mobility has also witnessed an increase of interest in Chinese international students as a specific group.

Much existing research on Chinese international student approach this group as a homogeneous whole who experience intercultural “adaptation, acculturation and adjustment” (Ploner, 2017). For those researchers who borrow from Berry’s (1997) adaptation framework, their concerns can usually be divided into three major themes: What are the problems international students encounter when moving to the host society? What are the causes of such adaptation problems? What strategies do international students choose to cope with these challenges and stresses? Although adaptation can be approached from many different angles, the research on Chinese

international student are generally concerned with two types of adaptation: academic adaptation and social adaptation.

On the one hand, a great number of studies explored how Chinese international students experienced challenges in the education systems in their host societies, which are primarily presumed to be attributable to their lack of proficiency in the local language and the lack of familiarity with their universities' pedagogical methodologies, expectations and systems. It is noteworthy that although the researchers come from various disciplines – linguistics, education, communication, psychology, sociology, and so forth – most of them stick to the adaptation literature strictly following Berry's (1997) model.

From the perspective of applied linguistics, Liu (2013) investigates into the linguistic challenges of Chinese international students in the United Kingdom (UK). In China, the international students and their parents often have high expectations of an overseas education and regard the host country as "a favorable environment to learn and use English" where students "will learn about the behavioral style and beliefs of local people" as well as "the social skills of the host culture" (Liu, 2013, p.124). Liu (2013) finds, however, that Chinese international students experience various stresses and challenges in overseas universities. One of the major reasons is the struggling transition from a "language learner" to a "language user" (Liu, 2013, p.123). Using qualitative methods like semi-structured interviews and class observations, Liu (2013) finds that students from China experienced challenges in understanding what the instructors and other native and international students say, especially when the accents are not similar to the "standard" English – for instance, the British English from British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) programs or the American English from Voice of America (VOA) programs – that they used to listen to when they learned English in China. Students also encountered a "speaking block" where they not only make grammatical mistakes or falter when speaking English, but may refrain from communicating in English all together and remain silent (p.132). In addition, students find themselves not prepared for the workload of writing and reading academically in the UK education system. Due to their writing skills, some of them imitate sentences they find from the Internet. As a result, their written assignments can be red-flagged as plagiarism because their sentence structures are too similar to those found online (p.134).

Similarly, Holmes (2008), by observing and interviewing Chinese students in a New Zealand university, found out that the cultural difference between China and New Zealand, or the Western world in general, may be the reasons for Chinese students' silence, inactivity or discomfort in classroom discussions. Approaching classroom participation from an intercultural perspective, Holmes (2008) argues that previous studies on Chinese international students found fault with their nonparticipation in classroom debates because of their "Eurocentric" perspective and thus valued behaviors such as voicing one's opinion, challenging the authority of the instructor, and taking a leader's role in the classroom discussion. These behaviors are against the Confucius' cultural heritage, with which the Chinese and many Asian students are aligned. For example, a Chinese student tend to "save face" for her instructor by not pointing out her mistakes, while the very act would be interpreted as cowardliness by her New Zealand peers. By comparing the cultural differences between China and New Zealand, Holmes (2008) urges mutual understanding between these cultures, rather than simplifying the challenge by criticizing Chinese students for not actively participating in classes and viewing it as a failure to adapt or an unwillingness to integrate.

Besides studying Chinese students' challenges in adapting to their new academic environments, research has been done on their adaptation to the host society outside the classroom. Campbell and Zeng (2006) conducted research on the general adaptation of Chinese students in New Zealand and found that they may gradually "adapt" to the life in New Zealand "without a sense of belonging" (p.23). These students made the distinction between "adaptation" (which translates to *shi ying* in Chinese) and "blending" (which translates to *rong he* in Chinese) and thought they would never feel "at home" or truly "blend" in (p.23). On top of this, the authors confirmed the observation from previous studies that international students do not contact, socialize or interact much with local students. Rather, these international students often seek for help from co-nationals in New Zealand and these co-national networks may eventually turn into a local silo.

Identifying the challenges in blending into the local community, Jia and Koku's (2019) recent research in the United States reveals that minor habits such as musical taste can play a significant role in the adaptation of international students in the host society. According to them, those students who listened to English-speaking music usually find it easier to make friends with American students, while those sticking to

Chinese-speaking playlist may show less motivation and have more hindrances to making friends with English-speakers.

Similar to how the choice of music is linked to the identification of the culture in the host society, Yang, Wu, Zhu and Southwell (2004) analyze the survey results from 84 Chinese international students at a Midwest university in the United States and make a link between students' self-perceived need for acculturation and their motives and patterns of media use. According to Yang et al. (2004), the motivations for watching TV for Chinese students in the United States are more likely that "I want to learn more about American culture", "It helps me adjust to American society" and "I want to improve my English" (p.87). In other words, to some extent, Chinese students in the study use media to fulfill certain needs (for instance, seek information) related to their adjustment to the American ways of life. On the other hand, the research data shows that although there are strong motives to keep informed about both what is happening in China and what is happening in the US, Chinese international students use Internet more to find out "what's going on in China", which echoes to the findings in the Chinese migrant studies that claim the Internet is double-edged, that it may facilitate or impede the acculturation of sojourners (p.91).

Apart from relying on mass media to learn information about the host society, including cultural norms, students inhabit and reproduce online spaces to support each other in the foreign environment. Ye has published several studies on online social support networks based on research conducted in the United States. In one of her projects conducted with 112 Chinese international students recruited from two universities in the southeast of the United States, Ye (2006a) found that social support in general serves as "a protective factor to buffer life stress" experienced by international students when they move to study in the US (p.15). For international students who are dislocated from their familiar social contexts and away from their families and friends, the online social support networks, created by, for example, the Chinese student organizations in American universities play a protective role similar to face-to-face social support. Not only can students seek useful information to cope with their lack of understanding in local education systems and the host society in general, but positive moderators can elicit healthy, anonymous, conversation on emotional stresses in the process of adaptation.

In a more recent study in Singapore, Chen and Yang (2015) explores the "Living in Singapore Group (LSg)", a sub-forum of one of the largest online forums for Chinese international students (Gter.net) and examines the role the sub-forum plays in students' experiences abroad. By interviewing 21 users and observing messages posted to the sub-forum, they found that the sub-forum offers emotional support, informational support, instrumental support and network support and these different forms of support take varying effects in the four stages of students' cultural adaptation – honeymoon, culture shock, recovery and adaptation (Oberg, 1960, quoted in Chen & Yang, 2015, p.2163). According to the students, the sub-forum helped them survive the challenges from English as the language of instruction, the academic pressures, as well as intense feelings of homesickness, isolation and frustration (p.2162).

It is obvious that scholars have been attempting to develop their methodologies and fill the gaps in the field of Chinese international student research so they can go beyond the adaptation paradigm. However, most of these studies are to some extent still limited by the adaptation discourse. By foregrounding the adaptation process, the problems students encounter because of their lack of knowledge about the educational systems and their host societies as well as their lack of language skills and their strategies to fix these problems, these scholars risk simplifying the international students' experience and failing to recognize their unique motivations, experiences and impacts while replicating the stereotypes about Asians as described by early and classic migration research on international students.

Meng, Zhu and Cao (2018) take a small step forward by approaching the adaptation of international students as a condition for improving their "global competence" (p.210). According to them, overseas education programs are expected to improve participants' foreign language skills, extend their intercultural networks and strengthen their overall competence in the multicultural world that we inhabit. In other words, students tend to "reap the benefits" of the increasingly neoliberal global education industry marked by extreme competition and high profit margin (Meng, Zhu, Cao, 2018, p.210). However, it is not always the case. Through their research on Chinese international students in Belgium, the authors conclude that a great proportion of Chinese international students are trapped in the separation mode and identify little with the culture in the host society. Only those who maintain multicultural contact, are proficient in the local language, or actively immerse themselves in a different culture

other than their home culture, would see improvement of their knowledge, skills and attitudes related to global competence (for example, tolerance towards cultural difference and diversity). Although Meng et al. (2018) uses the adaptation discourse from time to time, it is important to note that they do not use adaptation as the desired outcome of the overseas education, as indicated in previous studies. Rather, it becomes the precondition or strategy that facilitates better and more accomplishment out of the limited stay in the host society.

Also focusing on Chinese students in Europe, Maeder-Qian (2018) circumvents the adaptation terminologies and adopts "interculturality" as the framework to explore the transformative experience of international students. For her, the transformation during the limited time students stay overseas is about identity reconstruction. The process is an "interplay of language, culture and identities" and has much more nuances, uncertainties and individualities than implicated in conventional adaptation studies (p.586). By following Chinese international students over one year, Maeder-Qian (2018) finds that students from different backgrounds usually demonstrate different levels of intercultural identity formation. What is common for most of the participants is that the overseas experience in Germany foregrounds their Chinese identity. By encountering cultural differences, as well as German hospitality and sometimes discrimination, these students not only acquire a more engaged understanding of the German society, but reconstruct their comprehension of China and their country-of-origin identity.

Although it is not the central argument of Maeder-Qian (2018), she references Kinginger (2009) and observes that international students "are usually at the periphery of communities of practice in their host communities, where they may or may not want to be granted the status of legitimate participants" (Kinginger, 2009, quoted in Maeder-Qian, 2018, p.582). Regarding this oft-observed marginalized status of international students, whether active withdrawal from contact, interaction and possible integration, or passive isolation, De Costa, Tigchelaar and Cui (2016) have conducted an ethnographic study on a dozen of Chinese international students. By selectively presenting several life episodes of Aaron – a "poor" affluent Chinese international student – at Great Lake University (GLU), they reflect on the student's persistent efforts to distance himself from the local community around GLU and to make connection to an imagined transnational habitus. However, as someone who had studied in English at a local high school in Pittsburgh, PA, Aaron's life was not as satisfactory or advantageous as has been

pictured for Vandrick's (2011) "global elite"[12]. Rather, it was full of obstacles and feelings of frustration. Owing to his previous education experience in the US, Aaron could not identify himself with other ESL students in the class who had little exposure to American schooling. Nor could he socialize with the American students on campus, thanks to a lack of shared sense of humor (p.178. Although he was desperate to transfer to the coastal universities where his "friends from Pitt" were, Aaron had to endure and pass the ESL courses and be admitted to GLU before he had the option to transfer to another school. At the end of the project, Aaron did not pass the course and had to re-do the three ESL courses. In the research, Aaron explicitly refused to integrate into the communities around GLU but kept envisioning his life after escaping the ESL orbit, transferring to his friends' universities, and, after graduation, returning to China to work in the finance industry. By making constant references to his previous high school life in Pitt, keeping in touch with his friends by frequent short-term visits and private chats, and showing zero identification with his life at GLU on WeChat, De Costa, Tigchelaar and Cui (2016) believe that Aaron displayed his affiliation with an affluent social class who in this case appropriated a transnational habitus (p.181).

While developing new ways to explore students' experiences in their host societies, recent studies have demonstrated an emerging interest in contemplating the role played by the home country in international students' outflow into the global education market and inflow towards the home job market. According to *Xinhua Net*, in 2018, a total of 519,400 Chinese international students returned to China (Shi, 2019, March 27). The number increased by 11.19% compared to the previous year. Amid the global competition for talent and technology, the Chinese government has launched a combination of policies to encourage this "brain gain". For example, international graduates would be guaranteed to obtain the *hukou*[13] in first-tier cities of China, which gives access to key benefits including healthcare, real estate purchasing right, education and sometimes job opportunities. With such "pull factors" in China and "push factors" in countries like the US where international graduates face difficulties in securing jobs,

[12] Vandrick (2011) describes the newly rising phenomenon of international students as part of new global elite. He defines "global elite" in the following way: First, they have "lived and studied in at least three countries"; Second, they are "affluent and privileged"; Third, their everyday practices exhibit "a sense of global membership" (p.160).

[13] *Hukou* is the household registration system in mainland China. Instead of being just a piece of paper outlining your demographic information, it is crucial to the citizen's rights to education, healthcare, purchasing local real estate properties, etc.

applying for working visa and obtaining permanent residency, the recent decades have witnessed both a quantitative increase in numbers as well as a qualitative transformation in terms of international graduates' experience of re-integration into the domestic job market. These returning students, due to the perceived advantages they have due to their educational and living experience abroad, are nicknamed "sea turtles" (*hai gui*) in Chinese.

Biao and Shen (2009), for example, historicize the overseas education policies in PRC and contextualize the meaning of getting an international degree in the Chinese reality with the growth of social stratification since the Reformation and Opening-Up in 1970s. Borrowing Bourdieu's theorization on cultural capital, they argue that the fashion of getting an overseas education in China results from the country's new middle class' desire to legitimate their newly acquired status by converting cultural capital gained from overseas education into domestic political capital (p.514). Biao and Shen (2009) argue that these international students from already affluent families may lead to further social stratification in China over the long term.[14] On the other hand, their study reveals that a significant portion of families who send their children overseas are not financially established. Furthermore, when these students return, their employment prospects are not always as optimistic as they once thought. Since there are so many international graduates who return to the domestic job market only to find that they have to stay at their parents' home for a long time waiting for job opportunities that align with their expectations (for example, in terms of the salary), there came a new nickname for this specific group of job-waiting sea turtles – "seaweed" (*hai dai*). In this light, Biao and Shen (2009) conclude that pursuing a foreign degree for these families as "an exercise in 'venture investment' whereby returns – like a high-paid desired job in the first-tier cities – cannot be guaranteed" (p.516).

Focusing more specifically on the re-integration of sea turtles into the home job market and the Chinese society in general, Hao and Welch (2012) conducted surveys with 187 Chinese international students who graduated from an elite Australian university and interviewed 17 students and employers from different professional domains. According to their research, one of the drives for these students and their

[14] This view resonates with Findley's study (2011) as quoted in Plonel's (2017) research on Chinese international students in UK.

families to invest in overseas education was to increase their personal skills and knowledge and broaden their vision through foreign education, and in this way, increase their leverage when they returned to the domestic job market. Different from earlier generations of migrants, these students seek for overseas education to accumulate advantages against their domestic counterparts. However, the outcomes, as indicated above, are mixed. Local employers' high expectations for their performance, the increasing competitiveness of their domestic counterparts and the increasing number of international student returnees, adds to the risks of their "venture investment" (Hao & Welch, 2006, p.250-254).

These studies reflect the complex trajectories of Chinese international students both in China and their countries where they obtained their degrees, which for Chinese international students, given the strong pull factors for returning home, arguably no longer fits names like "country of destination" or "receiving country". In this way, the studies discussed above show that for Chinese international students, the adaptation discourse or integration paradigm is not the only discourse that applies. While the Chinese sea turtle discourse promises benefits like job opportunities and increased social status, the seaweed discourse implies the increased competition in the job market, as expectations for them as returnees would be set higher compared to their peers who attend and graduate from domestic universities.

One of the themes frequently mentioned by these studies on Chinese international students that were seldom explored in depths, is the observation that Chinese students tend to flock together in the host society (Campbell & Zeng, 2006). Even in research projects not designed to examine the students from China specifically, for example, in her research on siloed diversity focusing on transient migrants including international students in Singapore, Gomes (2018) finds that Chinese international students rarely socialize outside their circle of co-national international students. On the other hand, echoing De Costa, Tigchelaar and Cui's (2016) research on the "poor" affluent Chinese student's performance of his identity as part of the affluent social class that enjoys transnational mobility, Gomes (2018) observes that almost all transient migrants in her study consider themselves as "global cosmopolitan subjects, who frequently aspire for future transnational mobility in big cities of Europe, North America and Asia" (p.30). Gomes' (2018) "global cosmopolitan subjects" and De Costa, Tigchelaar and Cui's (2016) study on the Chinese student's appropriation of a

"transnational habitus" are both efforts to capture the multifaceted experience and nuanced negotiation of students' identities in a global context.[15] However, such studies are rare in the field and in the studies cited, examining the habit of flocking together is not their central focus. In other words, although many researchers have recognized that Chinese international students often flock together, few studies have investigated this tendency: the exact activities of the close-group members when they flock together, the means and processes of how this happens, as well as the ways it produces, and sometimes reproduces, Chinese international students' identities in the age of the economic and political "rise of China". It does show that national identity has not waned in the era of globalization. As Plonel (2017) rightly points out,

> "Such ongoing negotiations between 'home' and 'host' country qualify themselves as powerful expressions of lived resilience…and become an integral part of a social poetics of belonging which asks how people define binary oppositions and how resilience is enacted within ongoing negotiations of place and power" (Plonel, 2017, p.439).

As Plonel (2017) indicated, what should be put into question is the assumption that international students' life experiences are confined to "'adaptation', 'acculturation' or 'adjustment'" (p.438).

1.3. Digital migrants

Since the Internet was introduced to society in 1980s, it has gradually entered the life of many migrants along with other technological innovations and developments, such as computers, mobile phones and their applications. A great proportion of migrants today no longer get information only from newspapers, television and radio programs. They are also offered a wide array of alternative options to be exposed to local and global politics, economy and culture and to connect with local communities, the global diaspora (Ong, 2003) and their home countries. Ethnic media studies was very quick to respond to this new trend. A great number of ethnic media scholars examined the impact of the Internet and new media on the acculturation process of immigrants. Many of them were worried about the power of the digital media, since it offered migrants the option to

[15] These studies' (De Costa et al, 2016; Gomes, 2018) focus on the relatively more affluent and mobile international students from middle-class families and above in China, however, do not reflect the wide spectrum of the economic backgrounds of Chinese international students, nor the stresses encountered by the students when studying abroad.

access content written in their first language which was assumed to reduce their motivations to learn local languages, and to impede their ability and drive to acculturate and integrate into the mainstream society. Such direct application of acculturation theories and frameworks, which were developed before the popularization of the Internet, to the increasingly diversified mediascape of migrants who have lived the majority of their lives after the popularization of Internet, however, risks neglecting the systematic and underlying changes this new media brings to migrant experience and multicultural society. To avoid replicating the conceptual frameworks of ethnic media studies on digitally-mediated migrants, scholars have borrowed concepts, theories and methodologies from various fields and disciplines, ranging from ethnic and racial studies, border studies, urban studies to Internet studies, science and technologies studies and postcolonial studies (Leurs & Smets, 2018), and gradually opened an area and named it "digital migration studies".

As migrants demonstrate a skillful and creative use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), investigations into the impact of digitization on their migratory journey multiply and are no longer limited by the framework of ethnic media studies. With digital technologies gradually becoming part of many migrants' lives that expand beyond digitizing previously paper-based media, scholars have turned their attention to the systematic change the digital platforms and their associated technologies have brought to the migrant's lives. In other words, in this post-media era, it is essential that we look into how technologies construct migrant's life in all aspects.

In 2009, Brinkerhoff and Everett published *Digital Diasporas* and *Digital Diaspora* respectively, proposing "digital diaspora" as a new name for the phenomenon of being a diaspora in the digital age. The name also reflects the tension that this field was born with: on the one hand, it cannot avoid using the language of diaspora studies; on the other hand, the field aims to look into the current, or even the future of, social relations as entangled with the digital, which has been claimed as an essential force in the Third Wave Revolution (Dyson et al.,2004) and whose overuse has been increasingly criticized as being hyped as part of the neoliberalist ideology. It seems that the name is part of a larger trend. Around the end of 2000s and the beginning of 2010s, similar names emerged, including "connected migrants" (Diminescu, 2008), "e-diasporas" (Diminescu, 2008), "diasporas in the new media age" (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010) and "mediatized migrants" (Hepp, Bozdag, & Suna, 2013) (Leurs & Smets, 2018, p.7).

The emerging field of digital diasporas gradually found its unique path in between diaspora studies and new media scholarship. Candidatu, Leurs and Ponzanesi (2019), who are three important scholars in this emerging field, went through the literature published since the end of 2000s and identified three paradigms in digital migration studies: “migrants-in-cyberspace”, “everyday digitally mediated migrant life” and “migrants as digital data traces” (quoted in Leurs & Smets, 2018, p.8-9). “Migrants-in-cyberspace” examines how migrants use digital technologies in the online world, for example, posting comments, uploading selfies and representing their identities (Leurs, 2015). The second paradigm, “everyday digitally mediated migrant life” utilizes mediatization theories and scrutinizes the boundary and embeddedness of the online and the offline in everyday practices of migrants. Trimikliniotis, Parsanoglou and Tsianos (2014)’s *Mobile Commons, Migrant Digitalities and the Right to the City* is an exemplary study. Writing during the so-called “European refugee crisis”, they look into the everyday practices of migrants to illustrate the physical, political, cultural and digital borders in the 21st century Europe. While the first and the second paradigms I have discussed examine the relationship between the human agency and the digital technologies in complex socio-political contexts, the third paradigm examines “migrants as digital data trace”. Following the path of actor-network theory, new materialism and posthumanism, works like Diminescu (2008) studies how the paradigmatic figure of the uprooted migrant gradually transforms into the contemporary figure of the connected migrant. By massively using ICTs, a previously latent feature of migrants – as actors of a culture of bonds – became visible and dynamic (p.565).

However, as Leurs and Smets (2018) urge at the end of their review of the recent developments of digital migration studies, the field seems to be “Eurocentric” at this stage, since the majority of scholars conduct their studies either in or about Europe. Since most of the leading theorists are based in Europe, the field risks losing the insights possible from studies on populations and geographies beyond Europe.

As addressed by the first section of this chapter, the Chinese diaspora has been the topic of academic research in various disciplines for decades. Although how the digital reconstructs this field in general remains understudied, the field has witnessed increasing efforts to integrate digital media scholarship with the recent as well as long-existing discussions in the field of Chinese diaspora studies. Early attempts to synchronize these two fields did not deviate too much from the path set by ethnic media

studies and the acculturation paradigm underlying the majority of diaspora studies. Chen and Hanasono (2016) and Yang, Wu, Zhu, Brian and Southwell (2004) examined polymedia usage prevalent among student migrants and focused on how home digital media and their local counterparts perform different duties in the acculturation process. For these studies, media are assessed based on whether they help migrants to grow and maintain local networks, whether they motivate migrants to learn the local language and integrate in local mainstream societies, as well as whether they encourage migrants to embrace local culture and discourses and leave familiar zones, including their mother tongue and home culture. Putting home media and local media in juxtaposition follows the dominant logic of many diaspora and migration studies, where it seems the country of departure and the country of destination are constantly competing for the favor and fidelity of migrants (Amelina, Faist & Nergiz, 2014). Such investigations of migrants' media use often do a good job of describing the complex mediascape of migrants, where they do not use one type of media in a particular language, but creatively utilize a myriad of media options. As Mao (2015) finds from his research on the information-seeking pattern of Chinese migrants, migrants do not just take what is offered. Rather, they can take the initiative to select media channels for different purposes. His study finds that for government or policy-related information, migrants tend to read the official governmental websites. Yet for information regarding employment or other advertisements, they seem to rely on ethnic media. Mao's (2015) research captures the moment between the onset of Internet and the explosive expansion of social media. Yet now, with the digitization of homeland and local media, as well as the recent phenomenon of Appification (Li, 2018), it might make some sense to say that looking at the digital life of migrants within the spectrum of acculturation provides a narrow understanding of migrants' lives. As Candidatu, Leurs and Ponzanesi (2019) correctly point out in their methodological overview of digital migration studies, the digital has become part of life experience, as well as the identity of the migrants.

The last twenty years have witnessed some insightful attempts to bridge the digital and the migrant in the case of Chinese diaspora, if looking globally. Zhang and Hao (1999), after reviewing the tradition of Chinese ethnic press worldwide, suggests that Internet and digitalization could save the ethnic press from a declining or irrelevant future. Centering on the deterritorializing force of cyberspace, Yin (2015) points out that Internet can transmit the original Chinese cultural reservoir, intact, to the immigrants'

destinations, and this accessibility to homeland media helps Chinese overseas to maintain an "authentic Chinese-ness" (p.561). Ong (2003) underscores the importance of the *locale* in digital studies of the diaspora by citing the attacks on Chinese ethnic community in Indonesia in 1997 and the "Global Huaren" website established soon after the event as a counteract. In contrast, according to Ong (2003), failing to recognize these immigrants as local citizens, and instead seeing them as part of the overseas Chinese, neglects the efforts these communities have made to rebuild their society within the local context and could intensify their conflicts with other local communities. These studies on the role the Internet plays in the mediascape of Chinese migrants point out the potential challenges these newly enabled connections may create, unveil or intensify. The conflicts resulting from transnational mobility regarding national identity is one of them.

Along with the trend of Appification (Li, 2018) and the rise of social media, WeChat as an increasingly popular app gradually came under the radar of researchers working on the use of Internet among Chinese migrants. Since 2016, an increasing number of studies worldwide have studied WeChat, not just in terms of how this super Chinese app coordinates Chinese citizens' lives in the so-called surveillance state, but how it evolves into a super platform where overseas Chinese life can be connected, coordinated, and, sometimes, re-invented. Wang and Lim (2017), for example, explores how *peidu mama* uses WeChat to coordinate their local mothering tasks and connect with their families in China. *Peidu mama*, which literary translates into "accompanying study mothers", refers to the de facto single mothers who accompany their school-aged children to study outside China, for example, in the United States, Canada, and in Wang and Lim's case, Singapore. Compared to other migrants, these *peidu mamas* face different and often more challenging struggles, since they have to adapt to the local ways of life and become familiar with local transit, medical and school systems without the institutional support of their children's schools or universities in a very short period of time, so that the acculturation stress of their children can be reduced to the minimum. Wang and Lim (2017) adopt participant observation along with a method called "content-context diary", which records both content-related (for example, messages and emojis exchanged) or context-related (for instance, attitudes, times and places) aspects of communication. The study presents the data of three out of ten mothers participating in the research, and despite their diverse backgrounds, WeChat is always identified as an

irreplaceable source of support for both expanded local social networks and those maintained transnationally with families. (Wang & Lim, 2018, p.173).

Advertised most often as a social messaging app, WeChat not only enables its users to maintain intimacies and affective bonds across vast geographic distance, but also unlocks unprecedented opportunities for maintaining and building support networks, employment and maintaining their Chinese ways of life outside the homeland. "Parallel trading" is one example. Often used interchangeably with *dai gou*[16], parallel trading refers to the practice of buying local goods on behalf of customers in China by Chinese migrants, tourists, students and workers who live overseas permanently or temporarily (Martin, 2017, p.1). WeChat is one of the most often used apps by such parallel traders and customers. Focusing on female international students from China, Martin (2017) employed ethnographic methods to explore how the synchronous communication enabled by WeChat made it possible for female Chinese students in Australia to turn their transnational network capital into financial opportunities. With their assiduous work on WeChat – for example, drafting and posting advertisement on their WeChat Moments, providing immediate responses to requests from customers on WeChat and updating sales information of local pharmacies on their WeChat Moments – these Chinese female students were no longer limited to the precarious emotional labour in the "grey zones" of the city (Martin, 2017), for example, illegally working as a waitresses at a local Chinese restaurants, as a measure to help reduce their financial burden on their families who supported their studies in Australia.

In addition to maintaining transnational networks, WeChat is also used by migrants to connect with local co-ethnics. Calling it "a habitual media" (p.521), Chen, Butler and Liang (2018) reported that WeChat was the most recalled and most used social media among Chinese migrants interviewed in the study, that it shaped their acculturation process "as both mass media and interpersonal communication" (p.522). Among all the featured functions of WeChat, the researchers found the group chat feature to be the most interesting. Not only did all participants in the study join at least one WeChat group, but these groups facilitated a wide range of services and opportunities for support. For example, there are carpool groups, used furniture trade

[16] For a more focused study on the history, scale and controversy over Chinese parallel trading, please see Hanser & Li (2015).

groups, CPA[17] study groups and alumni groups (p.521). Despite the diversity of the ways that participants engage in group discussions, WeChat played an important part in supporting their everyday life in the host society both psychologically and socio-culturally (p.521).

Being such an important source of support in migrants' life experiences, during moments of crisis, WeChat also offers the political potential for mobilizing social movements. Chen, Mao and Qiu (2018) analyze the understudied role WeChat has played in the Peter Liang Protests in the United States and point out that WeChat transformed from a platform "for chitchat and group-buying" to "a political space for mobilization and protest" (p.87). Peter Liang was a rookie NYPD whose gun accidentally went off during his patrol in Brooklyn on November 20, 2014 and killed an African American citizen named Akai Gurley. He was charged with second-degree manslaughter and sentenced to 15 years in prison on February 11, 2016. What upset the Asian American community in this case was that they think Peter Liang was regarded as the scapegoat to pacify the African American community. Online discussion on WeChat soon broke out after the charge was made. People discussed details of launching the protests, including the dress code of the protest, ways to help Liang's family, choosing the right hashtag for Facebook and Twitter posts and ways to avoid conflict with African American community (Chen, Mao & Qiu, p.85). Various WeChat groups were set up to mobilize the offline protests and related articles were circulated on people's WeChat Moments. According to Chen, Mao and Qiu (2018), protestors still used Facebook and Twitter to advocate for Liang and explain the protests to others, but WeChat played an essential role in mobilizing and organizing the protestors (p.87). The researchers pointed out that part of the reason for choosing WeChat as the communication and mobilization platform was because it was a "Chinese" app and thus distinct from its American counterparts, Facebook and Twitter, which were viewed as "'strangers' social media" (Chen, Mao & Qiu, 2018, p.86).[18]

[17] CPA refers to Certified Public Accountant. It is a designation students get only after a series of exams and practicums. The designation is often required for high-level accounting-related jobs.

[18] Another important context not directly related to the political use of WeChat is that in the US middle-aged Asian migrants who were first-generation immigrants – the backbone of these protests – adopted WeChat before their second-generation supposedly tech-savvy migrant sons and daughters, to reconnect with their families and relatives in China (Chen, Mao & Qiu, 2018).

Despite the progress in the emerging global scholarship on the Chinese diaspora in the digital age, Canada, as one of the most popular destinations of Chinese migrants, has not been an active contributor in terms of scholarly research. It does not mean, however, that Canada does not have far-reaching issues with migration or ethnic community in the so-called digital age. On the contrary, Canada, which is often identified as a multicultural immigrant country, is facing serious challenges regarding migrants. The controversy over WeChat-mediated ride-hailing in the Lower Mainland of BC is a case in point.

* * *

To sum up, this chapter reviews the existing literature on three distinct but related fields. First, this chapter reviews literature on Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, Canada, which is one of the most popular immigrant destinations in the world. Instead of examining the Chinese immigrants in the metropolitan area as a homogeneous category, or a part of the global Chinese diaspora, this chapter deliberately focuses on research exploring the embodied life experiences of Chinese immigrants, coming from various backgrounds and immigrant trajectories to Canada[19]. The aim of the first section "Chinese migrants in Vancouver" is thus to go beyond "Chinese diaspora" as a homogeneous entity and excavate the multifaceted and nuanced everyday practices and feelings of Chinese migrants in Vancouver amid the local history of the tension between the Chinese and the mainstream.

Following the examination of the diverse academic descriptions of contemporary Chinese immigrant life experience in Vancouver, the second section of this chapter reviews the existing literature on Chinese international students in North America, Australasia and Europe. This part of the literature review highlights studies that do not limit their explorations on the academic adaptation and language acquisition of international students, but investigate their motivations for studying abroad, their local life experiences outside school and their trajectories after graduation. International students cannot be studied in a linear model of home-to-host immigration. In other words, just as Berry's adaptation and acculturation do not reflect the nuanced realities of the local life of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, they are not productive frames to

[19] This small-scale study focuses on the different life experiences of Chinese immigrants and potential immigrants like international students belonging to the educated or professional classes.

explore the multifaceted experience of Chinese international students in this particularly globalized and digitized world either.

The third section of this chapter focuses on the specific aspect of digitalization in the life of Chinese international students and immigrants. Different from the ethnic media studies' direct application of Berry's (1997) adaptation framework on investigations of digital media, this chapter brings light to studies that restore the complexity to digital connectedness embedded in migrants' everyday practices. Since there are limited studies on Chinese immigrants' use of digital media, this chapter borrows from the emergent field of Digital Migrant Studies, whose research mainly focuses on the role that digital media plays in the everyday experience of immigrants and refugees during the so-called "European refugee crisis". The concepts and methods, adopted by these recent studies, challenge Berry's acculturation paradigm and its high status in ethnic media studies.[20] In this thesis, I do not assume that the goal of Chinese international students or immigrants in Canada is to acculturate, nor do I judge their media use according to its facilitation or obstruction of their acculturative process. Instead, what I focus on is WeChat and what kind of embodied life experience is reflected from its popular use among Chinese international students in Vancouver.

1.4. Assemblage as a productive framework

As this study attempts to go beyond Berry's (1997) adaptation framework as applied in ethnic media studies and ventures into the intersection between 1) the heterogeneous experiences of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver, 2) the multifaceted life of Chinese international students beyond academic and linguistic adaptation and 3) the digital connectedness embedded in the everyday practices of migrants or international students, I need a productive framework that can accommodate this broader scope. Unlike Berry's (1997) adaptation framework that limits immigrants' or international students' experiences as empirical evidence for their eventual assimilation into the mainstream of the host society, this productive framework should do justice to the

[20] In ethnic media studies, media uses among migrants are analyzed based on the presumed aim to acculturate. This thesis does not theoretically explore what might be a new ground-breaking definition of immigration in the digital age, though I think it is very important to ask questions about what immigration means, especially in the digitized world today. What the thesis aims to do is to go beyond Berry's (1997) adaptation paradigm within the scope of Chinese international students' use of digital media in popular immigrant destinations like Vancouver.

complex, nuanced and multifaceted realities lived by Chinese international students and immigrants in Vancouver.

In the search for a productive framework, I encountered "assemblage" as a particularly interesting and fitting construct. "Assemblage" was a concept translated from the French word "*agencement*" from Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. A general definition of assemblage is "a multiplicity constituted by heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them" (Deleuze, 2007, p.52 quoted in McFarlane, 2011, p.653). However, an assemblage is not just a random combination of things and refers to anything and everything. Rather, as Wise (2005) notes, "assemblage select elements from the milieus, and bring them together in a particular way" (p.92). As an increasingly popular concept in social sciences, assemblage has been used as a descriptor that partially emphasized as the enlistment of things (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011, p.125). One of the risks of such deployment, as pointed out by Allen (2011), is that overemphasizing the nominal properties of assemblage may lead to thin and endless descriptions (quoted in Savage, 2019, p.2). This, as Savage (2019) explains, can make using assemblage a justification for just mapping out bits and pieces of the phenomena and no longer productive in explanation (p.2).

Quite the opposite of indiscriminately enlisting random elements, assemblage is always stratified (Wise, 2013, p.160). According to Wise (2013), an assemblage has two stratums: "the collective assemblage of enunciation" and "the machinic assemblage", the juxtaposition of which is often summarized as "content and expression" (p.94). In the former dimension, assemblages are "systems of signs, semiotic systems" and thus include elements such as "discourses, words, 'meanings' and non-corporeal relations that link signifiers with effects" (Wise, 2013, p.94). In the latter dimension, assemblage refers to "the systems of things, actions and passions" (Wise, 2013, p.94). To illustrate how the collective assemblage of enunciation and the machinic assemblage work together, here I quote Wise's (2005) illustration of the mobile phone approached from a perspective of assemblage:

> "I pick up the mobile phone and flip it open; my body changes speed, path and consistency; I enter into an assemblage of language, a collective assemblage of enunciation – acts, statements, 'incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies' – which makes some statements possible and others not." (Wise, 2005, p.100)

As is explicit from this succinct description, the mobile phone assemblage is not just the physical container of chips, batteries, buttons and screens, the thumb and other fingers but rather it employs users to type, press, scroll and flip, and incites the almost instinctual consciousness to hide the screen from crowds around, or the consensus of using a pair of headphones (or fancier, EarPods) rather than playing the music out loud in public spaces (or the combination of them). The key lessons to be learned from "assemblage thinking", rather, is to understand mobile phones, or in the case of this thesis, WeChat-based ride-hailing, as "a process of 'co-functioning' whereby heterogeneous elements come together in a non-homogeneous grouping" (Anderson & McFarlane, 2011, p.125). Taking the lesson back to the mobile phone assemblage described above, the assemblage is not just the mixture of my body and the physical device, but the contingent interactions as "I pick up the mobile phone and flip it open" (Wise, 2005, p.100).

Besides becoming a stratified arrangement of heterogeneous elements, assemblage, in its original French context, is not just a descriptive noun,[21] but refers to a process of becoming. This fluid reading of assemblage relates to what Wise (2005) terms the other axis of assemblage – "moving between making (territorialization) and unmaking (deterritorialization)" (p.94). According to McCann and Ward (2012), "an assemblage is always in the process of coming together… just as it is always also potentially pulling apart" (p.328). Rather than being a fixed arrangement of a list of heterogeneous elements, an assemblage is constantly in change. It is this fluid property of the construct that links it with the other groups of well-known theoretical constructs from *A Thousand Plateaus*, territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization. For Deleuze and Guattari, these three terms in the book describe the dynamic process of the making, unmaking and remaking of the assemblages, which as I mentioned above, is constantly worked through the interactions of the heterogeneous elements that the assemblages select from the milieus.

According to Collier and Ong (2004), assemblage implies characteristics such as "heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated" (p.12). On every possible level, it is against a reified reading of the lived realities as determined by macro-

[21] For the discussion of assemblage as a potential mistranslation from *agencement* and the French connotations of the term, please see Kennedy, Zapasnik, McCann & Bruce (2013).

structures, but encourages engagement with the complexities, fluidities and interminglings.

Since its initial conception in Deleuze and Guattari's book, assemblage as a concept gained traction firstly in art and architecture and then geography. It is only recently that communication scholars started to experiment with deployment of this concept. For example, Wise (2013), as a scholar well versed in the philosophy of Deleuze, proposes to use assemblages to approach the various forms, processes and power of attention, including inattention, in the "clickable world" today (p.159). He believes that "attention assemblages", as a theoretical construct, would bring light to "the distribution and formation of attention across body, brain, tool, and environment" and thus make it possible to examine attention as "a product of power, experience, habit, chance, and desire" (p.169). Capturing a similarly phenomenal trope in communication, Hess (2015) constructs the "selfie assemblage" to study the "constellation of multiple elements" in contemporary technological culture that express and sometimes interact with the "affective tensions of networked identity" (p.1631). For Hess, selfie assemblage is not the combination of self, space, machine and network, but the interactions and problematizations of authenticity and digitality, the need of intimacy and devices, the fleeting experience and the compulsion to document space and time (p.1631).

Different from Wise (2013) and Hess (2015), Slack (2013) deploys assemblage in a very different way. She urges communication scholars to take assemblage as a new way of research to save the discipline from falling into irrelevance. Slack (2013) argues that communication scholars should no longer limit themselves in scrutinizing only transmissions, modes and media. Rather, they should stop being limited by old (e.g. mediacentric) paradigms, expand the scope of communication studies to include contemporary developments (e.g. in biology), and reimagining the ontology of communication as lies in assemblage (p.155). Slack believes the assemblage thinking will be a productive heuristic to liberate the discipline from the scaffolding of traditional paradigms such as transmissions, modes and media, and as a result, it will help bring in more potentialities for reimagining communication as situated in the present and the future.

For this thesis, adopting "assemblage" as a productive framework is not just to follow Slack's (2013) call to bring assemblage in communication. More accurately,

assemblage as a framework emerges as a necessity from this study's research process and especially the fieldwork. For this thesis on WeChat-based ride-hailing, the field is not a fixed container of practices and meanings, whose inner logic is ready to be interpreted. Rather, the bits and pieces of the phenomenon are hidden everywhere across small-scale interactions as in a WeChat public account, a mobile phone, a vehicle, a kitchen in the food court, to large-scale movements such as traffic across cities and suburbs, the transnational flows of international students and immigrants, and the transformation of national policies on inbound and outbound flows of residents. It is not just a combination of devices, software, actors, vehicles and urban spaces; the phenomenon results from the contingent interactions of these heterogeneous elements. Besides, WeChat-based ride-hailing in Vancouver is characterized by resistance from local authorities and media, whose crackdown narrative unlocks the yellow peril discourse long existing in the area. Pressed up against this discourse is a separate discursive sphere on WeChat and other popular Chinese websites used, and constantly contributed to, by Chinese international students. On top of these stratified interminglings, the WeChat-based ride-hailing is constantly making, unmaking and remaking. Platforms emerge, expand, compete and become bankrupt. Local restaurant owners start to purchase advertising spaces on such ride-hailing platforms. The recent increase of middle-aged male immigrants as devoted drivers and efforts of platforms to professionalize the ride-hailing service gradually push international students out of the industry's potential pool of labour. The anticipation, repeated delays of Uber and the general regulation of ride-hailing industry in BC, and actual tickets received by drivers caught in police's crackdown operations, have led to updates of platforms as well as the increasingly alert mindset of drivers as they pick up strangers connected by platforms, which was interestingly described by one of my interviewed passengers as "*shanzhai*-ed Didi". For her, the ride-hailing platforms on WeChat in Vancouver, Canada is nothing but a poor version of platformed mobility that she was used to in China. The WeChat assemblage, and how its "tip of the iceberg" was revealed from this study's research on WeChat-based ride-hailing practices in Vancouver, will be developed with more details in Chapter 3 and 4. As for the above description of the multifaceted phenomenon that this thesis attempts to grasp, I hope it makes clear how assemblage will help restore the complexities, fluidities and intermingings experienced by Chinese international students in Vancouver on a daily basis. By approaching the WeChat assemblage through WeChat-based ride-hailing, this thesis hopes to study the life experience of Chinese international students in Vancouver

without assuming or abstracting their practices simply as steps towards what is almost destined acculturation in previous literature.

Chapter 2.

Methodology

As mentioned in the Introduction, WeChat is integrated into most aspects of the international students' life: maintaining connections with friends and family at home, staying updated of local news, food delivery, potential employment opportunities, to name a few. Given that the pervasiveness of WeChat in their lives cannot be exhausted in an MA thesis, I have decided to study one of these WeChat activities – WeChat-based ride-hailing. On the one hand, WeChat-based ride-hailing involves students as both drivers and passengers and promises to provide insights into different dimensions of international students' lives. It exhibits the integral role that WeChat plays in the life of international students, which contributes to both positive developments and potential issues for these international students and even the Chinese immigrant communities in BC's lower mainland. Thus, it serves as a valuable entry point through which I can explore the use of communication technologies in culturally diverse communities in countries like Canada.

WeChat-based ride-hailing, however, is not a static or easily accessed research subject. In China, ride-hailing services are embedded on WeChat thanks to Tencent's collaboration with already powerful leaders in the ride-hailing industry (e.g. Didi). In Metro Vancouver, in contrast, the ride-hailing service is illegal, limited to only part of the Chinese-speaking population, and was developed by local start-ups, some of whom would outsource part of their programming and designing work to China. Drivers participating in the WeChat-based ride-hailing services do not visit regular sites where they can meet coworkers or passengers and most of their registrations with platforms, checkups, and transactions and communications with both passengers and platforms are online through individual mobile phones. Thus, as a field, the WeChat-based ride-hailing is extremely challenging to access or observe. Furthermore, due to the Uber-ban in the Lower Mainland and crackdown operations led by local authorities to catch those registered with and running WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms, these drivers play hide-and-seek with local authorities like the RCMP and are in general wary about participating in public research about or discussing the issue as workers in the unregulated economy.

Regardless of the challenges of researching ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, WeChat-based ride-hailing showcases a number of key issues about immigration to Canada, including the introduction of transnational flows of people, technologies and lifestyles to Canada; the legal issues regarding these transnational flows and the long-existing anti-Asian media discourses; the understudied life experiences of international students who are often assumed to be hypermobile; and the use of digital platforms in ethnic social geographies. This makes it an interesting topic to explore. However, owning to its embeddedness in the local ethnic community, the immaterial attributions of its platform-based operation, and its current legal status in Metro Vancouver, researching WeChat-based ride-hailing requires a creative use of existing methods, frequent modifications and collaboration with the participants of this WeChat-gated ethnic world. To set up the background for the types of stories told in Chapter 3 and 4, this chapter describes my experience designing, applying and re-designing research methodology, and in this process, my deepened understanding of the field where the stories take place.

2.1. Researching digital migrants

Amid the growing research in Diaspora Studies and Migration Studies, (as discussed in Chapter 1) the majority of which rely on an adaptation framework (Berry, 1997), recently scholars have started using the notion of mobility (Hannam, Sheller & Urry, 2006). Different from older mobility paradigms that juxtapose mobility and fixity, the new mobility paradigm developed by Sheller and Urry (2016) underscores “differential mobilities” (p.12). The aim is no longer to study a “mobility” but to understand how the context of such (im)mobilities are “mobilized, or performed, through ongoing sociotechnical and cultural practices” (Sheller, 2011, p.2). Thus, the new mobilities paradigm might offer more freedom for complex phenomenon like WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, while continuing to make inquiries about migration.

Based on her in-depth reading of mobilities research, Yu (2018) takes the Chinese community in Flushing, Queens, NY, as the subject of her migrant studies using ethnographic methods. According to Yu (2018), the pursuit of the “contextual understanding” which is intrinsic to mobility research “requires thicker narratives that could only be obtained through qualitative approaches” (p.13). In one of her studies on the imaginative geography of residents that are mobile within the Chinese enclave of

Flushing, she adopts mental mapping and asks each participant to complete a map quiz to see if and how well they can identify Flushing or New York on a map of the United States.

Also bringing with him a mobilities-oriented approach to his research on student migrants, Ploner (2015) looks beyond the simplistic, homogeneous categorization of the "international student" and examines "the multifaceted nature of students' aspirations, mobilities and life experiences" (p.425). He chooses biographical interviewing as his research method. According to him, in-depth interviews and thick descriptions make it possible for both him as a researcher and the student as engaged participants to articulate their experiences, journeys, networks and moorings which have seldom been emphasized in previous research.

Like Ploner (2015), Wang and Lim (2017) develop methods which create more space for the participants' symbolic meaning-making. In their research on mobile communications used by mothers who go with their children attending universities outside their home countries (as discussed in Chapter 1), they use the "content-context diary" as a complementary method for a two-day conventional participant observation with each participant where the diary entries retain rich data from the observation phase, providing multidimensional thick description of these *peidu mama*'s[22] connected life in Singapore.

In *Uberland: How Algorithms Are Rewriting the Rules of Work*, Rosenblat (2018) plunges herself into the Ubersphere of Toronto, Montreal, New York, Los Angeles and even pre-Uber cities like Vancouver. By taking taxi and Uber-like rides in multiple cities, talking to the drivers and, if possible, recruiting them for longer interviews, and observing as well as critically analyzing the algorithmic platform of Uber and its impact on the labor of driving, her longitude ethnographic study produces abundant data on the everyday encounters of ride-hailing drivers.

Corresponding to how Sheller and other scholars described above embrace cyberspace as the focus, the site, and sometimes part of the method of their research, Leurs and Smets (2015) summarize the productive use of ethnographic methods for

[22] For a detailed explanation of *peidu mama*, see the review of Wang and Lim's (2017) study in Chapter 1.

researching everyday digitally-mediated migrant experience. According to them, such methods situated in the everyday practices of migrants lead to a grounded description of the migrants' multifarious experiences in the world of digitalization and migration today (p.9).

These scholars have developed productive methodologies that provide a grounded description of migrants studied through the lens of mobility whose experiences are mediated by digital technologies. According to Büscher and Urry (2009), "moving with" people, places, information and objects counterbalance the nature and tendency of stasis underlying conventional methodologies. To move with the ride-hailing, this research takes Marcus' (1995) multi-sited ethnography as its framing methodology. The multi-sited ethnography defines the objects of study through a number of different techniques, including "follow the people", "follow the thing", "follow the metaphor", "follow the plot, story, or allegory", "follow the life or biography" and "follow the conflict" (Marcus, 1995, p.110). The focus in this study – ride-hailing – is not a static object but entails the circulation of people, practices, infrastructures, spaces and ideas, and thus requires, following the user, the ride, the platform and the controversy. As I explained in Chapter 1, one of the key aims of this study is to explore how different people, practices, infrastructures, spaces and ideas form the WeChat assemblage as revealed from the WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver. In other words, this study is not just concerned about the international student ride-hailing drivers working in the unregulated economy providing illegal services, but more broadly, their role and experience when participating in the ethnic economy and community in Metro Vancouver. By plunging myself into the field of WeChat-based ride-hailing as a researcher, I hope to witness how the people, their practices and "objects" make up the transient and mobile space of rides, in-between the pick-up locations and the drop-off destinations, which are crucial to understanding what I call the "New Chinatown". Since the assemblage cannot be sufficiently studied by singling out any one site or any one thread of activity, it is clear that Marcus' multi-sited ethnography is the ideal methodology to study the composition and the operation of this WeChat assemblage.

2.2. The initial design

To be honest, at first, I decided to use Marcus' multi-sited ethnography to conduct my research because I planned to use the "ride-along" method as my specific

research method and thought studying the WeChat-based ride-hailing would involve a lot of mobile rides that I had to take, follow, observe and analyze. The “ride-along” method, meaning the researcher would get mobile with the moving rides, is widely used in academic investigations of mobile subjects including but not limited to Uber and other types of ride-hailing. For example, in both Anderson’s (2014) and Glöss et al.’s (2016) research on for-profit ridesharing, the researchers contacted the drivers by using the smartphone applications, booking a ride and interviewing them during rides or afterwards.

But as the research process proved later, my understanding of multi-sited ethnography was quite shallow. Actually, it was my exact research journey that brought me to a clearer and deeper understanding of why it was a good fit for my research. My original research design, before the revisions requested by Simon Fraser University (SFU)’s Research Ethics Board (REB), included employing a mix of participant observation and semi-structured interviews in order to “follow” the drivers of ride-hailing platforms. I planned to recruit participants taking rides from the ride-hailing platforms on WeChat and ask for their consent before both ride-alongs and interviews. During the ride-along, I would observe the ride-hailing experience as a passenger, converse with the driver according to the conversation norms within the space of the ride-hailing vehicle and take brief notes *en route*. If the driver agreed to participate in the interview, I would conduct a taped one-hour interview with them and ask questions about their experience of working at such ride-hailing platforms, their views on Metro Vancouver’s ride-hailing controversy and their mediated life experiences here as international students. Besides a series of related questions, the interview included two tasks: 1) drawing a map of Metro Vancouver on a piece of paper and labeling the places that the driver visited most frequently during their ride-hailing job, and 2) listing and ranking the part-time jobs that Chinese international students usually do and identifying where the occupation of a ride-hailing driver ranks.

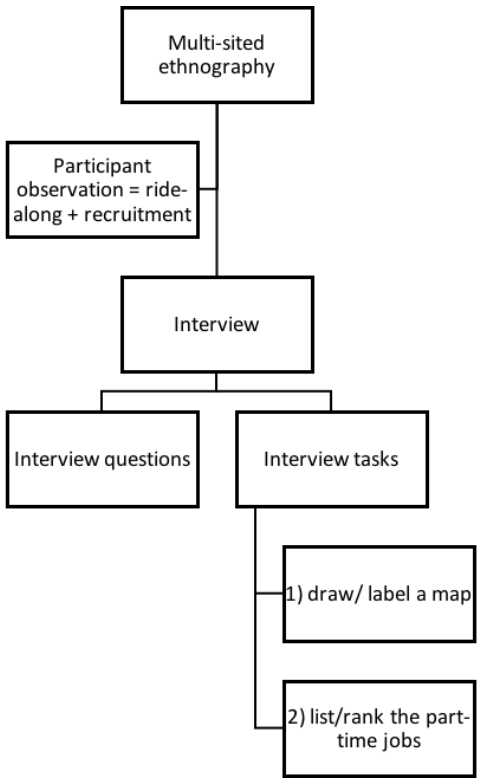

Figure 2.1. The initial design of methodology

Before officially entering the field, from my life experience as an international student in Metro Vancouver, I gained some knowledge about the existing ride-hailing platforms, became a subscriber of their WeChat public accounts where such services are offered, and designed the methodology of this research project. I proposed this project to my thesis committee in September 2017, applied for ethics' approval in April 2018 and got the approval after several rounds of revisions in July 2018. From August to November 2018, I conducted participant observation and semi-structured interviews with participants in the WeChat-based ride-hailing economy. The research, however, was not conducted as planned in the initial original methodological design as shown above. The guidelines, reviews and amendments of REB of SFU and the very contact, negotiation and research experience with the participants shaped the research methodology significantly. The transformation and revisions tell a lot of stories about a field that is mobile, partly immaterial and partly material, partly local and partly transnational, partly conspicuous and partly invisible.

2.3. To research, ethically

As ride-hailing was categorized as illegal in British Columbia at the time of the research proposal and ethics' review, the research, together with my thesis committee, spared no effort to protect the identities of participants who volunteered to contribute to this research. All research data, including but not limited to research notes, transcriptions and recordings were anonymized and stored in a password-protected computer that only I could access. The research had to also leave out personal information or characteristics that might enable identifying participants. The measures that I proposed in the ethics' approval application, according to REB, were considered insufficient for protecting participants as they could accidentally reveal information about the participants and thus increased their risks to be exposed to legal or other authorities who could give them a ticket of $1,150 and even jeopardize their visas. The provisos from SFU's REB raised a number of concerns about the ethical aspects of the study and the adjustments to the research design to address these concerns shaped the research greatly. On the other hand, the feedback from REB made clear the difficult environment both for the drivers who were conducting what the REB defined as "illegal activities" and for me to research and in particular "move with them".

First and foremost, REB believed the ride-along method adopted for this study involved not just observation, but rather interviewing, since I planned to talk with the driver and ask questions on the ride. I considered this necessary since the participants had to be informed and consent to participating in the study and doing an interview with me. The REB was also concerned because, they claimed, interviewing during the ride could expose both my participants and me to dangers, as the interview might cause distracted driving. As I discussed in the earlier part of this chapter, "ride-along" is a frequently adopted method in mobility studies on formal and informal transport, and as shown in studies like Anderson's (2014) and Laurier's (2004), the researcher talks to the participant during the ride. The benefits of the ride-along method include providing opportunities for the researcher to ask questions about the driver's everyday practice and things that happened during the ride, as well as reducing post-ride challenges of recruiting the drivers for interviews, for they are often busy driving and their schedules are determined by incontrollable factors like the orders and the traffic. Moreover, similar to the scenario when one takes a cab, it is normal to have conversation with the driver

during the ride and it could be seen as odd and even impolite if the customer refuses to start a conversation or respond to the conversation initiated by the driver. Given that in the case of WeChat-based ride-hailing, oftentimes both the driver and the passenger have experienced or are experiencing studying in Metro Vancouver as international students from China, it is socially reasonable for the driver and the passenger during such ride-hailing activities to have conversations on topics like the schools they attend, the part-time jobs they do and recent news in China – topics that may not show up in regular taxi or ride-hailing trips. Eventually, REB agreed to the use of ride-along as a participant observation method, as long as I did not ask questions that initiated or directed the conversation, but only answered questions when asked by the driver. This tweak of "ride-along", however, not only limited my observation of the social space of the ride – as I could only answer questions and sometimes just answering questions could be regarded as a signal of unwillingness to continue the conversation – but also meant it was difficult to recruit participants. As proved many times later in the field, the participants found it challenging to schedule a period of time to meet me for an interview research after the day they provided their ride-hailing services, as their job assignments were too unpredictable.

Another issue REB raised regarding how to ensure confidentiality and the safety of participants but added difficulty to my recruitment of participants was the time slot for the participants to deliberate on whether they wanted to participate in the research. According to the REB, the recruitment could not happen during the ride, as the participants would have little time to consider carefully and, facing me as an co-ethnic passenger who pays them for their ride-hailing service, they might feel pressured to agree to participate in the research. Thus, to give the participants sufficient time to think about their participation in the study in a way that was free of social, financial and temporal pressures while maintaining their confidentiality in the maximal level, I re-designed my recruitment method. I set up a WeChat public account, through which I communicated with participants. Different from calling, texting and emailing or WeChat messaging, by communicating through the public account, the participants do not need to give away their personal information, such as their phone number, email or WeChat ID. The only information that I could access was the participant's WeChat profile photo (which are often not their faces) and the alias they used on WeChat, both of which the participant can easily change any time. In this way, I would not have any identifiable

information about the participants. Nor would I have problems maintaining the confidentiality of such information.

The introduction of the public account into the research was a double-edge sword. On the one hand, it increased my familiarity with WeChat's public accounts, which was one of the main elements of the WeChat infrastructures I scrutinized in the study. On the other hand, the confidentiality-maintained communication through public accounts was not the most effective. As an individual, I could only sign up for a subscription account (whose difference with the service account will be discussed in the next chapter), which would not notify other subscribers – and thus potential participants – about the new messages I sent to them through the public account.

Another revision that REB insisted on was that since "ride sharing apps are illegal in BC and people found engaging in this work could face fines up to $1150", my initial description of the business as "grey area" needed to be changed as they thought it could mislead the participants from recognizing "the heightened risks the participants could be exposed to by taking part in this research". According to REB, not only should I recognize the ride-hailing activities as "illegal" in the Study Details document in which I summarized my research and submitted to REB, but I had to make the legal status of the ride-hailing activities – what my participants were doing – crystal clear as "illegal" in the consent form. REB was right to point out the risks that participants could be exposed to and the illegality of the labour in British Columbia. However, as a researcher embedded in the same community where ride-hailing was common and objections to the government's Uber-ban was frequent, telling participants outright that their activities were illegal could sound inconsiderate and even disrespectful to drivers working in the business of ride-hailing. It seemed that I had to assume the same position as the authorities, condemning their participation in ride-hailing as illegal while asking them to cooperate and participate in the study. To meet REB's requirement and at the same time not offend or scare my participants away, on the consent form I indicated the controversial nature of the Uber-ban but also stated that the service was categorized as illegal in BC at the moment of the research.

All the above issues raised by REB were addressed in the revised research design, which, as a result of these adjustments, in one way or another, brought more challenges after I entered the field. The following issue, however, brought me to a

deeper understanding of the difficult environment not only for WeChat-based ride-hailing, but as a research setting to study WeChat-based ride-hailing ethnographically.

The REB wrote, “Note that WeChat stores records of conversations in servers located in China. How could this impact participant confidentiality? How will you mitigate associated risks?” (Full Board Review – Provisos, p.2) According to the privacy policy of WeChat (“WeChat Privacy Protection Summary”, 2018, May 10), the servers are located in Ontario, Canada and Hong Kong, rather than in Mainland China. Furthermore, WeChat does not permanently store chat data on their servers and the data only passes through servers to be distributed to the users who are having the conversations. Despite this concern about data storage, this particular proviso of REB about the data security on WeChat revealed the underlying concerns about WeChat as a “Chinese” app. As a “Chinese” app, WeChat was almost instantly linked to China as a surveillance state that, from the perspective of REB, could put its hands on the migrant students’ involvement in a business that is popular in China but categorized as illegal by the local government in BC. Although it would be highly interesting to study the surveillance measures and scale carried out by the Chinese government, it is not the central concern of the study. Thus, without more research into this area, I could not make easy conclusions about whether the limited traces of data stored on WeChat might or might not be used by the Chinese government against the interests of participants. What was not taken into consideration was that drivers were already using WeChat to access customers, so the risk of creating evidence about those participating in the illegal ride-hailing existed prior to this study. What I could make conclusions about was, however, that the impression on China as an authoritative country outside the Western world, as evidenced in this proviso, was an important part of the context for the stories recorded and re-told in this research. While providing useful tips for protecting the participants in the research, REB’s provisos revealed the discursive undercurrents about how SFU’s REB viewed the site of the research. The challenge of the research did not lie merely on the illegality of the ride-hailing service in BC, but also in terms of how dominant institutions viewed it as underground, ethnic, and, as suggested by the last proviso here, “Chinese”.

After several rounds of negotiation with REB, I designed a combination of recruitment methods, which replaced the initial plan of recruiting participants during the rides. For the Recruitment Method#1, I would book a number of rides (referred to in this study as “recruiting rides” to distinguish from the “observing rides” in which I would

collect research data through observation). During these rides, I would introduce my research project and myself as the researcher. After paying the driver at the end of the ride, I would give him or her a number of recruitment cards. If they, or people they knew, were interested in the study, they could contact me through my WeChat public account. For the Recruitment Method #2, I would post digital recruitment messages on WeChat through the research public account. If potential participants viewed the digital recruitment posts on WeChat and were interested, then they could contact me through the WeChat public account.

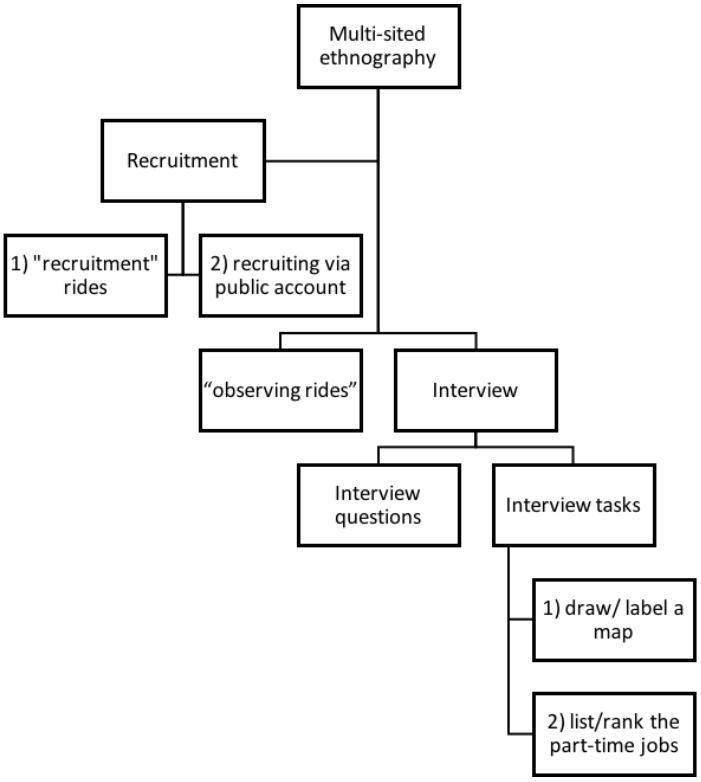

Figure 2.2. The methodological design adjusted after negotiations with SFU REB

2.4. Challenges of researching Chinese underground ride-hailing

The negotiation with REB shaped the project greatly. Getting their approval letter was like getting the ticket for a roller coaster – the exciting journey of the ethnographic research just began.

2.4.1. The first participant

When I sent out the first recruitment post through my research public account, the post's view increased rapidly within the first 24 hours. However, only four WeChat users subscribed the public account and among them only one sent a message to me through the public account, saying he or she was a ride-hailing driver and would like to participate in the research project.

Fieldnotes: *The first participant*

On July 28, 2018, I had my first interview with DDJ. I was in a state of ecstasy and had been muttering grateful monologues to myself for several minutes after I got DDJ's message. As my first participant, DDJ's confirmation of willingness to participate was particularly important to me. For since the moment I moved the cursor to the green icon of "Publish" on WeChat and pressed the left button of my mouse, I had had the frustrating feeling that I had little control over the recruitment, the participants or even the research in general. I had no idea what the result would be like: Would my recruitment posts be forwarded to circles several steps away from my personal circle of friends? Would it attract any of the readers it was intended for? Would anyone respond to this call for participants from me – who, for them, was just someone claiming to be a Masters student from Simon Fraser University working on her thesis project? Would the people from the ride-hailing platforms be interested, or annoyed, or even suspicious? My mind was filled with all the most extreme possibilities. This first confirmation message from DDJ was thus a beacon of hope.

The feeling of excitement was soon replaced by the pre-interview anxiety, as DDJ and I communicated through the messaging system embedded in the public account feature of WeChat, our conversation was on and off. In WeChat, messages between the public account and the individual subscribers are not accompanied by notifications, with sounds, vibrations or numbered badges like other conversations between WeChat individual users. That meant that DDJ would have to think of our intermittent conversation first, and then deliberately look up the public accounts he subscribed and find my public account, to notice that whether I have sent him a message. As a result, although he confirmed he would like to participate in the research project, we only managed to settle down with a general timeframe – on the weekend – to

meet up. Considering WeChat is an instant messaging app, our communication efficiency was extremely low. As a result, my heart hung in the air because the timeframe we settled down had too much flexibility. "On the weekend." That was DDJ's message. Yet when on the weekend exactly? It could conflict with my other plans, it could be the first few hours when my weekend started, and there could be even a possibility for it not to happen till the end of Sunday. If any mishaps occurred, I would have to look forward to the next weekend and to be trapped again in the same uncertainty.

Fortunately, DDJ did not make me wait long. On the Saturday morning, after I installed a mini program on WeChat which enabled public account owners to manage their communication with common subscribers[23], I saw DDJ's new message that he would be around Lougheed that afternoon. I confirmed my availability and asked him to choose a time and a place that fit his schedule best. He suggested Sharetea and that was where we met.

Sharetea is a Taiwanese bubble tea chain store and the one we went to that afternoon, which opened in 2017, was among its first branches in Metro Vancouver. It is located inside the Cariboo Centre, about 10 minutes' walk from Lougheed Town Centre Station, and 10 minutes' drive from the Burnaby campus of Simon Fraser University. We made the appointment in the morning to meet at 3 PM that afternoon. To make sure we had a place to sit, I took an earlier bus and arrived at the bubble tea shop half an hour in advance. It proved a smart choice to come a bit early, for there were only two vacant tables when I ordered my passion fruit green tea and only one of the two was left when I got my drink from the counter. It was a small table near the window. Nice, so I could see people coming. The small table could barely fit anything other than my laptop and a large icy drink. While waiting for DDJ, I opened my laptop and reviewed all my prepared questions. I rehearsed the questions one by one and my rehearsal was frequently interrupted by the unsettling idea that a participant of the shady ride-hailing industry might not understand why I asked these questions. He might be even wary of me, thinking me inquisitive about a trade and a life which I knew nothing about.

[23] It was a fairly easy installation with a few taps within WeChat.

The bubble tea shop was popular. It was at the end of the term and several tables were occupied by student-like young people staring at their laptops, exchanging something from time to time. There were also couples and friends who sat chatting jovially around me. With Chinese pop songs drifting softly in the air, among the sounds of different machines making tea, juice and slush, and with the warm sunshine sweeping in from the window facing the busy North Road, the vibe around me was relaxed. It seemed that everyone was absorbed in their own affairs. I was the only person who did not share the table with anyone. People came in, ordered their drinks, sat down, chatted happily and went out. Yet my participant did not turn up, until around 3:15PM.

I had been watching for cars that drew up in front of the bubble tea shop – whether a driver would walk in hesitantly with his eyes searching for someone who would look like his interviewer. Here he was, pulling the glass door slowly. He turned out to be an acquaintance. I waved and smiled at him and he seemed surprised. "I didn't know it was you!" DDJ said, pulled the chair back and sat down. The table now seemed even smaller. He was a very tall, solid, young man of my age. He was wearing just a vest and shorts. Sweat kept streaming down from his forehead. "I didn't know it was you. I saw this from Peter's Friends' Moments and I was curious who was doing research on this. I thought it might be one of Peter's friends but I didn't know it was you." DDJ and I had a mutual friend Peter and we met each other a few times at friends' birthday parties. But I never knew he was doing ride-hailing, nor did he know I was researching this trade. Finding that he would not need to speak with a total stranger (or worse, a police or a reporter), DDJ seemed relaxed a bit. "It's so hot. Let me get a cup of water." DDJ stood up and walked to the counter.

We talked for about one and half hours at Sharetea. DDJ provided detailed answers to all my prepared questions. He gave me a fuller account of the industry than my questions originally covered. He then gave me some advice on recruiting participants from his perspective as an experienced ride-hailing driver. He pointed out that the research process I posted on WeChat was too complicated. People surfing the app would be confused and not have the patience to read all of it. Another thing that he thought might turn away potential participants was the consent form, especially its emphasis on the measures I took to protect participants' personal information. As someone who had been treating ride-hailing as a casual part-time job for several years and thus had been exposed to the hostile environment resulting from the regulations

banning ride-haling and local media coverage of Chinese ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, DDJ advised me not to elaborate too much on consent or the ethical terms to drivers. He insisted that the more I explained about those protective measures I had designed to anonymize participants and protect them from the risks of joining this research project, the more likely people would feel they were signing their lives away, and thus the less likely they would give the consent and join my research.

DDJ was one of the most talkative participants. Sitting at the other side of the table and listening to him while he gave me not only responses but sincere suggestions, I was for a moment confused whether I was talking to a friend or a research participant. Maybe I should not assume the difference between the two concepts in the first place. DDJ said that he had been concerned about the legislative process, arguments and local coverage concerning Chinese ride-hailing platforms. He stressed that I should try to find people who truly knew things and were sufficiently articulate. Of course, it would make things a lot easier if those drivers who knew things and were sufficiently articulate were informed about this project by someone – someone they trusted – and thus they would know that I was not another policewoman or journalist hunting them down to reveal their secrets. At the end of the interview, I asked DDJ to do me the favor and forward my public account to friends who might be interested in the research. Within 48 hours, I got into contact with two friends of DDJ's who were willing to help with the project.

2.4.2. Recruiting participants online and on the rides

The encounter with DDJ gave me tremendous encouragement. The recruitment process, however, did not always go as smoothly as it did with him. I edited the recruitment post and forwarded it to my own WeChat Moments once per week. Even with my improvements, few responses were elicited from this recruitment method. While forwarding recruitment posts to my Friends' Moments, I also forwarded the same post to over ten active WeChat chat groups for people in Metro Vancouver, including groups for students studying at different schools, house hunters, people living in different cities, and so forth. The recruitment posts about an academic project on the currently illegal ride-hailing services, however, were not always submerged silently by other posts on rent/sale, lease transfer, second-hand textbooks and furniture, sale information at local supermarkets, and advertisements for Telus, Shaw, Fido and real estate projects. Once, I even got a friendly reminder from a stranger WeChat user in one of the groups that it

would be much better if I remained a silent onlooker, rather than dipping deep into this matter. After forwarding the research recruitment post to one of the groups, I saw that a WeChat user had posted a recruitment post for Raccoon Go, right after my research recruitment post. I tried to add this WeChat user and in the note section of the friend request I explained that I just posted a research recruitment post and was wondering whether the WeChat user was interested in participating. My friend request was rejected, however, with a message explaining that he or she was only forwarding the post for a friend. I sent the friend request again with a different message in the note section that I was doing an academic study and just wanted to talk to the WeChat user. The WeChat user rejected my request again and again with a message saying that he or she was not a Raccoon Go driver. I sent him or her a message through a friend request indicating my thankfulness for the WeChat user's patient replies. Surprisingly, the WeChat user rejected my friend request again, yet left me a message (as the reason of the friending request rejection): "Don't mess up with what is already messed up"[24]. As someone who was a WeChat user in Metro Vancouver (and beyond) and someone who by now had used ride-hailing frequently, I understood that the WeChat user was sending a friendly reminder about the muddiness of researching the topic.

Starting from August 2018, I took a number of rides from different locations of the city, including the SFU campus on the Burnaby Mountain, Metropolis Metrotown or Crystal Mall in the Metrotown area, Lansdowne Centre, and my temporary place of residence in Richmond. The rides usually went well with some drivers being particularly talkative, while some went a bit awkwardly in the cases where the drivers seldom spoke. Nevertheless, the casual exchange between the driver and me often became a bit tense when I explained my project and invited the driver to participate. Frequently, I would receive responses similar to the following:

> "No, no, no, …"
>
> "What do you want to know? I can tell you everything I know, but I am not participating in the research."
>
> "Sorry, I don't want to give them [authorities like police] extra edge."

[24] The conversation was in Chinese and was translated to English by me.

> "I will contact my boss and see if I can" Yet a few days later, the potential participant messaged the researcher saying he did not think it was appropriate for him to participate."

Sometimes when I started to talk about my project, it seemed very hard for the driver to understand the reasons behind my decision to conduct this research. "You students are too naïve. What's the point of researching this? I would rather make a better use of my time at school to improve knowledge, skills and abilities…and find a job. That's the right thing to do."

From the rejections and responses of these potential participants, it became clear to me that the WeChat-based ride-hailing controversy in Metro Vancouver was understudied not only because few researchers were interested in the phenomenon, but also because of the strategies the underground community used to intentionally remain marginalized and out of sight. The immediate rejections of the drivers seem to showcase the internalization of the marginalized position of the Chinese community, especially those participating in ethnic services that were legally ambiguous. Instead of keeping apprised of the ride-hailing legislation or participating in research to draw public attention to their situation, it seemed that the drivers would rather avoid discussion and not change the status quo.

To recruit participants was truly not easy. Actually, for most of my fieldwork, recruiting participants that knew things and were sufficiently articulate, to borrow DDJ's standards for a good recruit, had been one of my biggest challenges. I spent a little over half a month recruiting the first four driver participants, and to find another two it took me two more months. During the two months, I updated the recruitment post on WeChat once every week and at the same time took ride after ride on purpose to recruit drivers for my research project. With drivers who did not reject me right away, I would leave my small recruitment cards, so that in case they should become interested and willing to be interviewed or share the cards with their friends in the future, they would have my contact information. However, those recruiting rides brought few follow-ups. Two drivers did contact me after my rides with them, but the interviews I had expected did not happen in the end because, as one of the drivers described it, "the job is like this". As I would describe in more details below, for these two drivers, the job assignments of ride-hailing were too unpredictable. To be a flexible ride-hailing driver available for profitable orders most of the time, they could not figure out a fixed time or place to meet me,

though they said they were very interested in the research. As the following fieldnotes about *peidu mama* Alice reveals, she wished I had asked the interview questions during the ride I met her.

Fieldnotes: *Peidu mama*

I ordered a ride from Cornerstone at the Burnaby Campus of SFU to Metropolis Metrotown. A middle-aged female driver picked me up. I got a little excited when I heard her voice over the phone, for I seldom encountered female drivers. She told me she was a peidu mama, accompanying her daughter who was studying here in Burnaby. She was an enthusiastic woman and her voice sounded much younger than she actually was. We talked a lot during the ride, about the rainy weather of Vancouver, about the life of international students, and about different ride-hailing platforms. She seemed to be glad to talk with me and fairly interested in the topic of Chinese-language ride-hailing.[25] *Although we met each other for the first time, she treated me like a friend, or more accurately, a child a few years older than her daughter. Her cordial tone and companionable gestures made me think that maybe she would like to participate in the research. At the end of the trip, when she was about to stop in a convenient place within the outdoor parking lot of Metropolis Metrotown for me to get out without waiting for her to find a vacant parking space, I told her that I was not in a hurry and she could park first before I got off. She seemed to take it as a gracious act and said thank-you repeatedly. When she finally parked the vehicle, I paid the fare in cash and showed her the recruitment card. "You seem to be interested in the topic of ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver. Actually I am doing a research on this. Now you have worked for different platforms and had a lot of experience, it will be of great help if you agree to be a participant in my research. I would really appreciate if I can hear how you think on the issue." She did not expect this. But she did not turn me down summarily as many other drivers that I had talked to had done, who seemed to be unwilling to get involved in a research project about the underground economy where they worked. She asked me how it would work if she agreed to participate. Pointing to the recruitment card that I had just gave her, I explained the processes of the research. She seemed interested, but*

[25] In contrast, a great number of drivers who immediately refused me showed little interest in discussing ride-hailing, relevant legislation or media coverage. They often used silence, or changed the topic to evade discussion.

after reading the recruitment card and flipping it in this way and that for a minute, she asked: "then why didn't you ask your interview questions just now (during the ride)?

My internal thoughts:

Why didn't I ask her the interview questions just now? I wanted to but I did not allow myself to do so. In fact that is exactly what some other researchers did in "ride-along" research with Uber and taxi drivers. However, in that way, I would have failed to follow the terms of REB. For if I asked interview questions during the ride, even informally, it would have made the "ride-along" an interview. Following REB's terms, I would not have been able to record or take notes of the interview. Moreover, it would have been an interview without consent, or with a pretty rushed one. In addition, REB was worried about causing "distracted driving" by asking interview questions while the car was in motion which would have led to risks to both Alice and me.

Fieldnotes: *Peidu mama (continued)*

…I explained the ethics requirements for this research, including the prohibition on interviewing drivers while their vehicles were running on the road. And I stressed that I had to give her enough time to make sure she did not make a rushed decision about participating. She seemed to be understanding and still showed great interest in being a participant. I told her that she could contact me by scanning the QR code on the recruitment card and she said she would do it later when she got home. "Thank you", she said and smiled at me when I got out of the vehicle…I got her message sooner than I had thought, when I was still in the mall. After knowing that I lived in Richmond, she said she would contact me when she had passengers coming this way so I would not need to travel all the way to Burnaby for her. The moment I saw "I would contact you when…", I started to panic, expecting the similar uncertainty as I had anticipated when DDJ told me he would contact me "on the weekend". Nevertheless, I said okay.

Perhaps throughout that week none of her passengers were coming to Richmond, for she did not contact me. After waiting for over one week, I messaged her, saying that I could go to Burnaby if that would be more convenient for her. She replied a bit later and said again that she would contact me when she was near me. "Sorry, but this is just the way the job is. I have no control over my own", she added. I thanked her for being willing to participate in the study and said I would wait for her to contact me

whenever she was available, whether in Richmond, Vancouver or Burnaby. She did not contact me and the interview did not happen in the end.

I highlighted this unrealized promise of an interview because it was illustrative of something found in many of my encounters with the drivers.[26] Among those drivers whom I did meet and interview, over half of them refused to choose a timeslot from the many options I gave to them. Instead they promised to contact me when they were in the area. As ride-hailing drivers, they could not foresee whether they would have time for a one-hour interview. They could be forced to cancel the appointment with me at any moment. Supposing that they promised that they were available for the interview, say, at 12PM on Wednesday at Bamboo Restaurant at SFU, they might get an order at 10AM to YVR airport and take a passenger on their way back to Burnaby who would like to go shopping in downtown Vancouver. When they dropped that passenger in Vancouver, there might be other orders that would take them further away from the appointed place at SFU. Of course, they could just leave the morning window open and decide not to grab any order before 12PM on the day of the interview. However, in that way, the interview they volunteered to do for just a Starbucks card would cut their daily income significantly. For drivers like Alice, who spends many hours doing ride-hailing besides the time needed for family chores and other business, ride-hailing is almost like a regular job which absorbs most of their time and energy, and from which they expected a considerable financial return. As I will elaborate in the next section, the way Alice used the ride-hailing platform was different from drivers like DDJ who were international students and used the platforms sporadically to make some pocket money. Such differences between new-immigrant drivers, usually middle-aged, who spend more than two to three hours on platforms per day and expect stable and significant income, and the international student drivers who spend less time working on the platforms, would be discussed in later chapters in more detail. The thesis focuses on international students. Yet the encounters, observations and interviews with the growing number of middle-

[26] Another driver, Joe, whom I met during a ride from Crystal Mall to UBC, gave me the impression that he was also interested in the study. He later messaged me that he would contact me when he came to SFU yet that never happened. When I later messaged him that I could meet him wherever and whenever it would work for him, he only replied with something very similar to what Alice said, as mentioned above: I am sorry, but this is just the way the job is.

aged new immigrant drivers help delineate and distinguish the mobile spaces where international students study, work and live.

2.4.3. The field of surprises, in both good and bad ways

The recruitment process, however, was not the only nor the most unpredictable – and frustrating and intriguing at the same time – phase in the research journey. The encounters and exchanges with the platforms, drivers and later passengers revealed so many different issues, research topics and directions that as the researcher I sometimes felt at lost in the mist of what the mainstream media discourse of "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" could not describe.

Accidental and unexpected events were one of the most typical reasons for making changes to the research. During the few months while I observed the WeChat-based ride-hailing, designed the methods and then entered the field, several major ride-hailing platforms had updated their systems. As a result, features I wanted to discuss disappeared, though they were often replaced by some new features worth researching. The ride-hailing platforms on WeChat also encountered errors and as a result the services could be unavailable for a period of time. What's more, some of the "errors" seem to be intended. For example, one of the platforms I focused on often exaggerated the number of drivers available nearby. Thus when I submitted an order for a ride expecting one of the eight drivers that the platform showed were near me, the platform told me no drivers were actually available nearby. This was not often the case. Most of the time, the platform would show there were over twenty drivers around and one of them often grabbed my order within two to three minutes, if not sooner.

In the field, I also realized that the platforms' public accounts were not the only place to find WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver. Rather, these platforms could be present in other public accounts based in Metro Vancouver as advertisements or recruitment notices looking for drivers and other professionals to work on the platforms' operation teams. Furthermore, the platforms were not contained in the palm-sized space of a smartphone. As I indicated in the Introduction, they could be found on the counters of an Asian-themed food court and the glass door of Taiwanese dessert shops. They may even make their presence in local news media, which were rarely written in Chinese.

Given all the WeChat spaces for ride-hailing, in terms of interviews, I wondered if the potential participants would find a mediated conversation on WeChat securer than a face-to-face interview in a public place. Although I assumed that meeting face-to-face for interview would create more trust between both parties and offer more contextual information, the idea of meeting a stranger for a research project on one's part-time job that was legally ambiguous did preclude a number of participants from giving their consent for a vis-à-vis interview. One of them suggested using the audio call function of WeChat and another refused the idea of an audio call and insisted for an interview by texting on WeChat, though for the sake of convenience, I suggested sending audio messages explaining longer questions. Both these participants were referred by earlier participants in the research project. They added me on WeChat, and before adding me, they already had certain (mis)understanding of the project before I explained it. Both of them asked "Can we not meet"[27] without explaining whether it was because they lived far away, or they were not comfortable with meeting strangers, or that it had something to do with the ambiguous legal nature of the service they were involved in. Learning from experiences like this, in the later stage of the research I became open to more options for the interview format, including meeting at a public place that was easy to commute to (for example, food court and bubble tea shop), having audio or video calls through WeChat, or simply typing out questions and responses on WeChat.

Lastly, I found that my observations were almost always filtered through a personal lens. As a researcher, I inevitably bring my understanding of WeChat-based ride-hailing to the field, as well as my expectations about interacting with the drivers. Moreover, because the REB did not want observations on the ride to be turned to a proper ride-along with an engaged conversation, the experience of the ride as a social space – a key element of the student-driver and student-passenger interaction – was lacking in my research. To restore this important social space, I added passengers as participants in this research, who as a result told interesting stories about themselves, ride-hailing and WeChat in their lives in Metro Vancouver during their interviews.

[27] The conversation was originally in Chinese and was translated to English by me.

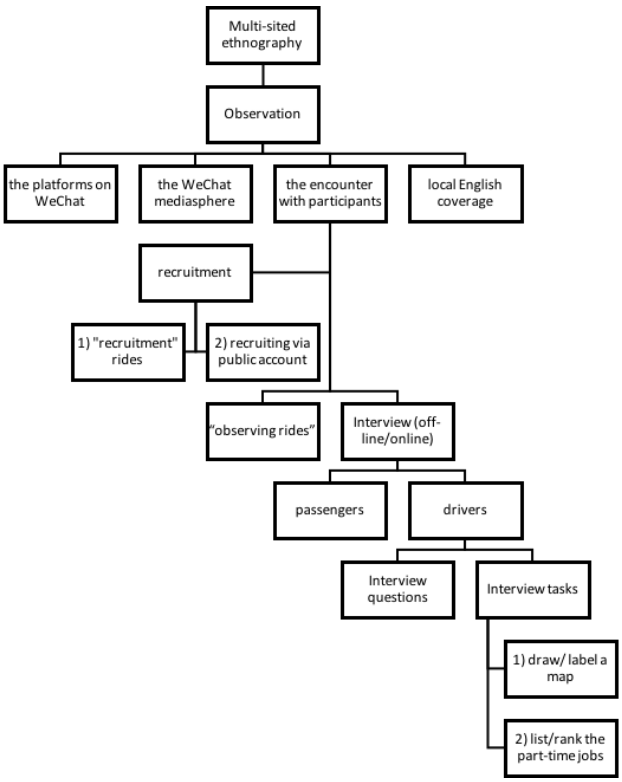

Figure 2.3. The methodological design shaped by the fieldwork

2.5. "Multi-sited-ness" of WeChat-based ride-hailing revisited

According to Marcus (1995), "multi-sited ethnographies define their objects of study through several different modes of techniques" (p.106). In his article where he aims to capture "the emergence of multi-sited ethnography" (p.95), as mentioned above, Marcus (1995) lists a myriad of techniques used by multi-sited ethnographers: "follow the people", "follow the thing", "follow the metaphor" "follow the plot, story, or allegory", "follow the life or biography" and "follow the conflict" (p.113). At first, as also mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, based on my superficial understanding of multi-sited ethnography, I thought by "following the rides", which are themselves mobile social spaces moving across the metropolitan region, I would be using Marcus' idea and conducting multi-sited ethnography. And the ride-along was thought to be parallel to the interview as I would be talking with drivers on the rides. Thus, the initial research design could be summarized as simply "follow the rides". As the research design went through several rounds of revisions with REB and was constantly reshaped in the field, I was no longer able to use the ride-along method, as explained above. Instead, I divided its

original functions into the recruitment rides, the observing rides, interviews with drivers, and interviews with passengers. In this process, my understanding of Marcus' multi-sited ethnography also changed. I realized that "multi-sited-ness" does not just refer to the changing locations of the rides. Rather, it is a perfect description of the space(s) of WeChat-based ride-hailing, where technological infrastructures, people, objects, ideas and spaces piece together the phantom of the so-called "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" that moves across the cities in an invisible but sometimes boldly conspicuous way. Therefore, a more sufficient use of Marcus' multi-sited ethnography would be to follow the WeChat-based ride-hailing, rather than just focusing on the drivers, in its multiple sites: "follow the user" "follow the ride" "follow the platform" and "follow the controversy". In addition to the major research methods like self-ethnography and interviewing, I used a set of supplementary methods to draw a multi-layered, embedded and engaged picture of the Chinese-language ride-hailing controversy in Vancouver, a city that is often branded as the multicultural gateway city by Chinese immigrants on the west coast of Canada.

Therefore, to study the WeChat-based ride-hailing I revised my methodological approach as follows: *To follow the user of the ride-hailing service*, I recruited and conducted interviews with 6 drivers and 6 passengers, inquiring into their motivation and experience with the Chinese-language ride-hailing with the assistance of WeChat, their understanding of geography as well as the transit system of Vancouver, their opinions about BC's delayed legislation on ride-hailing, and their identities as international students, and potential immigrants, in Vancouver. *To follow the ride*, I conducted self-ethnography and took a total 15 rides to and from different locations, most of which were selected from the list of frequently visited destinations provided by the platforms. *To follow the platform*, I kept tracking and archiving the two ride-hailing platforms by subscribing to the WeChat platforms and actively looking for the presence of these platforms in other WeChat public accounts targeting users in Metro Vancouver. *To follow the controversy*, I collected the coverage on WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver starting from July 2017 in Canadian media, though I did not limit myself to Metro Vancouver or BC.

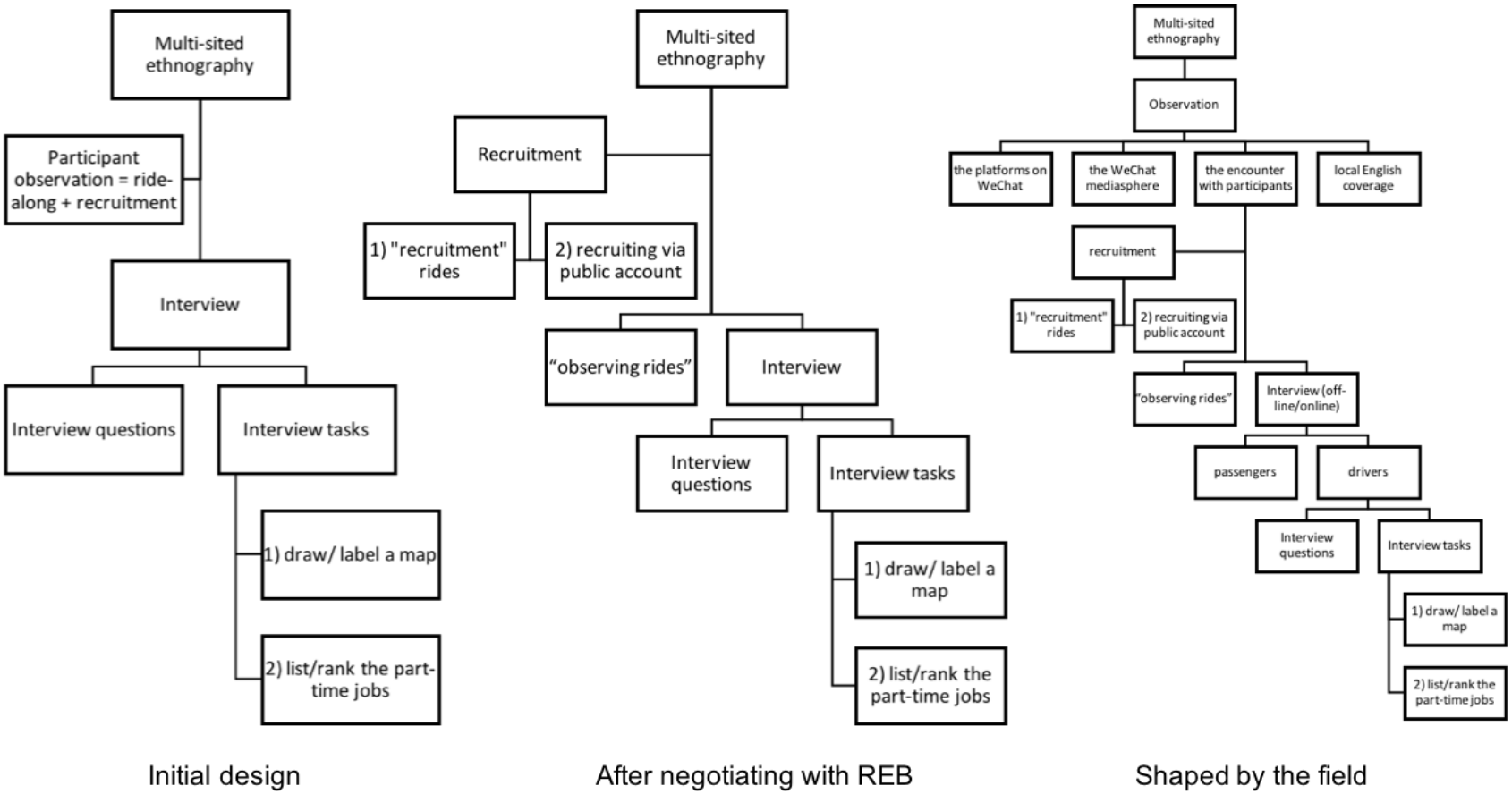

Figure 2.4. Development of methodological design in the process of research

Chapter 3.

Cultural Assemblage and the New Chinatown

This chapter begins with a brief introduction of WeChat, how it is a “super app” in China and how Vancouver is distinguished from other popular immigrant and overseas education destinations as one of the few cities in the world where WeChat can retain its “super-ness”. I analyze how the “super app” WeChat, when brought to Vancouver, has ended up forming a WeChat assemblage locally. To begin, I analyze how WeChat is different from its Chinese digital media predecessors, all of which seem to be gradually abandoned by international students and immigrants as they adapt to the local ways of life. Second, I analyze how WeChat is not only used by international students and recent immigrants but is embedded in the life of a variety of individuals, groups, communities and institutions in Metro Vancouver, regardless of their Chinese language proficiency. Third, I analyze how WeChat surpasses previous diasporic websites and forums as the shelter and the lens that significantly affects the identity formation of migrants and international students, which is clearly a challenge to the long-existing “adaptation models” and the discourses around migration behind it. The complex aggregation of technologies, networks, economies and identities around WeChat in Vancouver, amid local histories, politics and landscapes, behooves a new way to read into migration in the digital age. Later in this chapter, I explain how the concept of “assemblage” works particularly well with the findings from the field and what are the new possibilities such concept brings to the intersection of migration and media. To better illustrate the variegated-ness and inclusiveness of this “WeChat” assemblage, I introduce the metaphor “New Chinatown” to describe this particular WeChat assemblage in the Lower Mainland of BC, which unlocks nuanced stories about migration, international students and media.

3.1. “WeChat is a lifestyle”

In August 2018, WeChat reached one billion daily active users (DAU). According to its founder Allen Zhang, it could be the first digital platform in China to exceed one billion DAU (2019, January 10). WeChat did not get its nickname “super app” based on

the number of users, but its unique success of being an "all-in-one" app or what Chen, Mao and Qiu (2018) calls "platform of platforms". Though it may not have set out to be such a super app, WeChat has evolved into something that its Chinese users cannot live without. In addition to sending texts, audio and visual messages with families and friends, WeChat's featured functions include Group Chat with up to 500 users, Friends' Moments, Public Account, Red Packet, WeChat Pay, and the list is constantly growing. On top of the infrastructural ecosystem, WeChat allows plug-ins of third-party services and as a result it has turned into "a one-stop gateway" (Chen et al., 2018, p.5) to a multitude of services from food delivery, taxi or ride-hailing, flight and hotel booking, utility payments, mobile top-ups, investment consultation and portfolio purchasing, and many others. And the list does not yet include numerous services and products individual or business WeChat users provide via public accounts, mini programs and sometimes even in Friends' Moments and chat groups. As *The New York Times* (2016) vividly summarizes in its video extrapolating how this super app was born out of the unique cyberspace and economic-political conditions of the PRC inside the Great Fire Wall, WeChat is a combination of Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype, Uber, Amazon, Instagram, Venmo and Tinder. It hosts a wide range of Chinese social services including the ability to make appointments with doctors (The New York Times, 2016, August 9). In other words, most of the activities that one needs to complete in the Chinese society are supported by WeChat. As one of the participants of a WeChat-initiated 12-hour WeChat Sabbath experiment commented, in China "leaving WeChat means leaving [social] life" (Chen et al., 2018, p.2).

Allen Zhang[28] explained this "all-in-one" characteristic as "lifestyle", as he reiterated the importance of "WeChat is a lifestyle"[29] as a mission statement guiding its miraculous development at WeChat's Open Class Pro annual event on January 9, 2019. According to him, even before WeChat covered so many aspects of life and before the inception of WeChat Pay, he had been insisting that WeChat was a lifestyle: "WeChat will penetrate every person's daily life". Admittedly at that time, Allen Zhang and his

[28] Allen Zhang is the "Father of WeChat" who founded the WeChat team and has led the development of WeChat for over eight year now.

[29] Allen Zhang underscores the difference between "WeChat is a lifestyle" and "WeChat is a kind of lifestyle". He thinks the latter would just be a typical motto, rather than a mission statement. For more details, see Allen Zhang's four-hour speech at WeChat's Open Class Pro annual event. For the official English translation of the speech see https://blog.wechat.com/2019/03/18/what-is-wechats-dream-wechat-founder-allen-zhang-explains/.

colleagues may not have a clear idea about what steps WeChat would take to penetrate the daily life of its users. Yet today WeChat has truly entered all the various aspects of life, at least in Mainland China. As this WeChat founder summarized at the beginning of 2019, "I feel that WeChat has achieved the dream of being 'a lifestyle'."

One of the reasons that WeChat became the "all-in-one" super app in China can be attributed to the strong connections it developed with various local institutions in China, from utility companies, banks, credit agencies, insurance companies, theatres, service industry corporations to the Chinese government. Once brought outside the national border, though, WeChat was initially only able to involve users in and control their "lives" inside China, for example, allowing them to top up their Chinese mobile phone numbers. In terms of enriching local life experience for those outside of China, WeChat could do no better than its renowned international but local competitors, for example, Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Because of the border-crossing activity, the super app was often reduced to a connecting point for overseas Chinese with their families and friends back home, primarily relying on its messaging and group functions (Chen, Butler & Liang, 2018; Wang, 2018). For Chinese immigrants in most parts of the world, WeChat could not gratify their need to obtain sufficient local information, maintain and expand networks, let alone to enjoy services tailored to their local needs.

What distinguishes Vancouver from all these places is that here WeChat is used as a "platform of platforms" that has powered an increasing number of local services through one of its key features – the Public Account – rather than just another medium to connect with the co-ethnic Chinese community both at home and in the host country[30]. The open platform design of WeChat, especially its feature, the Public Account, provides infrastructures, tools and resources for individuals, entrepreneurs and organizations in Vancouver to build platforms and creatively fulfill their local needs.

In Vancouver, local WeChat-users have shaped WeChat into something Tencent did not expect it to evolve into – a gateway to the Chinese ethnic networks, economies, communities and ideologies in Vancouver. The unregulated Chinese-language ride-

[30] Existing studies have looked into various cases in which immigrants use digital media, sometimes brought to the host country from the home, sometimes created in the host society, sometimes created as a global *Huaren* media (Ong, 2003), as the connecting point between the newly arrived immigrants and the co-ethnic community in the host society as well as in their home country.

hailing operating as WeChat public accounts that is the focus of this study is one slice of these Chinese ethnic networks, economies, communities and ideologies that are guarded, supported and filtered by the super app of WeChat in the Lower Mainland of BC.

3.2. WeChat as the technological infrastructures

In the last section, I talked about how WeChat is an "all-in-one" app in China that has far exceeded the public's expectation for "a social messaging app", which WeChat interestingly insists on branding itself as in the IOS system. In this section, I will focus on how the technological infrastructures of WeChat help it to be "reborn" in Metro Vancouver as a "super app".

3.2.1. Public account as the service platform

The public account of WeChat is one of the founding stones for newly rising "platforms" in the Lower Mainland of BC. On the one hand, anyone or any organization can create a public account, as long as they have a WeChat account and a mobile phone number (which is required when one registers for a WeChat account). Currently, there are three types of public accounts: service account, subscription account and mini program. All of them can be created, designed and operated using WeChat's own Public Account Admin Platform. The service account is slightly different from the subscription account.[31] One of the most important differences here is that the subscription account does not allow very complex programming or add-ons. Only a multi-level menu bar can be set by the account holder. For the service account, however, it is common for external programs or websites to be hyperlinked to one of the buttons in the menu bar to complete advanced tasks including locating the user on an interactive map. Thus, it is apparent that the service account would provide better "service" for platforms that need

[31] The service account is often held by businesses and organizations for operation or transaction purposes. They can post to their public account once per week, maximum, while they can post to their subscription account once per day. The service account would lie in the contact list of the WeChat user among the WeChat friends and chat groups and, like friends and chat groups, it would put on a numbered badge on the top right corner of the icon when there is a new message from the account. While for the subscription account, only a red dot would be shown at the top right corner of the icon and it would not lie in the contact list but in a separate subscription folder. Thus, to access the content from a subscription account, one needs at least two taps and one scroll from the home page of WeChat.

to interact with users to complete specific tasks; while the subscription account would work better for “subscription”, for they can post every day and are not limited by the maximum number of posts per week that applies to the service account. The third choice, mini program, is a new feature launched by WeChat in 2017. It is only recently that the mini program is increasingly used as a supplementary space of the public account to complete part of the account’s functions.

In addition to public account’s accessibility for WeChat users to create their own “platforms”, the design of the public account infrastructure makes it a productive tool for building platforms. The following is a model of the home interface of a public account, which would look similar for the subscription account and the service account. The majority of the space is for messages and multimedia articles issued by the account in the past. It is worth mentioning that even for the service account, which is allowed for only one post per week, the account holder can post a maximum of 8 articles by bundling them together as one post. In that situation, one article would be chosen as the main article with a featured cover picture and the other articles would only show their titles with a mini square picture at the end.

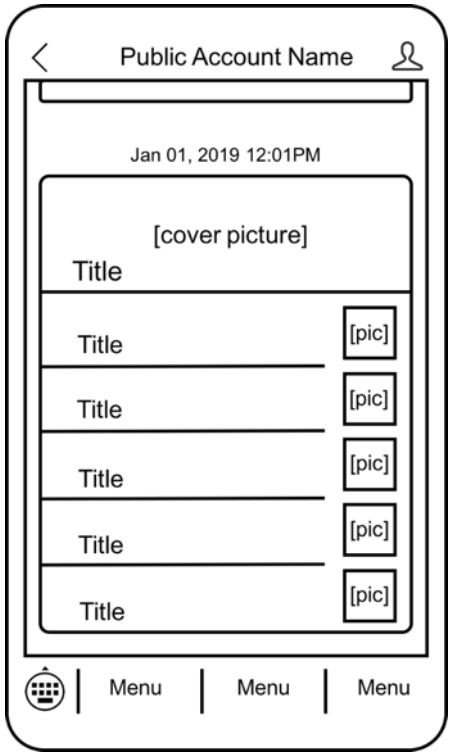

Figure 3.1. A model for the home interface of a WeChat public account
Note: The diagram was created by the researcher.

The interaction between the platform and the user often happen at the bottom of the public account, where there is a menu bar in light grey, with a keyboard button at the far-left end. The functions the menu bar can accomplish are up to the account holder. How many categories should the base menu have? How many sub-categories should each base category have? Where does each category and sub-category lead to? A pre-set message? An external link? An embedded program? A previously posted multimedia article? The menu of keywords that, if typed on by tapping the keyboard button, can also induce pre-set answers for frequently asked questions. If the expandable menu bar cannot solve the problem the user asks about, more personal and interactive communication between the subscriber and the account holder is always possible by using the conversation function by tapping on the keyboard sign on the left.

Thus, the WeChat public account provides the space, the toolkit as well as the possibilities for residents in Metro Vancouver to create local platforms that do not yet exist as websites or applications. However, does that mean that public account is just an alternative for apps and websites? Not at all. As one of the passengers, Lily, argued in the interview, one of the advantages of the WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver was that “it’s on WeChat”. For her, being integrated into WeChat’s system as a public account means that, to order a ride, WeChat users like her do not need to leave the app and open up a separate app. Being an intensive WeChat user, not leaving the app meant a lot to her. Although compared to her WeChat use in China, her use of the app in Metro Vancouver was not “crazy” enough. WeChat facilitates her communication with family and friends and also mediates various aspects of her life, from work, social networks to entertainment in Metro Vancouver.

> “I use WeChat to contact my family, friends, as well as the business partners in my work. The instant messaging, calling and file transfer functions made it [a] very convenient [tool]. The most important [thing] is that because they [family, friends and business partners] would be using WeChat a lot, they would reply you right away. Unlike WhatsApp, although I have the app on my phone, if you send me a message, I might see it only after two days. I would also use WeChat to share some of my life and exchange my experience with friends through WeChat's Moments. Recently, a lot of local stores started to offer WeChat Pay as an option. So when I don’t have cash, I pay by WeChat. I also use some of the mini program games on WeChat. For example, there are a lot of board game mini programs that you can use to play with your friends in teams. When my friends and I are partying, we always sit down together and play board

> games using the mini program function of WeChat." (Interview with Lily, 2018, November 6)

Being "on WeChat", however, does not just refer to the integration of platforms into the WeChat "digital ecosystem" that the WeChat users like international students and new immigrants have grown to use habitually. As revealed in the case of WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, WeChat is a space where these ride-hailing services as well as the promotion of and recruitment for such services can be completed without crackdown from authorities or criticism from local English media. Even local government officials and journalists admitted that WeChat was one of the barriers for the crackdown of such services. In one of *CBC*'s (2018, January 13) coverage on the Chinese-language ride-hailing controversy in the Lower Mainland of BC, Malcolm Brodie, Mayor of Richmond, admitted that it was almost impossible to eradicate such illegal rides because "they are operating in a way that they don't want to be detected and they certainly don't want any enforcement proceedings to go against them". In another media story on the ride-hailing issue, a journalist at *The Province*, Mike Smyth (2018, July 25) suggested that, part of the reason that "the enforcement action seems like a minor annoyance to the business" was that the business operates and promotes itself on WeChat. In this case, WeChat serves as an invisible wall, or gate, through which WeChat users can scan the QR code[32], subscribe to the public account and use the platform the way they want to, despite the province-wide Uber-ban, the crackdown measures and the fines as high as $1150.

[32] It is important to note that scanning the QR code is not the only way to find the public account. However, one needs to know several keywords of the public account to search from all WeChat public accounts. The QR codes, with a quick scan of which you can subscribe to these ride-hailing platforms, are easy to spot at food courts, on the glass doors of restaurants, at bubble tea shops and other places international students often visit, and in cyberspace (for example, your Friends' Moments or subscribed public accounts). Nevertheless, the QR codes cannot guarantee that every scanner of the code would naturally turn into a subscriber, let alone a customer of these platforms. Many participants in the research first used ride-hailing services after the recommendations of a trusted connection. QR codes are necessary but not sufficient. These ride-hailing services are on WeChat. Yes, you are not mistaken. Yet if you just download the app and have no friends sharing it, you may not trust the platform. Even if you read every poster on the outward side of the food counter when you are bored waiting for your spiced up *dandan* noodles, you may not dare to use it if none of your friends can validate the service is a safe, convenient one without the risks of losing your information, your money or even your life.

3.2.2. The marketing potential of the ride-hailing platform

Just having a platform for the service to operate, however, is not enough. To attract enough users to the platform – as drivers, as passengers, and even as subscribers – is equally important. As revealed in the model above for the public account home page, a large fraction of the space is given to the content produced by the public account holder. The notifications of new content posted would be pushed to the WeChat user, along with new messages from his or her friends and chat groups. As I will discuss in this section, the ride-hailing platforms have noticed the marketing potential of their platforms and transformed themselves into places where they not only provide ride-hailing services, but tell stories about their services, and promote the services of cooperating businesses in Metro Vancouver. At the same time, such content produced by the platform, whether it is advertorials, personal stories or recruitment notices, can be forwarded to Friends' Moments and group chats, where readers of such articles, if finding them interesting or relevant, may become subscribers of the platform.

Take Kabu as an example, when you click the button on the bottom menu bar of its public account to order a ride, a three-second advertisement page, rather than ride-hailing interface, shows up.[33] On the top right corner the colorful page, there is a countdown clock. Three, two, one. After three seconds, the advertising page disappears and another semi-advertisement page shows up. I name the latter "semi-advertisement" because the advertisement seems to be the background of what is at the top center position of the page – a text box writing "Where do you want to go?"[34]. The text box is a button. Tap on it, and one will be redirected to the ride-hailing interface where one types in or selects his or her destinations.

---

[33] At the time of writing, Kabu used the three-second advertising space to promote their own service, KABU EATS. On the top center position of the yellow-background page were six super big characters which translate to "stay at home, click for delivery". Beneath these big, bolded characters were eight smaller characters in dark red color with its English translation beneath them: "City of Surrey Now Available". On the bottom-left corner was a specially designed cartoon character of a KABU EATS delivery guy, with an orange delivery box on his back, holding a white plastic bag writing "KABU EATS" on his left arm. Next to the white plastic bag was a white-background QR code, which by scanning, one would be able to subscribe to the public account of Kabu, which is the same public account supporting its ride-hailing services. The advertisement page was designed in a cartoonish way. The only realist element in the page were the photos of *char siu* (barbecued pork) and lamb shashlik at the bottom of the advertisement page.

[34] All the advertisements inside ride-hailing platforms' public accounts are written in Chinese and are translated to English by me, unless otherwise stated.

This three-second advertisement is widely used by platforms on WeChat. In addition to using the space to promote the platform's own businesses, it is common for platforms to sell the space to other businesses to promote their services. For example, the three-second advertisement page on Raccoon Go was sold to a local grocery delivery platform in Metro Vancouver called "*Xiang Zhu Xian Sheng*". Branding its platform around the cute symbol of a pink pig, the platform delivers seafood, fruits, vegetable, soft drinks and so on and accepts a plethora of payment options from credit cards to WeChatPay.

The three-second advertisement page is one of many spaces the platforms have created for increasing its marketing potential. For example, on Kabu, when users finally enter the ride-hailing interface after being forced to watch the advertisements, they would encounter advertisements again even when typing in their ride-hailing destinations. When they tap on the "drop-off location" text box to type in their destination, a list of frequently visited destinations will be automatically pulled out. The list contains two types of destinations. For the top ones, for example, "17 Gaming Internet Cafe" or "Billiards & 45° Bubble Tea", they often have a yellow sign writing "AD" at the end of each of them. Different from the rest of the destinations, the ones tagged "AD" are local businesses that have cooperation with Kabu, who advertises the internet cafes and the bubble tea shops by embedding them in the most conspicuous position in the list of frequently visited destinations.

In contrast to such transient spaces of advertisement are the more conventional as well as conspicuous advertising spaces in public accounts – the multimedia posts right above the bottom menu bar. As can be seen from the following example, platforms like Kabu utilize this space to tell stories about themselves, their collaborators and their targeted users living in Metro Vancouver. Kabu posts one multimedia bundle per week. On July 4, 2019, it posted 6 articles in its service account and the following is the translation of the titles of the articles in the original order that these articles are bundled together, accompanied by my explanatory summary of the content of the articles.

Table 3.1. The list of articles published at Kabu's public account

Order	Title	Content Summary (by the researcher)
Cover article (article 1)	Sorry, Vancouver does not deserve ride-hailing	An analysis of the recent local news on legalization of ride-hailing after September 2019, especially new policies' challenges for ride-hailing companies.
article 2	You can never trust the words from the mouth of a restaurant owner! These restaurants fooled me again! I must lay them out and speak about them one by one!	Although the title gives readers an impression that this article is going to reveal dirty secrets of local restaurants, the article recommends a series of local supermarkets, restaurants, and bubble tea shops. The article ends with a July promotion of KABU EATS.
article 3	Vancouver is crazy! Turning downtown traffic lanes into thousands of feet long water slides? Come, let's slide!	The article is a July guide of where to have fun in Metro Vancouver. The recommendation includes Slide the City in North Vancouver, Playland Nights 19+ at PNE, the firework show "Celebration of Light", the music festival "FVDED in the Park", Global Relay Gastown Grand Prix, Circo Osorio, Folk Music Festival, Whistler Vallea Lumina, Cultus Lake Waterpark and Richmond Night Market.
article 4	After spending 337 nights together, he married someone else: If you are invited to your ex's wedding, will you go?	The article began with a story in which the editor's friend could not forget her ex, who she heard was going to marry someone else, and how she gave up on her personal life and gained 15 kilos in one year. To help her friend, the editor brought her to Puriin Spa to relax and lose weight. The second half of the article is an introduction of the advantages of Puriin Spa located in downtown Vancouver. The article ends with a QR code, by scanning which subscribers can make appointments to experience the service at the Spa.
article 5	Don't mess up with drunk people in Vancouver. They are wild.	In the article, the editor tells his abominable experience dealing with his drunk brother the previous night. It is not clear to what extent story is exaggerated. The narrative of the editor's brother's drunk story is intercepted by a series of funny GIFs, some of which are about behaviors of drunk people. The article ends with the reminder by the editor: living in a foreign country, you can drink, but don't drink too much.

Order	Title	Content Summary (by the researcher)
article 6	Fooling me into marriage because you are pregnant? Are men in Vancouver all like this, or I met a real jerk?	The article is a typical "*qiu zhu tie*", which refers to submissions from subscribers looking for help from editors and fellow subscribers. This submission describes a girl studying in a local university who found she was pregnant but her boyfriend does not want to take the responsibility and simply asks her to fly back to China to abort the child. The girl dared not to ask her parents for help yet she did not know what to do. The article mainly uses the WeChat screenshots between the girl and the editor – in which the girl tells the story from her side – and the WeChat screenshot between the girl and her boyfriend. Both of their profile photos and names had been covered in black. Two times, the editor foregrounded her or his comments and added text between the screenshots. And the article ends with the editor's warning to subscribers to take effective birth control measures.

Note: The articles were published on Kabu's public account on July 4, 2019.

The content for these articles is diverse. There were advertorials for Kabu's and other businesses' products and services, recommendations about local restaurants and events, submission from a subscriber looking for suggestions for their problems, the sharing of personal stories as well as news and discussions about ride-hailing. In other words, the space was not used by Kabu only for ride-hailing service related information. Instead, its public account becomes a space where subscribers can read and respond to personal and local stories, find information and recommendations of places to have fun and even run into an ad of a Spa they might be interested to go someday.

At the same time, other functions of WeChat are also indispensable in the platform's operation and for its marketing strategies. For instance, content produced by the platform, including recruitment notices for drivers, sales, UI/UX designers and editors[35], is frequently forwarded to chat groups on WeChat.[36] There are many WeChat

[35] For an example of such recruitment post, please see Table 3.2. in Chapter 3.

[36] Group chat is another key component of the WeChat assemblage. The first one who creates the WeChat group is the group manager and each group can accommodate at most 500 members, including the group manager. WeChat users can be added to a group by a WeChat friend who is already in that group. Depending on the setting, to join a group you may need the approval from the group manager. Another typical phenomenon for chat groups in Vancouver is that some groups would forbid ads and may kick out those members who post ads on the group chat, while some groups ask those members who post ads to send a red packet to the group to be grabbed randomly by other group members.

chat groups in Metro Vancouver and they have been created for a variety of themes, occasions and purposes. For example, I have joined over ten WeChat chat groups for house hunting in Vancouver, new immigrants, international students in Metro Vancouver, people coming from my home town, folks interested in literature and history in a local public university and so forth. These groups are another way for me to obtain key life information in Metro Vancouver, including but not limited to house hunting information, low-priced Internet plans, discount flight tickets, news and gossips around recent local crime, accidents and scams, immigration policy changes, and things like whether recent trendy products, like the instant pot, are as good as advertisements claim. Together with such information circulating in the chat groups as conversations, screenshots, links and WeChat articles, the stories told by the ride-hailing platforms are only a small part of what WeChat users consume in and about Metro Vancouver.

Out of 92 friends on my WeChat that lived or are living in Metro Vancouver, 55 of them subscribe to the public account of Kabu, 45 of them subscribe to Raccoon Go, 22 subscribe to Ding Dang, 10 to Udi and 10 to Longmao[37]. Just to have an idea of the number of subscribers, Van Food is one of the most popular Chinese-language food delivery platforms in Metro Vancouver and 70 of my WeChat friends are subscribers of its public account.[38] By posting diverse content, the platform attracts subscribers who come for the content but who might one day become a user of Kabu's ride-hailing service. On the other hand, passengers of Kabu might click one of these articles and become interested in one or more of the products and services advertised in the public account. In this way, these ride-hailing platforms not only rely on the commission from drivers participating in the underground ride-hailing activities, but also turn their subscribers into commodities as an audience and make money by realizing the marketing potential of the ride-hailing platform.

[37] Ding Dang, Udi and Longmao are three of the seven ride-hailing platforms identified by PTB.

[38] Exact statistics on the number of followers can only be obtained from the owner or operator of the WeChat public account. In larger projects in which the researcher can establish and maintain long-term trusting relationship with the ride-hailing platforms, such statistics can help bring light to the actual number of customers and drivers, in Metro Vancouver.

3.2.3. WeChatPay: A variety of payment options

At the end of a ride-hailing trip with Didi in China, the driver would often ask “how would you like to pay?” or “WeChat or cash”? For Didi, the WeChatPay is integrated into the ride-hailing platform. Once the driver taps on his mobile phone screen and confirms the completion of the trip, the total amount would automatically jump out on the passenger’s mobile phone screen. Just tap on the “pay” button, the interface would shift to WeChatPay and the amount would be withdrawn from the passenger’s WeChat wallet balance or cards linked to the WeChat wallet within seconds. As I mentioned, the ride-hailing platforms as local start-ups in Metro Vancouver do not sign a contract with Tencent to use the company’s platform to run their local ride-hailing business. Different from the integration of Didi and WeChat in Mainland China, when the passenger wants to pay, the platform cannot withdraw money from the passenger’s WeChat wallet directly. Rather, the transaction has to be completed by utilizing other payment options in the WeChatPay ecosystem: QR code payment between strangers, money transfer between WeChat friends and red packet (between WeChat friends or strangers).

More specifically, the monetary transaction on WeChat is not built into the platform. In other words, at the end of the ride, I am not transferring money through WeChat to the platform’s bank account. Rather, no matter if I pay by cash, email transfer or WeChat, the amount would be added directly to the driver’s personal bank account or wallet. The platform would calculate the amount of commission paid to the platform based on the commission rate that the drivers have agreed to, which the platform requests the drivers to pay regularly (for example, at the end of each month).

This mechanism allows the driver and the passenger to make transactions based on their individual understanding of payment options like WeChat, where transactions can happen in a variety of ways. As I will discuss below, the different ways in which transactions happen shape the experience of the transaction and even the (potential) relationship between the driver and the passenger. For example, as I explain below, in one of the rides, the driver taught me how to use WeChat to make transfer between two strangers, a WeChatPay function I had never used before.

Fieldnotes: *A WeChat lesson from the driver*

"How would you like to pay?" The driver asked me with his eyes focusing on the road condition ahead. We already arrived at the parking lot of the hot pot place and the driver was slowly approaching the gate of the restaurant, by passing two cars that were backing up into their respective parking spaces. "Can I use WeChat?" I asked the driver. I have used cash a lot and email transfer a few times. This time, I would like to try paying by WeChat. "OK." The driver pulled over at the side of the road in front of the gate. "12." He seemed to be confirm the amount with me when speaking it aloud while typing it on his screen. "You scan me", he said. In front of me was an interface that I had never seen before on WeChat. It had a yellow background and on it there was a QR code in the center of which was what looked like the driver's WeChat profile photo. I scanned the QR code by tapping on the little plus sign at the top right corner of my WeChat homepage and tapped "scan" in the dropped-down menu. A green square appeared in the centre of my phone with a green line regularly swept from the top to the bottom of the square. I hovered my phone, and to be more exact, the green square, to the QR code the driver asked me to scan. About one or two seconds later, a payment confirmation interface replaced the green square. There were a number of lines written in Chinese characters or serial numbers, but one of them was written in bigger size and bolded: 66. The 12 dollars that the driver charged was already converted to renminbi. Finding it was so convenient, I couldn't help but said "Wow, I didn't know WeChat has this function." The driver looked at me and seemed surprised. "Then you definitely don't use WeChat very often." I said thank-you and got out of the car.[39]

Besides using the payment reception QR code to make transactions, WeChat supports monetary transactions through the "face to face red packet" between strangers. With this function, if two WeChat users are physically proximate to each other, proximate enough to scan the QR code on each other's phone, then the red-packet packer can add

[39] After learning this payment method from the driver, I experimented with this function after going back home that day and found that WeChat users like myself who do not own companies can not only use WeChat to pay restaurants, supermarkets or strangers who have the payment receiving QR code, but also create our own payment receiving QR code to receive payments from strangers. Just click the little plus sign at the top right corner of my WeChat homepage, select "my pay" and choose the "Receive payment through QR code" hidden in the green list of transaction methods below my most often used QR payment code. In contrast to the green interface background for the QR payment code, the background for the payment reception QR code, as mentioned, is yellow. In this yellow payment reception interface, I can set the amount to be received, save payment reception codes and check the payment reception history.

money[40] to a red packet. Just type in the amount and confirm to pack the red packet, and then a red-packet-colored QR code would pop up on the screen. Scan the red QR code and the red-packet receiver would receive the amount instantly.

Lily, one of the passengers I interviewed, used a different WeChatPay function – "red packet" between WeChat friends. Once added as friends on WeChat, the driver and the passenger can transfer money to each other through a money transfer[41] or red packet. If they choose to use red packet to transfer the fare, the interface would look very different. On the one hand, when the passenger types in the red packet details, he or she can add some good wishes in the text box below. The good wishes would be sent to the driver along with the money. Interestingly, even if the passenger chooses to add no words in the text box for the good wishes, a default good wish will be sent with the money in the red packet – *gong xi fa cai*[42], *da ji da li*, which translates to "wishing you good fortune and wishing you good luck!" When the driver clicks the small red packet in the conversation interface, a much bigger red packet will appear on the screen. Only if the driver taps on it, will the closed red packet open and show the amount that the passenger has transferred to him.

The way that my ride-hailing driver taught me and the way that Lily paid drivers are two out of many ways that the drivers and the passengers can use WeChat to make transactions. In these creative engagements with WeChat, as well as with each other, the driver and the passenger can take on the role as the active operator of WeChatPay to complete the payment. For instance, in my case, it was the driver who took care of all the payment chores, including locating the payment option, inputting details, calculating foreign currency exchange, reviewing and generating the QR code. What I needed to do was just to locate the "scan" function on WeChat and scan the QR code he generated. In contrast, in Lily's case, it would be all the passenger's work to pack the red packet and send it to the driver. What the driver needed to do was simply to tell the passenger how

---

[40] The amount is subtracted from his or her WeChat wallet or Chinese bank accounts linked to WeChat wallet.

[41] If they choose to use a money transfer, they just need to type in the amount in the transfer details window and confirm, then an orange ribbon will appear on the screen with the amount of money shown in white numbers. When the other person accepts the payment, another orange ribbon will appear in their conversation interface saying that the money transferred has been accepted.

[42] "*Gong Xi Fa Cai*" is in Mandarin. In Cantonese it would be, perhaps more well-known, pronounced and written as "*Kung Hei Fat Choy*".

much it was and click to accept the payment. These different ways of payment can lead to different possibilities of future interaction between the driver and the passenger. For example, by using WeChat-supported strangers' transaction methods, I completed the transaction with the driver without leaving any trace of this transaction or my meeting with him on my WeChat, except for a brief entry in the transaction history. Yet, to send a red packet to the driver, Lily would need to add the driver as a friend on WeChat. After sending the red packet, she may or may not have conversation with the driver, for example, "thank you", in WeChat's conversation interface. Afterwards, the driver would be in her WeChat contact list and the driver's posts would appear in her Friends' Moments. As discussed in Chapter 4, adding someone on WeChat is different from saving someone's number to the phone. The existence has a more significant meaning and the transient encounter has potential to transform into someone in the driver's and the passenger's network.

Admittedly, these payment functions of WeChatPay are not the most common ways to make transactions between the driver and the passenger in China.[43] Yet it is these uncommon ways that make the transaction possible and comparably easy in Vancouver. The passenger does not need to leave WeChat and can complete the transaction with only a few taps on the screen within the same app. The passenger does not need to request and type in the driver's email address to do an email transfer (EMT). Nor does the driver need to spend time finding the exact changes for the passenger as in a cash transaction scenario.

3.2.4. The hidden hazards of the platforms on WeChat

According to one of the drivers in this study, DDJ, drivers use "little tricks" and have their own strategies to make money from the platform. They can work sporadically, not take a single order for weeks, months and years but remain as an active driver on the platform, or only take an order when it looks profitable. They can also work for hours every day, drive around the city, park near popular pick-up locations, wait for and grab orders, and turn the job into a comparatively stable source of income, which shows how

[43] For in China, platforms like Didi have an in-depth collaboration with Tencent and even have their platforms embedded as one of the third-party functions in WeChat's wallet.

the platforms do not have much control determining the working hours or patterns of the drivers.

Another example showcasing the limited control that the platforms have over its drivers is the common phenomenon for drivers to register for more than one platform and look for orders from several platforms at the same time. During one of my trips in Richmond, I witnessed the driver using his fingers to swipe on his mobile phone screen to switch between the interfaces of different ride-hailing platforms. Although the major platforms discourage drivers from taking orders from multiple platforms at the same time, it is impossible for the platforms, at least currently, to prevent such behavior.

For platforms, however, that is not the worst. Drivers can not only switch between platforms as background programs operating on their smart phone, they are also likely to shift between their identity as a "platform driver" and a driver working on his or her own. Despite having guidelines, platforms can do little to forbid drivers adding passengers on WeChat or asking passengers to contact them directly for future rides at a cheaper rate.

> "You know, many many orders on Platform A[44] are pocketed by drivers as their own job. For example, I live on the mountain and you live on the mountain too. Next time, don't hail [the ride] on Raccoon Go. Just give me a call. Many orders are appropriated in this way…Let me put in this way, the platform of Raccoon Go offers many opportunities to us, and some people also find some loopholes on the platform to pursue their own interests." (Interview with one of the drivers[45])

Out of the 6 drivers I interviewed, more than one exchanged contact methods with passengers for at least once and since then have been contacting these passengers directly when they need rides. In other words, these drivers are not bound by the platforms. Instead, they utilize the platforms to accumulate "ride capital". Once they accumulated enough capital as a reliable and pleasant driver, they would be recognized as a "ride-hailing driver" that people would think of when wanting a ride, even though the ride may be ordered through personal contacting methods rather than a third-party ride-hailing platform.

---

[44] The name of the platform is anonymized to protect the identity of the participant.

[45] The participant is anonymized so his identity will be protected from being identified by the platform or other groups.

In another case, after drivers obtained the experience of how to operate a platform and the business, they started their own ride-hailing platform based on the business model of the one they worked for and later became a competitor of their previous employer (Interview with one of the drivers[46]). This shows that while on the one hand, the WeChat functions – Public Account, Chat Groups, WeChatPay system and others that support creative platform development – made it possible to replicate services like ride-hailing that are popular in China in Metro Vancouver. However, on the other hand, the low-threshold of these creative functionalities may bring fierce competition, for the platforms are easy to establish, maintain and promote but the market is not expanding as fast as the platforms.

3.3. People in the WeChat assemblage

The concept of "Chinese diaspora", which Liu and van Dongen (2013) explain as "the approximately 46 million ethnic Chinese who reside outside of mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau in the early 21st century", is a general description. The concept is not productive in reflecting the variety of languages and dialects, ethnicities and cultures as well as immigration backgrounds and trajectories of these "ethnic Chinese", coming from different parts of China and the different Chinese communities around the world. Even in Metro Vancouver, there are the so-called "millionaire migrants" who immigrated years ago under entrepreneur programs (Ley, 2011); there are skilled immigrants who came to Canada based on their abundant overseas work experience but found they are stuck in low-paid jobs and diasporic industries (Han, 2012); there are immigrant families who, after struggling for decades, have become quite established; there are de-facto single mothers who gave up their promising careers back in China and came to Vancouver to accompany her child for school (Waters, 2002); there are international students whose families immigrated long ago and moved back to China also for a long time and then sent them back to study while living in the condos they purchased previously; there are also international students who are the first in their extended families to study abroad and are appalled by the amount they have to pay when converting the Canadian dollar to the Chinese yuan (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28). These nuances and diversities cannot be elucidated through broad concepts

[46] The participant is anonymized for fear of leaking his identity to the platform he works for.

like “Chinese diaspora”, let alone the realities that each immigrant experiences are different and each of them respond in their own creative ways. WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver is an interesting case that shows the nuanced relationship between diverse groups of “Chinese diaspora” and how they, from their different positions, engage with these unregulated rides running on the road of Metro Vancouver.

According to the drivers, most of their passengers are international students studying at colleges and universities. “And high school students,” Zack added (Interview with Zack, 2018, August 18). Students at high schools, colleges and universities, especially in the first few years after they arrive at Vancouver, do not have their own vehicle, or a driver’s license. Thus, when they go to distant destinations, come back home late, carry heavy groceries, or do not want to wait for public transit in the rain, they hail a not-too-expensive ride on these platforms (Interview with [emoji], 2018, October 27). According to the drivers, those who already work full-time jobs seldom take rides on the platforms, for a lot of them would have bought a car (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28). However, when interviewing Lily, an international student who just graduated from a local university, she admitted that she kept using WeChat ride-hailing even after graduation. Besides, one of the popular WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms, Raccoon Go, has been trying to expand its market by launching a service called “long-term school/work shuttle”. After ordering this service, a driver would pick up the passenger at a certain time every day and the passenger no longer needs to worry about not being able to find a driver nearby when hailing a ride to school or to work. Although it is not clear how successful this service has been, it is clear that the platform did not want to exclude potential customers among those who have graduated from school or who are already working full-time jobs. Here, the “long-term school/work shuttle” seems to be an attempt to attract working professionals to their platforms.

Different from the passengers, the drivers, at the time of my fieldwork, were not predominantly international students. According to the drivers, international-student drivers make up approximately 50% of the drivers in the trade. The other half, whose ratio is said to be rising recently, are what Philip and other drivers called *xin yi min da shu*, which literally translates to “middle-aged new-immigrant males” (Interview with Philip, 2018, August 3). Different from international students who can spend at most several hours per day aside from their academic duties at school, these middle-aged drivers, especially those who do not have a day-time job, can spend hours after hours on

these ride-hailing platforms, remaining constantly online in order to grab the most profitable orders.

> "There are recently many middle-aged new-immigrant [drivers]. Because they can spend the whole day working on the platform, they would be prioritized. People like me who is doing this by the way would not be competitive in getting the best orders." (Interview with [emoji], 2018, October 27)

[Emoji] was an international student who was in his last year of study at a local university in Metro Vancouver. As a someone who joined the business of ride-hailing only recently, [emoji] was upset about the grabbing system adopted by Raccoon Go at the time of the interview. Previously, the passengers would choose from a list of drivers. The choice was made by the passenger and the judgment could be made on the distance the drivers were from the passenger's pick-up locations, the make and model of the vehicles, or small things like the alias of the drivers. However, Raccoon Go adjusted its order distribution system. By replacing the previous passenger-select-driver order distribution system with the current order grabbing system that distributes orders to drivers on a first-come-first-to-serve basis, the recent algorithm update favored the middle-aged new-immigrant drivers over international-student drivers. Students are not able to keep an eye on the platform all the time and thus are at a disadvantage when orders are awarded to the fastest grabber. In the interview, [emoji] told me that he even started to doubt whether he should keep doing ride-hailing, for doing just a few rides every month would not bring him a good income, especially given that his German vehicle is less economical in terms of gas compared to its Japanese equivalents.

Although drivers, passengers and the owners of the platforms seem to be the only players mentioned in local English coverage on WeChat-based ride-hailing, these platforms are not as simple as a public account built by the account holder for drivers to provide services for passengers in need. Behind the establishment, operation and expansion of the platforms – which are so virtual that they can be subscribed to by scanning a QR code and can be used wherever there is Internet – are the people working at different positions in different organizations in Metro Vancouver and even Mainland China. Below is a list of positions Kabu has posted in a recruitment notice published on their public account.

Table 3.2. A list of Kabu positions advertised in its public account

Job title	Job description
Salesperson	Improve the marketing value according to the company's marketing strategy; expand collaborations with business owners; complete the assigned annual sales quota; actively maintain existing and acquiring new sales channels; expand customer base; complete negotiation and closing of deals with business owners by collaborating with other departments; analyze market trends and provide regular reports of work and market analysis to company.
Customer representative	Provide proactive, passionate, satisfactory and considerate service for clients; maintain smooth and effective communication with clients; understand and satisfy the needs of clients; summarize and report the needs of clients; participate in the professional trainings and meetings regularly.
Ground marketing staff	Complete the assigned ground marketing tasks; maintain existing customers and actively acquire new ones; participate in and organize ground events to promote company's products; provide instructions for customers in terms of registering, installing and using company's products.

Note: These positions were advertised in an article titled "I Say It Three Times Because It Is Important! And It Is Three Things" published on Kabu's public account on June 21, 2018. The post is translated from Chinese to English by the researcher.

As can be seen from these advertised positions, the platform has a great demand for sales and marketing professionals, who can promote their ride-hailing service to potential users, and perhaps more importantly, maintain and develop cooperative relationships with local business owners. These businesses, if seeking advertising space at the platform of Kabu, want Kabu to post their advertorials in its public account. As shown in the advertorial in Table 3.1., the subscribers of Kabu's public account have to read till the middle of the article to find that it is an advertisement for a local Spa place.

In addition to promoting these businesses in its public account in sometimes unexpected ways, Kabu strives to promote its own presence through such collaborative relationship at these local businesses' places: a Kabu ride-hailing sticker on the glass door of the shop; a flyer of Kabu's service on the checkout counter; the QR code printed on a set of business cards put on the front desk; and even a disposable tableware package provided for free by Kabu for restaurants and family-owned kitchens. How did I know this? The KABU EATS symbol, the branding colors and the QR codes were printed on the package. And all of these cannot happen without the labour of the marketing professionals, who are the ones connecting the "virtual" platform on WeChat with local businesses – ranging from internet cafés, dessert shops, restaurants to spas – scattered around Metro Vancouver.

Besides marketing and sales professionals, the operation of the platform relies on various kinds of other labour. As revealed in the above job post, customer representatives are also key to ensure that the platform is ready to help solve any technical issues 24/7. In addition, the platform needs professionals for programming, UI/UX design and copywriting to build, maintain and update their platforms, especially when the platform's functions cannot be fully realized by utilizing the menu bar at the bottom of the public account. These professionals may be the full-time or part-time employees working for the platform. They may also work at a WeChat marketing company[47] – which could be in Metro Vancouver or even in Mainland China, where this job has been outsourced.

It seems that these positions are intended for Chinese-speakers. The job posts above were originally written in Chinese and published as one of articles posted in Kabu's public account on WeChat. Besides WeChat, these recruitment posts could be seen at popular forums and websites for Chinese in Metro Vancouver. There, the recruitment ads, again, were written in Chinese and published on websites predominantly used by Chinese-speakers.

However, being "Chinese" or speaking "Chinese" does not necessarily mean that one would be considered an "insider". As revealed in the following anecdote told by the driver Zack, drivers could be on guard and even reject rides if the passenger does not speak Chinese or speaks Chinese with a "foreigner's accent", for fear that the "passenger" is a police or journalist who is pretending to be a genuine "passenger".

> "One day I was around New West when I got an order. When I called the passenger, I found he had a foreigner's accent when speaking Chinese. I reported to Raccoon Go customer representative that this man sounded weird. The representative looked into his account and told me not to worry. He has taken quite a number of rides before. It turned out that he was from Hong Kong and that's why his mandarin was not that good." (Interview with Zack, 2018, August 18)

It is a common practice among drivers to call the passenger before driving to the pick-up location. Every driver I interviewed included calling the passenger as part of their procedure and, when I took rides, every driver I encountered called me before they

[47] If they outsource the job to WeChat marketing companies in Metro Vancouver, those who establish, design and write articles for their platforms are often international graduates who luckily find being familiar with WeChat becomes one of their advantages in the job market.

arrived. In addition to confirming details of the ride, the upfront conversation, as in Zack's case, provided an opportunity for the driver to withdraw if he thought the passenger would be dangerous for him.[48] As DDJ told me, "Raccoon Go told its drivers not to take non-Chinese-speakers or Chinese-speakers with a strong foreign accent" (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28). When I asked him what about Chinese-speakers with a foreign look, he laughed, "That's even more scary. They could be cops or journalists!" Although the protection of passengers has been a long-existing issue for Uber and other ride-hailing platforms (Chee, 2018; Levin, 2017), in the specific context of Metro Vancouver, where those who are caught doing ride-hailing can face fines up to $1,150, drivers are conscious and even sensitive of the risky environment in which they work. From the anecdote above, we can see that the work to define the boundary between "inside" and "outside" is difficult and varies from person to person and even case to case. In the case of Metro Vancouver where such rides are considered illegal, being constantly on guard may lead to a narrower definition and a harder and even discriminating boundary of who should be "inside".

The ambiguous boundary between "inside" and "outside" – which may relate to how a combination of characteristics from ethnicity, language, accent to media use habits are assessed – showcases an ambiguously defined group of Chinese as intrinsic to the forming of the WeChat assemblage. This ambiguously defined group of Chinese is not equivalent to Chinese diaspora. It centers around a fraction of the Chinese migrants in Metro Vancouver who were intensive WeChat users before recently moving to Vancouver and who actively use, work for or invest in the local life services, for example, ride-hailing, provided on WeChat that they used to be familiar with in China but are not readily available in Metro Vancouver. This amorphous group includes international students, new immigrants and international graduates working and probably preparing

[48] "Chinese" is a highly generalized concept. The complicated history of Chinese immigrations to Vancouver, from Guangdong Province, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the rest of the PRC and other parts of the world, in addition to the different experiences and ideologies of the first-generation, 1.5 generation and second-generation immigrants, makes it is extremely complicated to distinguish or define who is "Chinese" and who is not. Specifically, in the case of Chinese-language ride-hailing, we could see that there was an equation in the minds of drivers and platforms operators that equate non-Chinese as possible risks of exposure in the context of the local English media discourse and the legal environment where the ride-hailing is to be tracked, trapped and clamped down. However, because of the blurry definition of "Chinese" and the guarded intuitive approach behind drivers and platforms' decision-making process of whether to take the order or not, the strategies and tactics that they use to distinguish the real riders may not always be effective. Sometimes they may even mis-categorize potential participants as outsiders of the ethnic, underground economy.

for immigration on work permits, as well as other groups who may not be active participants but are associated to the WeChat-based economies in a variety of ways.

What further complicates the case is that the people discussed above may take multiple roles. International students could be a parallel trader, a WeChat article writer, a food delivery driver, a ride-hailing driver, or a private chef who make meals on their own and sell to their fellow international students[49]. The same possibilities can also apply to recent immigrants who, like international students, have experienced the digitally-connected life in China and actively utilize WeChat in various ways to creatively meet needs that are not satisfied by the existing resource and support in Metro Vancouver. Moreover, the regular passenger of one of the ride-hailing platforms might be someone working in a local start-up providing WeChat marketing solutions to local businesses. Someone whose job title seems to have nothing to do with WeChat may take advantage of it to advertise their product or service. They might even create a name card advertising themselves, which would later appear in the articles posted by one of Vancouver's popular public accounts that have over 1,000 readers per article on average. They may have left China and opened their small restaurant in Metro Vancouver decades ago and recently picked up WeChat as their newly accepted payment option because WeChatPay charges less compared to Visa and MasterCard. They work at English-speaking company who used WeChat-related facilities for the first time when they were trained to make transactions in the newly-introduced WeChatPay system at the store they work for. They may be someone working for Translink and had to stick those narrow advertisement stickers with Chinese characters and a QR code to the top advertising bar inside the Skytrain.

The multiplicity of these interweaved social networks and identities seems to start with WeChat – a smartphone app that anyone can download from the app store of IOS or Android systems. Yet it is not limited to the cyberspace. At present, with WeChat being a "platform of platforms", connecting various economies and communities together in Metro Vancouver, the WeChat assemblage becomes increasingly visible. However, it would not be accurate to define this increasingly visible assemblage simply as a branch

[49] "Private kitchen" or "*sichu*" in Chinese was mentioned by ZZZZ as one of the part-time jobs students can do by cooking dishes at home and selling them to fellow students via WeChat. For more local coverage on this new and unregulated business, see "Trunk trade: Unlicensed food market quietly growing in Richmond" on *Richmond News* (Xiong, 2017, August 11).

of the WeChat world in China. For it is not the result of the expansive strategy of Tencent the company, but the result of the efforts of local start-ups and grassroots, some of which are even founded and operated by international students by utilizing WeChat's technological infrastructures and its potential in connecting groups and communities in Metro Vancouver. Thus, rather than describing it as a looming economy based on a foreign application, I think it would be more productive to say that what Metro Vancouver is witnessing is a WeChat assemblage resulting from the labour and connections accumulated through the people involved in varying degrees with WeChat.

3.4. A separate mediasphere

In addition to providing the technological possibilities and reorganizing local economies and communities, WeChat is also a place where an alternative Chinese-speaking discursive sphere has come into shape. This separate discursive sphere is composed of the WeChat-based news channels (usually as news-themed public accounts and some of which are public account versions of long-existing ethnic media), life service platforms like Kabu that partly operate as a marketing platform and post articles about local news as well as advertorials, recounts or immediate streaming of events posted by individual WeChat users on Friends' Moments, as well as personal stories shared in chat groups. Though news-themed public accounts may translate excerpts of coverage from local or international English media, the stories circulating in the alternative media sphere and the way these stories are framed do not always align with the English media. In some cases, the stories and the discourses around these stories are the very opposite of the frameworks found in local English newspapers. In this section, I would like to focus on the stories that are circulated on WeChat and related digital sites. Compared to the crackdown discourse and the ethnic exclusivity discourse about the WeChat-based ride-hailing in local English media, in the following two stories from the alternative discursive sphere, the ride-hailing drivers and platforms are viewed from another perspective as engaged members working, studying, living as well as contributing to the community, rather than participants of illegal business that need to be condemned and targeted for crackdowns.

3.4.1. When an "illegal" ride-hailing driver called the police…

According to DDJ, ride-hailing drivers would refrain from calling the police even when they are robbed, for they believe they have neither a legitimate status nor a legitimate reason for reporting crimes given that they are performing what are perceived as underground activities. Nevertheless, in the story I will recount below, it was one of these ride-hailing drivers who are normally so afraid of the police who proactively contacted the police in order to save someone's life, despite probably having to admit that he was doing illegal ride-hailing.

On September 12, 2017, a 17-year-old teen was reported missing. News, posts and messages were everywhere on local WeChat media channels, WeChat groups as well as Chinese-language forums. What people knew was that the missing teen was a Chinese international student studying in a secondary school in Vancouver. On September 10, 2017, he and his roommate went from Aberdeen Center to Marine Drive Station on Canada Line. At Bridgeport Station, he stormed out of the train just before the door closed and his friends lost contact with him. A search of the student's name online led to a series of short articles encouraging the public to report information if they saw or had seen this student, who was "last seen wearing a black hoody with stripes, black pants and black ankle-high boots" ("Police ask for help in finding missing Richmond teen". 2017, September 15). In addition to the clothes the student was wearing, another key piece of information was that the location where he was last seen, which a lot of local English media reported, was around "the Knight Street". *Vancouver Sun* was one of the few local English media that chose to reveal the identity of the person who reported the key location information about the student to the police – "a car pool driver" – "Investigators have since been able to speak with a car pool driver who saw Yu on the Knight Street…" (Ip, 2017, September 20)

According to the articles, posts and messages circulated in WeChat and Chinese-language websites and forums, the car-pool driver played a critical and active role in locating the position of the missing teen and the direction he might have gone.[50]

[50] Unfortunately, on September 23, the student's body was found near River road in Richmond.

For example, a public account called "DushiVan"[51], in an article with over 2,600 views, told the story with more details:

> "Later, a ride-hailing driver called the police claiming he took Linhai Yu from between 30th to 40th Street to the Knight Bridge around 2AM on the 11th. According to Yu's roommate, the driver checked the destination with Yu many times and said he could not stop in the middle of the Knight Bridge. Yet Yu insisted and said he wanted to have some air."[52] (2017, September 25)

After finding out that the student was missing, the driver called the police and said that he dropped the student off in the middle of the Knight Bridge around 2:30AM on September 11th.

That was how, through the police, *Vancouver Sun* and other English media outlets came to know the last seen location of the unfortunate student, which was not at the Bridgeport Station but on the Knight Street Bridge. According to the articles circulated on WeChat published by many public accounts, including "Canadanews", "collegedaily", "TCNnews", "GVRD Love" and "Guangson Canada"[53], the ride-hailing driver was not found by the investigators and then forced to reveal information about his ride with the missing teen. Instead, he voluntarily contacted the police because he believed he could provide some useful information to help find the missing international student, whose search notices were everywhere on WeChat with detailed descriptions of his appearance, the area and the time he went missing and photos of him.[54] In contrast to DDJ's account of the story, which he heard from the WeChat group about drivers' avoidance of police even if they are attacked, we see how the driver in this case was putting away his own concerns about being caught participating in unregulated ride-hailing activities behind the safety of his passenger.

---

[51] "DushiVan" is the English name of the public account. It is not translated by me.

[52] The article on "DushiVan" was written in Chinese and was translated to English by me.

[53] "Canadanews" "collegedaily" "TCNnews" are the English names of the public accounts. "GVRD Love" and "Guangson Canada" are translated from Chinese to English by the researcher.

[54] The missing student was reported on public accounts from those focusing on Chinese international students and immigrants in Metro Vancouver to those focusing on North America. These articles and search notices were forwarded to WeChat users' Friends' Moments and numerous chat groups and were further shared from there.

3.4.2. The international student radio

Together with a wide range of local volunteer organizations, CSSA and service platforms, Kabu has supported establishing a student radio station, which had its first broadcast on April 13, 2018. The radio station is podcast-based and circulates as embedded audio files in multimedia posts on WeChat public accounts. As made explicit in its slogan and its mission statement, its goal is to let the voices of Chinese international students be heard. Since the slogan and the mission statement to some extent reflects how Chinese international students understand their own identity and experience in Canada, I would like to translate the slogan and the mission statement from Chinese to English.

Slogan:

> "The fun of study abroad, stops when one just looks on, and begins when one communicates."

The mission statement:

> "Studying in the Country of Maple Leaves, from high school to postgraduate studies, our journey of growing up is always involved with pressure and confusion. The multiple tragedies of international students alarm the society again and again, that Chinese students need to let their voices be heard.
>
> However, seldom would people listen to us. When you need company, probably your parents and good friends are not in the same time zone. The way back home in the winter time, studying alone at the coffee shop during the Spring Festival, switching back and forth in the listless playlist on the road…
>
> We know at these times you need a voice beside your ear, a close voice, an expectant voice, a powerful voice, a unique voice." (2018, April 13)

From the slogan and the mission statement, it is evident that the establishment of the radio station was a response to "the multiple tragedies of international students", the situation of which they believed would be relieved if the voices of international students were heard. To be heard, here, however, does not just refer to representing themselves in a way that distinguishes their accounts from existing media coverage. More importantly, as revealed in the mission statement, its aim is to open the channel of communication as well as informational flows and emotional support between

international students. Not only is the aim to enrich that "boring" journey in which the student commutes between home and school with interesting audio content, but to address the loneliness represented by the lonely journey back home, solitary study time during the Spring Festival and the "listless playlist", by bringing together the lonely international students who had been "onlookers" rather than engaged participants of a somewhat collective life of international students in Vancouver.

The student radio invites Chinese international students from local colleges and universities and mentors from various industries in Metro Vancouver to talk about their experiences, confusion, interests and advice to each other. The radio has four columns, each of which features a different theme: "5-minute Introduction to University" "Voices in Raincouver" "Mentors' Cafe" and "Zhitu Talk"[55]. The student radio updates a new episode every week on its collaborators' WeChat public accounts. In Kabu's public account, the student radio, in the form of podcasts shared as WeChat public account articles, lists its collaborators as follows:

> GVRD volunteer organizations: Adai Network Foundation, Safety Youth, CloudaryVS;
>
> University/College CSSA public accounts: KPU; TWU; SFU; UBC; CAP;
>
> Local community platforms: In Via Education; Overseas Study Club; Kabu; lahoo.ca; 6pi; SoVanSoHot; Vanonline.com.[56]

Even without listening to the content of the student radio, the partners that Kabu collaborates with can shed some light on the role that Kabu plays in the life of Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver. From the mainstream English news coverage, it is easy to obtain an impression of Kabu as a deliberate rule-breaker that repeatedly defies local transportation regulations and authorities. Yet if looking at Kabu from the perspective of this list of local supporters for the international student radio, it is

---

[55] The four themes are translated from Chinese to English by me.

[56] The list in its structure resembles the original list in Chinese at the bottom of the WeChat articles where the podcasts are embedded as audio files. The names of the universities and colleges were originally written as English abbreviations. The names of the volunteer organizations and local community platforms were originally written in Chinese. For most of them, the researcher did not translate, but replaced the organizations' Chinese names with their English names. Except for "Safety Youth" and "Overseas Study Club", since they do not have English websites or sites on other English-language social media platforms, the researcher translated their names from Chinese to English.

apparent that the so-called “illegal Richmond ride-hailing” platforms like Kabu can sit together with local volunteer organizations, the Chinese student associations in local universities and colleges, and various local organizations and media that have been concerned about Chinese international students and Chinese communities. One of the fellow media collaborators, Lahoo.ca, for example, is one of the most influential Chinese media in Metro Vancouver. Its WeChat public account is said to have over 86,000 followers and it is recommended as the second best digital marketing platforms for businesses targeting Chinese communities in Metro Vancouver.[57] Coming back to Kabu’s collaboration with these volunteer organizations, student associations and local platforms, although collaborating with these parties may not change the profile of Kabu as an illegal transportation company to an engaged community builder, it shows that Kabu has a more complex relationship with the international student and Chinese migrant communities beyond the crackdown narrative circulating in the local English media.

In the local English-language media, Chinese-language ride-hailing is often discursively treated like a general category. Since the platformed mobility has not been regulated under local legal framework, it must be eradicated using escalating forces of punishment and control (Ferreras & Beja, 2018, January 9), let alone the ethnic exclusivity of such platforms. In WeChat and Chinese-language websites and forums, Chinese-language ride-hailing refers to a set of distinct platforms that sponsor community events, disseminate their viral marking posts through WeChat’s public accounts and chat groups, and provide employment opportunities for drivers, marketing professionals, customer service representatives, and so forth. As in the case of the missing student, the drivers and the platforms are represented as living, individual participants of the community in articles circulated on WeChat.

[57] According to various sources, established around 2012 and 2013, lahoo.com launched its WeChat news platform and now it has developed multiple media channels as WeChat public accounts, Weibo accounts and websites. One of its most successful channels, “lahoobignews”, as a WeChat public account, has over 86,000 followers, according to their self-report on LinkedIn (https://cn.linkedin.com/company/lahoo).

3.5. Fantasizing/replicating the Chinese life

> "These platforms look like *shanzhai*-ed Didi." (Interview with Lucy, 2018, October 17)

> "That was my first experience with ride-hailing [in Metro Vancouver]. It was not as good as I thought, but it was okay." (Interview with Lily, 2018, November 6)

The ride-hailing platforms in Metro Vancouver share a lot in common with popular ride-hailing platforms like Didi in China, including interface design, advertising strategy and even color themes. Lucy interestingly pointed out during her interview, "these platforms look like *shanzhai*-ed Didi". "*Shanzhai*" is a unique word with Chinese characteristics. WIRED magazine (2018, August 24) once quoted Xiaowei R. Wang's "Letter from Shenzhen" and explained the contemporary use of the term as the following:

> "Shanzhai is a Cantonese term, originally used as a derogatory word for knock-offs — because people from rural mountain villages couldn't afford real Louis Vuitton or officially produced DVDs of Friends. As a result, there was the cheaper, 山寨 [sic] version that was a mere imitation, coming from low-end, poorly run 山寨 [sic] factories."

What Lucy meant was that these ride-hailing platforms found on WeChat in Metro Vancouver are merely low-end imitations of Didi, which for her represented the high-end original. For one thing, it is interesting that Lucy views the ride-hailing platform in China as the original, while viewing the platform in Vancouver as *shanzhai*. It seems to suggest that Lucy, like most of other drivers and passengers I interviewed, unconsciously took what the service was like in China as the reference point and kept comparing the services and their life in Metro Vancouver to that back in China.

Although some of them do recognize Vancouver as a clean, diverse and democratic city, many drivers and passengers miss the "convenient" life in China, especially when discussing BC's overdrawn debate over the legislation of ride-hailing. Lily, for instance, referred to her ride-hailing experience in China and expressed her confusion over why a middle path can't be negotiated in Vancouver between ride-hailing platforms and traditional taxi industry.

> "Even if Uber comes, you can [also) choose from the two. Like in China, as a taxi driver, you can take orders from Didi or take orders as regular taxis.

> I can't understand how this [legalization of ride-hailing] would do them [taxi industry and drivers] bad."

Coming from a society where drivers benefit from the digital ride-hailing platforms, Lily cannot understand why it is so difficult for ride-hailing platforms to legally operate in this "big city" where she lives.

In China, indeed, taxi drivers do not have to choose whether they would like to be a professional taxi driver or a participant of the sharing economy. They can be both at the same time. On the one hand, taxi drivers can be seen sticking their phones into their cars' plastic A/C covers and switching between platforms to get the most profitable orders while racing along the roads of urban China, where the traffic is seldom light. Sitting in a taxi, a passenger can hear new orders coming from different platforms with a "ding" notification sound before a voice begins to read out the details of the ride. The taxi driver just needs to click "grab order"[58] to get their next job. On the other hand, even after registering on Didi, taxi drivers can wait at the taxi bay of a shopping mall, train station or airport and line up to pick up passengers, or simply pick up random passengers at one side of the road. For Lily, the ability of taxi drivers to register on ride-hailing platforms and enjoy the convenience digital technologies like ride-hailing could improve their business – which she called a "win-win" situation – which is the relationship between taxi drivers and ride-hailing platforms that she was familiar with in China. Thus, when similar solutions cannot be easily reached by the stakeholders in the debate over legalizing ride-hailing in British Columbia, she could not understand why.

Yet since she started following related coverages on the legislative progress and the concerns of different stakeholders, she understood better the challenges of legalizing ride-hailing in BC right away, given the way taxi industry has been connected to the administrative borders between cities, taxi insurance policies, and existing professional training and licensing regulations. Most other passengers, however, made little effort to explore why ride-hailing was not available in BC. Rather, they often used the ride-hailing policy and popularity in China as the reference point and believed the same should be applied to Canada, sooner or later. As Philip said, "it was the trend of the future" (Interview with Philip, 2018, August 3).

---

[58] "Grab order" is the text on the button which if the driver taps on his phone, the order will be distributed to him. The text is originally in Chinese and is translated to English by me.

As mentioned earlier, WeChat-based ride-hailing is far from an accidental replication of Chinese platform economy in Metro Vancouver. In the broader picture, the WeChat users in Metro Vancouver seem to be leading a life that is increasingly identical to their digitally connected life on the other side of the Pacific. WeChat has become a "platform of platforms" where, for users, numerous local service providers can be found and, for local start-ups, the platform infrastructures, the market, the work force, as well as the marketing channels are all conveniently in the same place. The increasing number of bubble tea shops and chain restaurants that have proved its popularity in mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong have expanded to Metro Vancouver and they often have collaborations with local WeChat public accounts which often broadcast the news of the incoming restaurants or shops weeks, if not months, before their actual opening. Needless to say, WeChat remains the "habitual media" (Chen, Butler and Liang, 2018) for international students, who can find information from the minimal GPA one needs to transfer from a local college to a business major at a local university to the emojis joking about the garbage recycling and sorting policy that is recently being implemented in a number of pilot cities in China. To some extent, life in Metro Vancouver seems to bear more and more resemblance to that in China: With a few taps in WeChat, these migrants can have the lunch from their favorite restaurant delivered at their door; they can hail a ride and let it take them to a place that would take twice the time on public transit; they can order childhood snacks, fresh fruits and vegetable, and even seasonal seafood like crayfish from Chinese-language online supermarket and request these groceries to be delivered to their place; they can also order fresh cherries to be sent from Canada to their parents and friends in China; they can find immigration lawyers, translators, insurance agents, professional and not-so-professional drivers, movers and cleaners, as well as sales representatives selling cars, houses and condos, cellular and Internet plans, flight tickets, to name a few services available. They might bump into their friend who is looking for a place to rent, wanting a lease to transfer, or wanting to sell a set of second-hand furniture, or a WeChat friend who is flying from China to Vancouver and who can bring something they purchased on Taobao.com (a popular online shopping website in China owned by Alibaba) to Canada for them. They can also pay in Chinese yuan on WeChat whether they are paying for a quick lunch at an Asian-themed food court or purchasing a thousand-dollar Canada Goose parka at a luxury shopping mall in downtown Vancouver.

When I asked Lily how she thought of "integration", Lily immediately sensed where I was leading to by asking that question.

> "For me, 'integration' is not 'assimilation'.[59] After all, Canada itself does not even have a unified standard. Then which standard out of so many do you want me to behave and convert my behaviors in accordance to?"

Lily's response corresponds to Campbell and Zeng's (2006) study, in which they found international students preferred to translate "integration" to *shi ying* in Chinese, whose meaning is closer to "adaptation" and "getting used to", rather than "integration" as defined in existing diaspora and migration literature (Berry, 1997). According to Lily, she does not need to conform to the mainstream society as described in Berry's adaptation model (1997), because, she believes, there is no standard for how one should lead their life in Canada, which she credits as a country of diversity.

From Lily's answer, it seems that international students and immigrants are no longer bound by acculturative stress and can keep leading a life that they were once familiar with in China. And from the observation of the WeChat practices in Vancouver, it looks like that life in Metro Vancouver is increasingly identical to the digitally mediated life in China for intensive WeChat users. Such fantasies of leading a Chinese life in Metro Vancouver, nevertheless, does not come without frictions and fightbacks.

Yet, as I explain next, the picture is much more complicated. In the case of ride-hailing, as recently as in 2018, the City of Richmond, the PTB as well as the Richmond RCMP organized a joint crackdown against the illegal ride-hailing services in Richmond in January. As a result, 12 drivers were fined and another 50 drivers were given tickets (Campbell, 2018, January 30). In addition to being defined as "illegal" ride-hailing business that violated the province's Uber-ban, these ride-hailing platforms were frequently cited examples of the worrying exclusiveness of the local Chinese community. In a commentary, Quan (2018, October 19) from *National Post*, situated the controversies surrounding the exclusive Chinese community in relation to the deep-running issue of seeking "cultural harmony" in Richmond, which he named as a

[59] Like the rest of the interviews, this interview was translated from Chinese to English by me. In the original Chinese interview, I asked the question using the Chinese word *rong ru* (which is closer to the English meaning of "integration" as defined in diaspora and migration literature). When answering my question, Lily followed my use of *rong ru* but distinguishes it from *shi ying*, which she later confirms is equivalent to "adaptation" in English.

multicultural city in the title but problematized such title in the article. The article was published on the day before the results were released from the general local and school board election of 2018 for the City of Richmond and it cited the Chinese-language ride-hailing services in one of the key questions used to open up the discussion on the meaning of a multicultural community:

> "What to do about businesses that advertise mostly, or — in exceptional cases — entirely in Chinese characters? How to clamp down on a thriving underground ride-hailing industry that caters only to Chinese speakers? And how to respond to birth tourists — non-resident expectant mothers who come here to secure Canadian citizenship for their babies?" (Quan, 2018, October 19)

Quan's question succinctly captured the key themes in the English news media's criticism of the Chinese ride-hailing services: they are underground activities that need to be clamped down. Yet more importantly, they are the "tip of the iceberg" of the alternative life world inhabited by Chinese speakers who enjoy mobility powered by illegal ride-hailing services with fellow ethnic Chinese.

In contrast to the interviewed drivers and passengers' optimism about ride-hailing, as well as the digitally-connected lifestyle that is being gradually replicated in Metro Vancouver, WeChat is not a digital heaven hovering over the soil of Metro Vancouver. Rather, infrastructures, economies, regulations and existing discourses around immigration and multicultural society form the environment that WeChat users inhabit. When the fantasies of replicating Chinese life in Metro Vancouver confront what is considered "local" – a word different from "mainstream" which is frequently used together with terms from Berry's (1997) adaptation model and somehow imitates the rule-writing role of the "mainstream" – controversies arise. And those outside the WeChat assemblage would feel the existence of the alternative ways of life whose "tip of the iceberg" has been disclosed in the controversies.

3.6. The New Chinatown

> "WeChat is Chinatown." (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28)

DDJ and I were talking about the places in Metro Vancouver that were particularly important to him. When I asked the role "Chinatown" would play in his life, he said,

> "You mean Chinatown-Stadium [Station]? That's a pretty narrow definition of Chinatown. Chinatown is not the only Chinatown. Actually, you can say Crystal Mall is Chinatown, Richmond is Chinatown, and even WeChat is Chinatown. It depends on how you say it." (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28)

WeChat, however, would be a different Chinatown compared to the previous two examples DDJ gave. The first example – Crystal Mall – is an Asian-themed plaza located in the south of Burnaby that is famous for both its food court offering dozens of Asian cuisines from different parts of mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia and Japan and its diverse stores offering comprehensive products and services to Asians, and especially Chinese immigrants. The second example – Richmond – is a city located at the south of Vancouver across the Fraser River. Sometimes used as synonymous with "Chinese", the city is famous for its ethnic Chinese population as well as the tensions between what was perceived as "Chinese" and what was regarded as "Canadian" – for instance, as early as in 2013 residents in Richmond submitted a petition to Richmond City Council to regulate the excessive use of Chinese characters on signs of businesses in the city (Hui, 2013, March 15).

Whether it is a miniaturized "town" in the size of a two-storied plaza or a behemoth "town" as big as of over 190,000 people, all these "Chinatowns" have a tangible shape that even outsiders can walk by and recognize "Oh, that's the Chinatown". WeChat, however, cannot be articulated as a space. Rather, it is a constellation of technologies, people and their multiple roles, narratives and fantasies, as well as variegated virtual and physical sites. Thus, as I discussed in Chapter 1, it would be more accurate to describe WeChat, and what it helps to form in Metro Vancouver, as an "assemblage".

As a philosophical concept, "assemblage" was first raised by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. As discussed in Chapter 1, "assemblage" refers to the dynamic arrangement of heterogeneous elements from milieus that expresses a character or identity and asserts a territory. Since 2000s, scholars like Delanda (2006) have contributed to demystifying this concept and applying it in various disciplines. The concept emphasizing on the multiscalar nature of the social reality adds to the possibility of scholars to restore the complexity. Keightley and Reading (2014) encouraged scholars in communication studies to use the liberating concept of assemblage for "the

recognition of the unevenness of globalization and mediation and of the intermeshing and intersecting of micro, meso and macro levels at which these operate" (p.296).

In the case of WeChat in Metro Vancouver, the concept of "assemblage" makes it possible for me to not assess WeChat as another Chinese social apps that is popular among international students who recently came from China to Canada. Rather, the concept liberates the significance of WeChat from an application just made of 1s and 0s to the multiplicity that enables the replication of platforms, the social networks, and the rearrangement of communities and economies. Assemblage also encompasses the circulation of ideas, stories and fantasies in the alternative discursive sphere that partly rests upon the existing diasporic media tradition in Vancouver and is distinct from the local English media in terms of what and how stories are told.

As an app that connects people to other people, services and cultures across time and space without wires perceptible by its average users, it is tempting to consider the role WeChat plays in Metro Vancouver as "deterritorializing". "Deterritorialization" was first brought up by Deleuze and Guattari. Papastergiadis (2000) brought it into culture and communication studies and defined "deterritorialization of culture" as "the ways in which people now feel they belong to various communities despite the fact that they do not share a common territory with all the other members" or "the way that a national or even regional culture can no longer be conceived as reflecting a coherent and distinct identity" with physical borders under the jurisdiction of a single government (p.115). The development of transportation and communication technologies are often perceived as catalyzers of this process and cyberspace is considered as one of the major "deterritorializing" forces. The QR codes that can bring us to specific public accounts when we hover our phones over them, at first sight, are the very representatives of deterritorialization. For these QR codes are like magical channels that shrink space and time and bring us to the rides, deliveries, movers, cleaners, immigration consultants, copy editors, local, global and homeland news, as well as recommendations of places to visit during the next long weekend. From the position of the WeChat users, all these services, people and information seem to be no more than text, visuals and buttons – which are all "in nature" digital signals generated by the "deterritorializing" smartphone.

However, even the QR codes in the abovementioned example need space, material and labour to exist. The code made of seemingly random black and white dots needs the algorithm behind WeChat to generate it. The public accounts – where these QR codes are leading – need to be programmed and designed in advance. To paste a QR code sticker or a poster containing such QR code to a food counter, a glass door or a checkout front desk, rounds of negotiation need to be made between the business owner – the space holder – and sales and marketing professionals working for the platforms – the one who wants to reshape the space. Moreover, before the sales and marketing professionals approach and negotiate with the business owner, the marketing decision might have to be discussed by the operation team, which is formed by Chinese-speaking WeChat-users who may have a variety of immigration statuses permitting them to legally reside in Canada. The main point I want to make here is that it is almost impossible to talk about "deterritorialization" without recognizing "territorialization" or "reterritorialization" is happening at the same time. The territory of Metro Vancouver has been shaped by generations of immigrants. Thus, WeChat in Metro Vancouver is at once contained in and reshaping the existing social geography shaped by previous movement of communities, economies and cultures. The virtual spaces of the ride-hailing public accounts, the mobile spaces of the rides running through the landscape of Metro Vancouver and the spaces in which these ride-hailing QR codes are stuck onto are not created from scratch. "Territorialization" and "re-territorialization" happen at the same time as "deterritorialization". All the local infrastructures, networks and identities that were undone in the deterritorialization process are, at the same time, redone (Morley, 2011).

Next I return to the interesting point DDJ raised – "WeChat is Chinatown". How is the WeChat assemblage in Metro Vancouver analogous to a Chinatown? Chinatown, in ethnic studies, is often considered as an ethnic enclave, usually in a non-Asian urban space, that is heavily populated by ethnic Chinese. The contemporary space of Chinatown is often marked by the large red arch entrance, green-tiled roofs and neon lights – a fashion maintained from the earlier generations of Chinese.

At the first sight, Chinatowns seem to be urban spaces marked by sets of idiosyncratic architectures, which seem to have little to do with WeChat the app or the assemblage formed in relation to it. Chinatowns, however, are more than urban spaces with Chinese-style architectures and Chinese people. According to Anderson, Del Bono,

McNeill and Wong (2019), Chinatown is “a real, densely lived and worked place, defined by everyday transactions, practices and interactions, and very much entangled with its surroundings at urban, national and transnational levels” (p.2). Like the WeChat assemblage this thesis discusses in relation to WeChat-based ride-hailing, Chinatown is a place where people work and live, where merchandises, information and opportunities are found, where the diasporic economies intermesh with underground as well as transnational economies, as well as where languages, cultures and discourses are maintained and developed. As rightly pointed out by Anderson et al. (2019) in *Chinatown Unbound*, it would be more accurate and productive to study Chinatown as an “urban assemblage”, which Farias and Bender (2010) defines as “heterogeneous connections between objects, spaces, materials, machines, bodies, subjectivities, symbols, formulas and so on that ‘assemble’ the city in multiple ways” (quoted in Anderson et al., 2019, p.10). In this way, research in Chinatowns could be more open to analysing its transformation, multiplicity, as well as “multi-scalar relations into which localities and cities are networked” (Anderson et al., 2019, p.10).

As an urban assemblage, Chinatowns, at least some aspects of them, are perceptible even to those who do not speak Chinese. Residents of the city, as well as tourists, can pass by, walk through and even explore inside Chinatowns. Admittedly, a deeper participation of the everyday practices of Chinatowns would require proficiency and knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, which become an invisible wall that has kept Chinatown a comparatively closed community to some extent.

As an assemblage analogous to Chinatowns, the WeChat assemblage, to some extent, also reveals itself as an ethnic enclave, in the way that there are boundaries between those “inside” and “outside”. Nevertheless, such boundaries are nuanced and porous. Not only are language and ethnicity key indicators of the identities of those “inside”, as is revealed in the anecdote Zack narrated about the Hong Kong student whom he almost rejected because of his “foreign accent”, nuanced elements like accent draw the line between the “inside” and the “outside”, especially in the alerted context that ride-hailing is illegal in Metro Vancouver. Furthermore, since the technological infrastructure of WeChat underwrites so many interactions in the assemblage, the habits and skills to use WeChat play a role in delineating the assemblage as well. Being unfamiliar with WeChat, for instance, has become one of barriers for the authorities in their efforts to crack down unregulated services operating on WeChat, including ride-

hailing. Therefore, though WeChat does not elicit images of an urban space like Chinatown, there are boundaries porously formed by the language, accent and technologies. Yet as in Zack's case, the way the boundary is defined can be attributed to the inhabitants' subjective understanding of the boundary, which could be affected by the social milieu in general. In this case, the province's regulation for ride-hailing and the crackdown measures the authorities have been using to trap and ticket drivers made Zack being warier of the existing boundary.

Yu (2016) studied similar transportation systems in an ethnic community in the US. Observing the hyper convenient ethnic transit system for the Chinese community in Flushing, New York – a variety of what she calls "ethnic mobile services" including casino buses and Chinese taxis that offer commuting options for Chinese – Yu acknowledges the physical mobility these services bring to Chinese immigrants, but the main point of her paper was actually an oxymoronic symbiosis of mobility and immobility (p.12). Proposing the concept of (im)mobilities, Yu (2016) argues that the mobilities the immigrants obtain from ethnic mobile services could bring cultural and economic immobilities, as one of her interviewees said, "I am like a deaf, dumb and blind person" (Yu, 2016, p.10). I found a similar feeling of fearing for being stuck in the Chinese enclave among some of my participants too. When I asked ZZZZ what he would do if ride-hailing is legalized and Uber comes to town, he said he would prefer Uber over what he calls "Chinese platforms" for something that driving for WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms cannot give.

> "If Uber is in the town one day, I will be a part-time Uber driver rather than working for the Chinese platforms. That way, I can meet people from diverse backgrounds and talk with them. At least, I can practice my English. By just serving the Chinese community, I don't feel I am getting anything out of the work experience except for the money." (Interview with ZZZZ, 2018, August 3)

Inhabitants of the WeChat assemblages, like the Chinese residents in Flushing who rely on the casino buses to go to work outside Flushing every day, do not celebrate the "Chinatown" they have been collectively, and maybe unconsciously, building. Even though they rely on the smartphone, the app, the digital connections between platforms and individuals and all kinds of mobilities that the assemblage has brought to them, they do recognize the mooring aspects of it.

By analyzing a series of interviews Raushenbush (1924) did with "young racialized Chinese" for a project to "document the lives of racialized Asians on the Pacific coast of the United States and Canada"[60] (p.130), Stanley (2007) finds that while their parents and maybe even grandparents, being first-generation immigrants, came to Canada and settled down in the Chinatowns of Victoria and Vancouver, the second- and third-generation immigrants spare no effort to "move out of Chinatown and into previously all-white neighbourhoods" (p.138). As DDJ pointed out, "WeChat is Chinatown". The WeChat assemblage in Metro Vancouver has revealed itself as Chinatown 2.0, as it rewires the splintered "Chinatowns" spread across the city – the Chinatown, diasporic malls and plazas, ethnic neighbourhoods, ethnic businesses, to name a few – and bridges the ethnic population, markets and lifestyles with the non-Chinese-speaking communities and economies in the *locale*. As of now, it is hard to determine what will happen to the prosperous and evolving WeChat assemblage in Metro Vancouver decades later. Will it be gradually given up like the fate of other ethnic enclaves that have disappeared as immigrants adapt to the local ways of life? Would it be accepted by more diverse groups and communities as it integrates into the local life in Metro Vancouver and the tag of being associated with "Chinese" fade across time? What we do know is that WeChat has exhibited the potential to have a fate different from older homeland social media that were previously brought to the host society by international students and immigrants and then abandoned as they integrated or attempted to integrate to the English-speaking local life. At least for now, international students and new immigrants crave the convenient and connected life experienced mediated by WeChat in Metro Vancouver, while fantasizing for a better local replication of the digitally connected "Chinese" life. From the small sample of interviewees in my study, if their views are any indication of views shared by larger numbers, most of them do not agree that they must integrate, acculturate or assimilate to be a "good international student" and eventually a "good immigrant" in the mainstream Canadian society, but that they believe the Canadian society, famous for its diversity, would eventually accept and embrace the technologies, economies and lifestyles they have been used to in China before coming to Canada for study, work and life.

[60] The project was originally organized by the Institute of Social and Religious Research. As noted in Stanley's study (2007), the federal Exclusion Act of Canada in 1923 made the organization particularly interested in the province of British Columbia and the young racialized Chinese.

Chapter 4.

WeChat-based ride-hailing: A corner of the "New Chinatown"

In this chapter, I describe what lies beneath the "tip of the iceberg" of the WeChat assemblage through the WeChat-based ride-hailing, or what *Global News* and other local English media have called "illegal Richmond ride-hailing". I used data from both my interviews with participants and my own observations in the field. As I suggested in the previous chapter on the WeChat assemblage, what I was observing was not just the service platforms and procedures of "ride-hailing". Rather, it was the dynamic, interrelated and complex assemblage inhabited by international students, as well as Chinese-speaking residents with other identities, performing the labour of driving cars to give rides to "co-ethnic strangers" (the concept of which I will expand in 4.3 "Sharing a temporary space with a co-ethnic stranger"). Although a few platforms attempted to launch their own applications downloadable from the IOS App Store, most of the Chinese-language ride-hailing platforms were established on WeChat. For these international students, doing ride-hailing seems to be a "not-too-bad" money-making opportunity as its flexibility makes it possible for them to make some pocket money outside the school hours. The job of being a ride-hailing driver, however, is not a random part-time job. It is one of the most flexible jobs among their limited part-time job options; it is an illegal part-time job without any proper training, benefits or legal protection; it is a social space for the driver and the passenger as co-ethnic strangers who are often peers or even schoolmates; and it is part of an ethnic, underground economy that builds on the local social geography that is already layered by the convergence and tensions between what is considered the local mainstream, the diasporic and the transnational. In brief, in this chapter, I will tell the stories of WeChat-based ride-hailing popular among Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver. I hope the thick descriptions included in this case study of "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" (which, again, is an interestingly problematic name) can shed some light onto the WeChat assemblage or the "New Chinatown" as discussed in Chapter 3.

4.1. The precarious "illegal Richmond ride-hailing"

On January 8, 2018, *Global News* published an article titled "The illegal Richmond ride-hailing app that allegedly won't take non-Chinese fares". In the article, the reporter described her experience of trying to "catch a ride with one of those companies" – Kabu. The reporter described the experience as meandering:

> "Global News tried to book a Mercedes SUV, but the driver wasn't available. But someone driving a Nissan Rogue was. The Rogue was supposed to arrive in six minutes. But then it had a flat tire, so a different ride would have to do. An Audi A4 eventually arrived to pick up its fare. But the driver wouldn't take this one."

This was not the first time that WeChat-based ride-hailing was covered in local English newspapers. However, this coverage by *Global News* was one of the first to focus on the deep running issues regarding the ride-hailing controversy: it is not just that this service is illegal; it is ethnic-exclusive. As *Global News* highlighted in big bold letters on its website, "'The driver said the company running the app asked them not to take any Westerners, or say, non-Chinese riders', Qi explained." Qi was the individual whom the *Global News* reporter interviewed. The description of the reporter's ride-hailing experience, as well as his encounter with Qi, stopped right there. The rest of the article turned to an elaboration of the dire consequences of the illegal ride-hailing industry, including its detrimental impact on local taxi business and the $1150 fines for drivers who were participating.

The ride-hailing platform, Kabu, however, did not agree with this characterization. Right after *Global News* published its first article on January 8, 2018, the product development director of Gokabu Technologies Inc. explained that "the initial *Global News* story about Kabu created a 'negative impression over our business intention'" (Ferreras & Beja, 2018, January 9). The statement from Kabu was quoted in a follow-up piece published on the *Global News* website on January 9, 2018, titled "Illegal Richmond ride-hailing company denies having Chinese-only policy":

> "[S]ince the app 'currently only available in the Chinese language, and not all drivers are fluent in English,' drivers have the option of not taking non-Chinese-speaking passengers 'to reduce frustration in communication and riding experience.'…'Most of our customers are Chinese-speaking local residents or short-term visitors from China at this moment because the app itself is currently only in the Chinese language due to limited resources in

> develop'…'Multi-lingual updates are already in development since December 2017, and will be released to the public once its completed.'"

According to the Director, not taking non-Chinese-speaking passengers is a personal choice made by individual drivers. Instead of declining non-Chinese for racial or ethnic reasons, the decision was made based on drivers' assessment of their English language levels. The goal was "to reduce frustration in communication and riding experience". The platform, also did not have an institutional policy that cast non-Chinese beyond their scope of business. Rather, the role that the platform played, according to the Director, was mainly to allow options to drivers who were not proficient in English to either take or not take non-Chinese-speaking passengers. What's more, he said that the platform was actively working on developing multi-lingual features to counter this issue of the "Chinese-ness".

The Director's response only partly echoes to the responses I got from the participants of this research. When I asked whether the platform had policies asking drivers to take only Chinese, 5 out of 6 drivers I interviewed admitted that platforms had such "suggestions". However, they viewed the issue from a somewhat nuanced perspective without simplifying the business as one based on ethnicity or race. One of the most common interpretations from drivers and passengers was that the platforms wanted them "not to get into trouble". For example, [emoji] reflected,

> "The company will tell us not to take foreigners, but I think the company just does not want us to get into trouble. I have never been fined myself but I have heard there were policemen pretending to be passengers and giving you a ticket when you arrive." (Interview with [emoji], 2018, October 27)

According to the drivers, taking only Chinese is an expedient strategy to maximize the possibility for both the platforms and the drivers to stay out of trouble in the current legal environment, which is hostile to ride-hailing services like theirs. In *Global News*' follow-up story, BC Green Leader Andrew Weaver suggested the fines should be increased to $1500 and impound the car when the driver was caught a second time (Ferreras & Beja, 2018, January 9).

The ethnic Chinese community has a protective wall against the persecution, crackdown and investigation from outside. In one of *CBC*'s (2018, January 13) reports on the Chinese-language ride-hailing controversy in the Lower Mainland of BC, Malcolm Brodie, Mayor of Richmond, admitted that it was almost impossible to eradicate such

illegal rides because “they are operating in a way that they don’t want to be detected and they certainly don’t want any enforcement proceedings to go against them”. Indeed, passengers were often introduced to the ride-hailing service as already heavy users of WeChat. Lily came to know this service through a friend and started to familiarize herself with and use this service after the friend sent her the interactive name card of the ride-hailing platform through WeChat (Interview with Lily, 2018, November 6). Rebecca, similarly, learned about such platforms through a conversation in a WeChat group for international students (Interview with Rebecca, 2018, October 13). In other words, to learn about such rides, one has to download the app, add enough friends and follow enough public accounts that are concerned about their local life in the Lower Mainland of BC. As one of the interviewed drivers, Jack revealed when one has enough WeChat friends in Vancouver, one ends up being updated about most of the news, gossip and other social information circulating in the region (Interview with Jack, 2018, October 14). To be a user of the platform, one needs to search the name of the platforms by typing Chinese characters in the search box and navigating the menu bars of the platforms, most of which are written in Chinese. Encountering local legal barriers, these Chinese drivers and platforms would withdraw to the ethnic Chinese community to avoid further contact with what is outside the protective wall of WeChat.

The current legal environment in BC for the ride-hailing industry may be a key factor in the direction that these WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms have been developing to – an ethnic-exclusive ride-hailing industry sitting at the oft-problematic overlap between ethnic economy and underground economy. The legal environment, however, does not tell the whole story. In the research, students frequently referred to a “*huaren*[61] circle” that is somehow different or separate from the “local” “mainstream” “Western”[62] community, which is the target of these media investigations, criticisms, and crackdowns, according to the drivers. Most of the drivers agreed that the WeChat-based ride-hailing services were primarily for *huaren*, or more specifically young international

[61] An off-the-top-of-head explanation for “*huaren*” would be “Chinese”. However, it might be more accurately explained as a general name for Chinese overseas, or used to describe the general community of people of Chinese origin in a particular region. For example, *huaren* in Vancouver. People may have different opinions of whether they belong to the *huaren* community or not. For example, a second-generation Canadian-born Chinese may not identify with such name.

[62] “Local” “mainstream” “Western” were all words used by participants to describe the antithesis of the “*huaren* circle”. Participants often say “local” in English and say “mainstream” and “Western” in Chinese. Thus the latter two are translated from Chinese to English by me.

students. They also pointed to WeChat as a self-evident explanation (for them) of why it was intended for Chinese, “Foreigners they don’t use WeChat” (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28). Thus, to some extent, the platforms designers chose Chinese-speaking WeChat-users in Metro Vancouver as their target users when making the decision to build their platforms on this “Chinese” app.

The criticism from local media and the crackdown by local authorities, unfortunately, are not the only problems drivers face in their everyday practice. By participating in an industry that is often said to belong to the “sharing economy”, the drivers take financial and even life risks when taking strangers into their cars and driving to the destinations requested.

When DDJ and I were discussing a special section that Raccoon Go used to have – female drivers, for female passengers only – DDJ said that he used to envy the resources female drivers got from Raccoon Go, because the platform used to take care of them and always think about them first when orders came. Yet now when I hail a ride on Raccoon Go, I rarely encounter female drivers and there’s no longer a designated section for female drivers. That’s when the conversation shifted towards the safety issue. The safety issue of ride-hailing is not an industry secret. Academics have done research on how (un)safe it is to ride with Uber, Lyft and similar ride-hailing platforms, including the sexual violence that female passengers frequently encounter in the closed space of a ride (Chee, 2018; Levin, 2017). That was the safety issue of ride-hailing that I was more familiar with – the safety of passengers, who are threatened by certain criminal drivers. What DDJ was telling me, however, was a different story. He was concerned about the drivers’ safety and he was not concerned about female drivers being harassed by male passengers in particular, but how the lives of all drivers, male or female, could be in danger. The following story that DDJ heard from a chat group on WeChat was the example he gave me.

> DDJ: Raccoon Go used to have a group for female drivers, where many female drivers are put together. Previously, female drivers of Raccoon Go have lots of benefits. Like, if Raccoon Go has orders, [they] would prioritize female drivers and dispatch the orders to them. But now it seems female drivers are not as many. You know, one of Raccoon Go's biggest problems is safety.
>
> Me: You mean for passengers or drivers?

DDJ: Drivers.

Me: Like female drivers?

DDJ: No, it applies to male drivers as well. Actually I didn't think it would occur to a lot of people. Once, around the beginning of this year, someone in our group, someone I didn't know, sent a WeChat message [to the group]. He said that, the previous night, one of their Raccoon Go drivers, at 4AM, was robbed when taking passengers from UBC to Richmond. Robbed by the passengers. It was that kind of planned robbery. What's more, passengers robbed you meant that they had been targeting at you. Once they got into the car, they sat at the back and said that they were going to a place in Richmond where there would be people picking them up. When you arrived, they took out the weapons, took your wallet and phone and ran away.

Me: Then what could you do to deal with this kind of thing. Call the police?

DDJ: Think about it. What COULD you do? You CAN'T call the police.

Me: Just because you were doing this?

DDJ: Because, first, what reasons you could use to call the police? "I was doing Raccoon Go at night, got passengers and …" For starters, what you do is not legal. You…actually your rights can hardly be protected. When I came to know this story, I was shocked as well. I didn't know that this kind of thing would really happen. But I did saw it [the message]. I am not sure if the message is true. But I believe it is.

After listening to his recount of the story, for one moment, I was wondering whether the story was true or not. Yet at that moment seeing the seriousness in his eyes, I didn't think it was appropriate to challenge the truthfulness of the story, since it would seem to imply that the safety of drivers is somehow less threatened. That way, I would be assuming the role of the police whom he said he dared not to call if he was robbed – I would be reinforcing the media's neglect of their worries and challenges which are already lacking in the so-called "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" controversy.

4.2. Enter the world of ride-hailing from WeChat

In this section, I will provide a more detailed description of these WeChat-based platforms from the perspective of the passenger. The following example is an excerpt from my fieldnotes about a ride I took from SFU to Metropolis Metrotown. I hope in this way the readers of this thesis can get a glimpse of the subjective experience of

navigating ride-hailing using WeChat in Metro Vancouver, where ride-hailing is banned and such "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" has been the target of crackdown and criticism.

Fieldnotes: *navigating ride-hailing on WeChat*

I just finished my office hour duty at the Teaching Assistant's office in K-Building located at the south part of the campus. When I woke up my phone to order a ride, the lock screen showed that it was just past one o'clock. When the screen was unlocked, I tapped on the icon of WeChat – a green rounded square with a pair of eyed dialog boxes. I was instantly brought to the homepage of WeChat. My eyes swept down as my right hand kept scrolling on the screen. I was looking for the symbol of some special contact or other: either a specially-designed "K" or a cartoonish raccoon. Yet neither appeared promptly. I tabbed the white search box on the top and typed in one of the platforms' name. When I typed in the third letter, the symbol of the specially designed "K" came up as the fourth related search result. I tabbed it and came to the familiar interface of the public account of KABU.

There was a grey menu bar at the bottom. The first item on the menu wrote "one click to ride"[63]*. I tabbed it and the public account interface disappeared. A narrow green progress bar extended from the left to the right and before it reached the right edge of the screen, an ad page appeared. After three seconds, the ad page disappeared and the ride booking interface came out. "Where are you going?" A text box was located at the upper part of the page, the background of which seemed to be another advertisement. I tabbed on the text box and wanted to type in "Metropolis Metrotown" but I was immediately redirected to another interface.*[64]

On the upper half of the new interface were two text boxes. The first was for the pick-up location, with a grey icon of a person standing inside a small circle. The second was for the drop-off location, its icon being a checkered destination flag. Below these two text boxes were two choices: "depart now" and "paid booking". The default choice

---

[63] Except for the name of Kabu and the names of the destinations (e.g. "Metrotown"), all texts in Kabu's public account are originally in Chinese and are translated to English by me.

[64] The lengthy description of the navigation process might read as confusing. The description also reflects my confusions and frustrations when navigating these developing platforms on WeChat, which are called "*shanzhai*-ed Didi" (a lesser version of the more professionalized ride-hailing platforms like Didi). Some of the features, such as the ad interface, echo the discussion of the technological infrastructures of WeChat and its potential to be creatively utilized by users.

was “depart now” and eight destinations were listed below: “17 Gaming Internet Café” (strangely, there was a pill-like yellow text box writing “AD” next to the name of the address), “Metrotown”, “Lansdowne Centre”, “Holt Renfrew”, “Richmond Centre”, “Aberdeen Centre”, “YVR – Airport”, and “Tsawwassen Ferry”. Since K-building was inside the campus and there was little space for vehicles to park, I wanted to depart from the Cornerstone area, where there were a series of commercial buildings and a multi-storied parking lot. I typed in “cornerstone” in the first text box, which turned out to be a search box. My key term was soon paired with an address –“The Cornerstone Bldg, Burnaby, BC V5A 4Y6, Canada”. That was it. I tabbed the address to select it. Next I needed to type in the destination address. I was not sure whether the “Metrotown” below referred to “Metropolis Metrotown” or the “Metrotown Station”. Thus, I checked the address of “Metropolis Metrotown” in the Google Maps app and typed in “4700 Kingsway, Burnaby, BC” in the destination text box.

What seemed to be the list of frequently visited destinations – the eight addresses – was then replaced by four lines of information and one black key at the bottom with four characters on it, which meant “submit order”. The four lines showed the four pieces of basic information about the ride: number of passengers; make and model; phone number; and payment. In the second line “make and model”, there was a sketched sign of a sedan in the middle, next to which was the words “Ford F-150/Prius” with five golden stars below. I was curious if there were other vehicles available. So I tabbed the second line “make and model” and was brought to another interface.

A line of characters appeared at the top: “Please select a driver”. Below I had six drivers to choose from. Actually, it was not really a choice of drivers. For the only distinguishable information between the different options was the make and model of the vehicle and how far they were from the Cornerstone Building. More accurately speaking, I was choosing the vehicles. The farthest vehicle was 18.4km away from SFU. The one that was closest to me, surprisingly, was not the “Ford F-150/Prius” that the system suggested to me, but a “-Toyata-Corolla”. (I was not sure why there was a hyphen before the letter “T”.) Besides the “-Toyata-Corolla”, I had three other options of riding a “Honda Civic”, “Mazda 3” or “Benz E300”, which were all three to four kilometers from SFU.

When I looked at the information sheet of the available drivers closely, I realized that the profiles were largely provided by the drivers themselves, for the message and style of the various notes furnished for the drivers, on the left of the five golden stars, differed widely. Some of those notes were easy to understand. For example, the driver for the "Benz E300" added his name and the make and model of the car he was driving that day –"Alex is driving Prius today". It seemed that the driver tried to give the impression that he was honest with what car he was driving so passengers would not feel disappointed when they, for instance, saw a Honda when expecting a Mercedes Benz. From some of the notes that the drivers added, one could even get a sense of their personalities. For while some of the notes were very neat and matter-of-fact with just an English name, or an English name plus the make and model of the car they drove that day, others seem to be set to show the characters of the drivers and to try possibilities of conversation before the ride happened. For example, one of the drivers added "hey folks pick me pick me pick me". However, not every driver's note was easily comprehensible. Some added a bunch of capitalized letters, the combination of which could not be found in the dictionary. And for some, even though I understood the literal meaning of the notes they added, I could not figure out what they meant by them. For instance, one of the drivers added the note, "good cabbage".

Different from the more standardized aspects of the platform, those notes were messages drivers intended to convey to passengers and thereby influence their selection. It seemed that the platforms did not even try to standardize this section. In addition to Chinese characters, English letters and numerals, drivers used IOS emoji and kaomoji to grab attention from potential passengers. Apart from the ride booking experience mentioned above, I had witnessed a variety of ways the drivers express themselves to attract passengers, which partly reflected how they understood the function of such "note", or what were the important messages that they thought should be conveyed to potential passengers before they booked the rides.

The notes sometimes did make a difference. For instance, when I hailed a ride in Richmond to Vancouver, I would not select a driver who added a note saying that he or she wanted to drive back to Burnaby. If I was thinking of covering just a short distance, like a ten minutes' drive, I would not choose a driver who made it clear in the note that he or she preferred "big orders".

After I chose a driver, I would be brought to the order confirmation interface, to review all key information I had been asked to key in or select in previous steps – pick-up location, drop-off location, depart now or paid booking, number of passengers, estimated payment, make and model and my phone number. Usually within three minutes, a stranger's call would come. When I picked up the phone, it would be the driver who would confirm my exact location and tell me how many minutes I would have to wait before he arrived, which, according to my experience, never exceeded ten minutes. There was only one exception when I received a hesitant call from a female driver, asking whether I could wait for twenty minutes. She seemed to be inside a mall or some other noisy and crowded place. Because I was in a hurry that day, I said I could just hail another ride then. She seemed to be relieved when I said that I would cancel her ride and book another. Maybe she was in the supermarket and had not finished her checkout. Or maybe she touched on the wrong button and accidentally accepted the ride when she did not have the time to complete it. Yet that was the only time when I got a call from a driver who showed explicit hesitation in her tone and seemed almost like she might suggest that I cancel the ride.

Besides confirming details of the ride and giving both driver and passenger a second chance to accept or reject the order, for passengers like me, the phone call before meeting the driver in person revealed information about the driver. I would generally be able to tell the gender and age of the driver through the phone call. Combined with the make and model of the vehicle described on the platform, this information helps to identify my ride from among approaching vehicles, most of which might be simply looking for parking spots. However, sometimes the approaching vehicle might not be exactly the same as described on the platform. Thus to identify the vehicle, I can't just rely on the descriptions the platform provides, but I can also observe the behavior of the approaching vehicle and the driver inside. Usually when the driver arrives, he or she would call me again, confirm their arrival and ask where I am. If a vehicle comes slowly and stops on one side of the road and the driver starts to make a phone call while looking around, that is often the driver who is coming to pick me up. Yet there is a possibility that the vehicle was booked by another passenger and is not there for me.

Furthermore, the phone call reveals certain aspects of the driver's personality and it might set up assumptions about the person. For example, if the driver speaks in a

respectful manner and uses *nin* – an honorific way to say "you" in Mandarin Chinese – during the short conversation on the phone, then I know that he or she is probably one of the drivers who regards ride-hailing as a professionalized service and will treat me politely during the ride. If the driver gives a lot of extra information, uses a conversational tone and even laughs from time to time, he or she is probably an outgoing person who likes to talk with the passenger. If phone call is completed in a matter-of-fact and reticent manner, the driver may not enjoy talking and I can expect a zero-conversation ride, which happened during one ride.

It is important to note that the ride-hailing platforms on WeChat discussed in this thesis do not sit comfortably under the category of ride-hailing. A lot of them provide other business or community services while supporting the communication between ride-hailing drivers and passengers. For instance, Raccoon Go provides a variety of services in addition to ride-hailing to its subscribers. When you click in Raccoon Go's WeChat public account and tap the "one key to go" button at the bottom menu bar, you would find the "take a ride now" interface (with the pick-up and drop-off locations, tips and the number of passengers) is the first out of the 6 options under the default function "use a ride", which is located the second place in the top menu bar right behind the first function called "designated driver". If you keep swiping left, you would see all 6 functions of the WeChat-based platform: designated driver, use a ride, run errands, truck service, city-to-city trip, and driver recruitment[65]. Among them, "use a ride" and "run errands" have several sub-functions as listed below.

[65] All the six functions, as well as other texts used in the public account, are translated from English to Chinese by me.

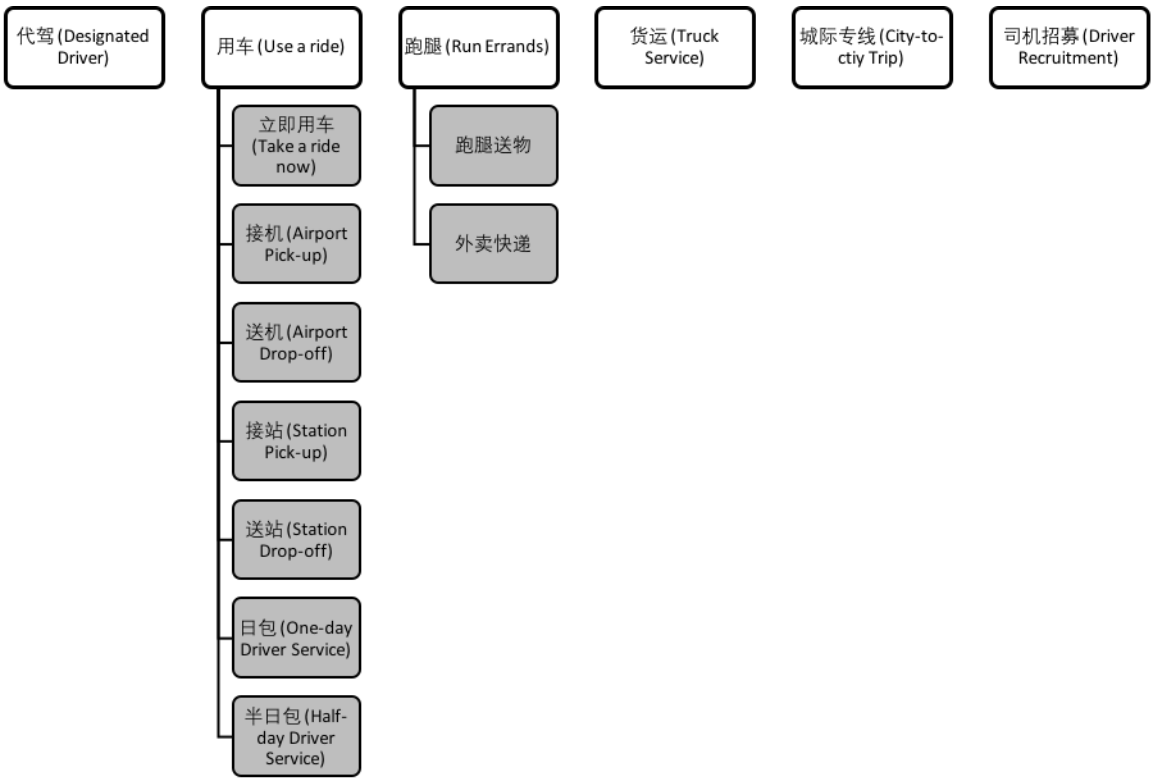

Figure 4.1. Raccoon Go provides a variety of services in addition to ride-hailing

Compared to the more professional ride-hailing platforms concentrating on short-distance rides within or across neighboring cities, Raccoon Go has more variety. The variety showcases Raccoon Go's effort to accommodate the various needs of the local Chinese-speaking population, especially Chinese international students, who find the life in Metro Vancouver is vastly different from what they are used to in China. Moreover, it shows that Raccoon Go's ambition does not lie in being a copycat of Didi or Uber before these industry giants enter the market of BC. Rather, they have developed their services around the local needs and root their business in the local soil of Metro Vancouver. In this sense, although their interface design is somewhat similar to that of Didi, it is not a manifestation of transnational influence. At the very least, it is a combination of a transnational business model and the demands of local Chinese international students and immigrants.

When I asked DDJ if I could do a ride-along to observe how he worked, he declined and said, "I can tell you what the process is like. It is way simpler than you think." It was true. The process was not too complicated to comprehend. What I would like to point out was that the way driver and passenger, as co-ethnic strangers,

communicate before – and, as I will elaborate in the next section, during – the ride adds a meaningful layer to the ride-hailing platforms as operated in Metro Vancouver. The note section in the driver's profile and the phone call prior to the ride give space for direct communication between driver and passenger. As I will discuss in the next section, the driver-passenger relationship powered by WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms is different from that on the more standardized and well-known platforms like Uber and Didi. The space where this relationship is built is full of possibilities for building conversations and networks.

4.3. Sharing a temporary space with a co-ethnic stranger

Although one of the well-known platforms, Kabu, claimed that they did not have a policy that required drivers to take only Chinese as passengers, most drivers I interviewed mentioned that the platforms had encouraged or advised them not to take non-Chinese passengers to avoid being caught by police disguised as passengers. (The driver might face heavy fines as a result). What I want to emphasize here is that as most drivers and passengers who use the platforms are Chinese-speaking international students and migrants, their relationship is coded in a way different from the relationship with Uber drivers, say, in the United States or with Chinese drivers back in China. In this study, both driver and passenger speak the same language, use more or less the same series of social media apps, treat both China and Canada as the dual contexts of their lives consciously or unconsciously, and belong to the same local Chinese community – no matter how diverse the community is. In other words, they are "*tong bao*", or co-ethnic or co-national in English. Previous literature has discussed how co-ethnic Chinese often flock together and come up with various support services and organizations (see Chapter 1). However, in the specific context of WeChat-based ride-hailing, the relationship between the co-ethnic driver and passenger is not entirely the same as the co-ethnic Chinese who tend to flock together at school[66], in church or around diasporic economic centres like Chinatowns. There is a service element to the relationship between the co-ethnic driver and passenger, who may be strangers meeting each other

[66] In Gomes' (2018) *Siloed Diversity*, she touched upon the commonplace phenomenon in Singapore that Chinese international students tend to flock together. She also finds the difference in social media use between Chinese students and local Singaporean students or other international students makes it challenging for Chinese students to integrate and adapt to the local ways of life.

for the first time. Thus, their relationship is subtly different from both what has been studied about co-ethnic Chinese who tend to gather together and find mutual support as co-ethnic and the pure service provider-client relationship in regular ride-hailing contexts. In this section, I would like to showcase the temporary space shared between driver and passenger as co-ethnic strangers *en route* in the context of WeChat-based ride-hailing through several stories I collected from the field.

Before entering the field, my understanding was that the ride-hailing space *en route* was a space of networking and communication. For on the several rides I took before starting the study, the drivers were almost all outgoing and talkative. We entered conversations easily. We talked about anything from the ride-hailing industry in Metro Vancouver, our respective schools, majors and programs, our hometowns back in China, to our future plans, for example, whether we would stay in Vancouver after graduation. Sometimes, the drivers would even ask if they could add me on WeChat so the next time I needed a ride I would no longer need to use the platform. Just give them a message or a call, and they would be able to pick me up with even a cheaper rate. Although I turned down the offers at that time, I got the impression that communication in a casual engaging chat was quite a natural part of a ride, and active networking like friending each other on WeChat was commonplace.

But my fieldwork subverted my "impression" of the ride-hailing space in multiple ways. One of the first revelations was that the communicative activity varied from person to person. Not every one of the rides was a pleasant experience chatting with another Chinese student or immigrant. For example, on one of my rides from the Burnaby Campus of SFU to Metropolis Metrotown, I encountered a driver who spoke no more than three sentences to me from the moment he called me before arriving at the pick-up point until I paid him and got out of his car. In addition, my fieldwork, as I will explain below, revealed more subtleties in this temporary space on the move.

Fieldnotes: *The silent driver*

The call was hung up. Staring at the screen, I thought to myself, this sounded like a professional driver, who would not speak a single redundant word. I walked slowly to Bamboo Garden Restaurant next to Starbucks at the northeast corner of the campus. One car was approaching. Was that him? I asked myself. Yet he made a left turn after

passing the restaurant. Maybe not. I was wrong. It was him, parking at the side of the entrance of the parking lot near the restaurant with his engine still on. I walked to the passenger seat and waved at him. You ordered a ride? He asked. Yes, I said while getting into the car. He put into gear, turned left and drove downhill. A few minutes after choosing to sit in the passenger seat, I started to regret it. This driver made no attempt to speak! He was listening to a radio station which was playing English light pop songs. I could not tell why, but he had an air around him signaling to me that he did not want to engage in any conversation. In order not to feel awkward, I started to play with my phone – checking emails, replying messages and scrolling my WeChat friends' moments. Gladly, it was before the rush hour and the trip ended within just thirty minutes.

This silent driver was not the only one who broke my presumptions about the drivers as well as the temporary space of the ride. One of the drivers I interviewed, ZZZZ, also described himself as an introvert driver. "Usually I don't chat with passengers. Maybe the northerners would prefer being talkative." (Interview with ZZZZ, 2018, August 3) "The northerners" refers to the Chinese population living in the northern part of China[67] and it is a popularly held view that northerners are stereotypically more outgoing and talkative than people from the southern part of the country.

Not falling into the talkative type, nevertheless, does not mean that ZZZZ did not converse with passengers beyond the inevitable communication regarding location, time and fare. ZZZZ revealed to me that he once got along well with a girl who often took his rides. After a few rides, he started to pick up the girl to school and he kept doing that for several months. While ZZZZ was one of those drivers who see themselves as the opposite of being outgoing or talkative, even ZZZZ could engage in conversations and develop networks in the ride-hailing space. Then what are the factors that prompt the driver and the passenger to become contacts in Vancouver's Chinese networks, friends, or establish even more intimate relationships?

Chatting seems to be an essential ingredient in the space of ride-hailing. According to DDJ, communication during the ride is a mutual act. "If you said something and he or she kept playing with his or her phone, you would know that they didn't want to

[67] However, the border between the north and the south has been controversial for centuries. People from the same province or from provinces of similar latitudes could have different opinions on whether they should identify with "the northerner" or "the southerner".

chat with you at all" (2018, July 28). The driver Zack also described his principle as the following, "Chat more if I find I have a lot to talk with the passenger and chat less if they are not that chat-able" (2018, August 18). In this sense, the conversation is not only important for sharing information. It is also a critical way to observe and assess the passenger – whether "I", the driver, should continue the conversation, whether "I" should change the topic, and in some cases whether "I" should ask the passenger to add "me" on WeChat.

What I just described, from the driver's perspective, might be one-sided and thus a little misleading, since the communication should be reciprocal. The passenger Rebecca told me about her experience of encountering a driver who she found very difficult and even uncomfortable to speak to. *Liao bu lai*, meaning having awkward conversation or having little to say to interest each other, was the phrase she used to describe her encounter with the driver.

> "Last time I returned to Vancouver, at the airport, I hailed a ride for my mom and me from Raccoon Go. The driver was probably close to his forties. Age-wise he was a little old [compared to other drivers]. He chatted with us. He began by saying how he dislike Vancouver and wanted to return to China and stuff. And then he talked about the bad atmosphere of marijuana smoking in Vancouver, cannabis legalization and topics that we obviously had no interests in. He kept pushing the direction of the conversation to politics. He was worried that his children would pick up bad habits here and he felt like sending them back to China. Later he got so engrossed in his own opinions that both my mom and I became speechless." (Interview with Rebecca, 2018, October 13)

The chat, however, is not the only ingredient in the communication within the mobile space of the ride. Other factors also have roles in the space. [emoji] was an outgoing young man in his last year of an undergraduate program at a public university in Burnaby. Although his great sense of humor made me laugh with him throughout the interview, he said he had never exchanged WeChat contact information with any of his passengers. Though he had just started to work as a ride-hailing driver several months prior to the interview, he did not attribute the reason that he never friended passengers on WeChat to his limited service time in the business, but to something quite interesting. "I…you know…don't have a good look. Handsome people like ZZZZ, I know he used to know a girl [from his rides] and had been picking up her to school. I…haha…no way…" (Interview with [emoji], 2018, October 27). Thus for [emoji], the appearance was also a very important factor, among other factors, to determine whether the short ride would

turn to be the beginning of a different relationship – a relationship that no longer needs to be brokered by the platform. Since he considered himself as not attractive, [emoji] did not think such a relationship would be possible for him.

Personal appearance may preoccupy some, but is not generally counted as among the top factors determining whether a connection can be formed or whether WeChat contacts can be exchanged. As implied in Rebecca's story, age, in contrast, could influence the content of the conversation as well as its outcome, though there is complication even here. According to the passenger Lily, she tended to talk about different topics with drivers of different ages. With drivers who looked older, their conversations were often around the banal old-fashioned topics, for example, "how long have you been in Vancouver", or "what job do you do". In contrast, when talking to younger drivers who were her peers, their topics would be less about their personal histories. Rather, they would share information about having fun in Metro Vancouver – like "where do you go for fun" and "how do you like that popular restaurant" (Interview with Lily, 2018, November 6). Although Lily distinguished the drivers by age, age may not the only determinant factor even in the examples she gave. Age can be an indirect indicator of the time when those drivers immigrated to Canada and the immigration programs that were available at that time. Also of significance is whether they are new immigrants who landed some years ago and now stay in Metro Vancouver with their families, whether they are international students who are still in school or who have just graduated and are looking for jobs. One step further, age may reflect the drivers' media habits – Where do they get the information? From Chinese-language community newspapers that people can pick up at the colorful newspaper boxes at the entrance of Skytrains? From news websites? Or from social media like WeChat? What are they concerned about? International headlines? Immigration policies? Information about the newly opened restaurants, bubble tea shops and supermarkets in Metro Vancouver? Or the hip-hop TV show that was recently popular in China?

Look, age, status and media use are all factors, to some extent, that characterize a driver and the extent to which he shares experiences and interests with passengers who are Chinese students. Nevertheless, the conversation within the closed moving space of the ride, can sometimes be affected by random factors. When describing her conversations with different drivers, Lily recalled that oftentimes their conversations would begin with discussing the traffic, her destinations, or "how's it going with the ride-

hailing business in general" (Interview with Lily, 2018, November 6). The answers to those questions, if based on facts, would be random. According to Lily, it was those random answers – for example, the random destination that she had to go to on that particular day with that particular ride – that initiated new topics of the conversation or pushed it forward. This "randomness" has also been brought up by drivers like DDJ. When I asked him if he had strategies to converse with the passengers. He said, "No. It's all ad hoc" (2018, July 28). By "ad hoc", DDJ meant that there were no routines to follow when he was encountering passengers of different ages, in different genders, or picking up the passenger from different locations to different destinations. There's no fixed ways to start a good conversation. For him, the best he could do was to be observant and ask questions that were appropriate to the situation – "Like, you can't ask someone who just came out of the airport 'have you had lunch?'. Can you?" (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28)

Therefore, depending on the factors mentioned, and not mentioned, above, the ride could become a social space where the driver and the passenger go beyond their driver-customer relationship and form new connections. Lily has a friend who drives for one of the ride-hailing platforms regularly. According to Lily, he made a lot of friends while driving by chatting with passengers and friending them on WeChat. Those friends, she said, could end up being very important, for they might find that the circles they built by chatting and networking might help them in the future (Interview with Lily, 2018, November 6). Lily has made an interesting point – networking with the driver, or with the passenger, may be helpful for careers, finding accommodations, or solving problems that Chinese students or immigrants frequently encounter. What underlines her point is one of the facts that has often been neglected in the coverage of "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" in Metro Vancouver: the relationship between the driver and the passenger is fundamentally different from the relationship between the driver and the passenger on other platforms like Uber or Didi. One question makes this point: Would you add your Uber driver on Facebook? In China, I would definitely not friend the Didi driver who picks me up on WeChat. Then how are the relationships different from one another? To put it in another way, what are the things that make the ride-hailing driver or the passenger a good network contact that "might help them in the future"? (Interview with Lily, 2018, November 6) One of the possible reasons is the multiple roles of these international student or immigrant drivers in Metro Vancouver. Being ride-hailing drivers is just part of

what they do and who they are. None of the drivers I interviewed considered ride-hailing a full-time job. Even some of the drivers – whom I observed during the rides – devoted multiple hours to driving for platforms, they had other work or business on the side. To some extent, the ride-hailing drivers have their own resources and networks – and in the case of international-student ride-hailing drivers, future resources and networks – that they can share with the networks they develop through the rides. Thus, different from the professionalized ride-hailing drivers, who drive for even over eight hours a day and whose life would seldom intersect with the lives of his or her passengers, the drivers and passengers in the case of WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver share a lot in common.[68] Their lives could easily intersect. Thus, their resources and networks can be meaningful for each other as well.

After deciding they are chat-able, one of the ways to secure this newly established relationship is to add each other on WeChat. You might ask, why WeChat? How is it different from, say, exchanging the phone numbers? As I mentioned when introducing the features and functions of WeChat in the introduction to the thesis, WeChat is more than a social messaging app. Different from WhatsApp, if you are friends with someone on WeChat, you can not only send them messages, the aspects of life that they selectively present on WeChat will also appear on your Friends' Moments. The Friends' Moments is similar to Facebook's News Feed, on which you can see what those "friends" have posted, whether it is a paragraph writing about their recent challenges at school, or a few photos or videos documenting how they spent the long weekend or a link to a WeChat article recommending top five hot pot places in Metro Vancouver.[69] If you are interested in one of your friends, just click their profile photo, and you will be redirected to their homepage with all the articles, photos, videos and links they have posted.[70] So when the passenger and the driver add each other on WeChat, they might think of their relationship as mere passengers and drivers who happened to

---

[68] As Philip said, "Most of those who order rides are our peers, schoolmates or those who just arrived in Vancouver. After talking, it is normal that sometimes people would like to friend each other on WeChat and continue the conversation." (2018, August 3)

[69] Stories on Friends' Moments are ranked in chronological order and advertisements appear only occasionally.

[70] Recently, WeChat users can categorize their contacts and give limited access to some of their posts and determine how many days of Friends' Moment posts others can view. They can choose to show all of the posts they have ever posted, only posts within the last 6 months, or only posts within the last 3 days.

get along, but as WeChat friends their posts show diverse aspects of their respective lives in Metro Vancouver, from which they may find that they turn out to share a lot in common with each other. The restaurant where the driver had a great dinner with his friends and posted photos about might be the one the passenger had always wanted to try. The passenger might post the hyped UNIQLO X KAWS T-shirts she bought that had already sold out a few minutes after the sale started at Metrotown's UNIQLO where some of the driver's friends had been lining up. On the day of the super long line-up, they might both see in their Friends' Moments photos of "people mountain people sea" lining up in the shopping centres in Burnaby, Richmond, Coquitlam and Surrey to get the UNIQLO X KAWS T-shirts – photos posted by their friends in Metro Vancouver, who might or might not know each other. For an international student driver, the writing-intensive course a student passenger complained about as too hard may have been the one he or she had taken and complained about in the same way. Not improbably, they might both studied in one of the tutoring centres in Metro Vancouver where instructors (who may well be international students themselves) teach the course content in Chinese and thus help students pass the exam or boost their GPAs.

In other words, by friending each other on WeChat, the driver and the passenger extend the connection made in the closed space of the ride to WeChat, where they become contacts not just in the virtual space, but also present themselves as fellow international students or fellow immigrants living in Metro Vancouver, who, on the part of the drivers, happen to work.

4.4. International student labour on/beyond the rides

In the last two sections, I discussed the social aspect of ride-hailing – how the platforms are designed and support rides in a way different from the more developed platforms like Uber and Didi. In other words, how their special design adds to social possibilities between drivers and passengers. A question that might be bothering the readers of this thesis is, why would these international students expand their networks in this "illegal" ride-hailing space of socialities? Why would these international students work several hours a week and do "illegal" activities, let alone face risks including fines as much as $1,150? It is the goal of this section to delineate the international students' rationales behind choosing ride-hailing as a part-time job in a context where international

students are not infrequently associated with stereotypes of ultra-rich kids who make extravagant purchases, buying luxury apparels and noisy racing cars.

4.4.1. Driving through the sleepless nights

Although the last section describes the ride as a social space between co-ethnic strangers who are often peers and even schoolmates, driving for ride-hailing platforms is not just about socializing and building networks. First it is a job and as a driver, the international student can encounter situations that do not necessarily follow the script of picking-up passengers, having conversations (or remaining silent), receiving payments and dropping passengers off at their destinations. In the following interview, ZZZZ described his labour of driving for one of the ride-hailing platforms and what that labour included in addition to driving and conversing with passengers (2018, August 3).

Me: How much time do you usually spend on Raccoon Go or other ride-hailing platforms?

ZZZZ: Probably two hours per day on average, two to three hours. Because I am like...I study in the day. At night, I am particularly energetic. At night, especially on the weekend, I would take some orders to or from places like bars in downtown. Many people go to dance and would order for rides when it's late. The traffic is light at night and I can't sleep anyway. So I study and take orders when they come.

Me: So you do ride-hailing for around two to three hours per night on average?

ZZZZ: Approximately. Maybe a bit more. Three to four hours.

Me: Since you regularly take orders to or from clubs, would you meet difficult passengers or troublesome situations?

ZZZZ: Oh yes. There are passengers that are extremely drunk and act crazy, or passengers smoke marijuana. They could be doing anything.

Me: Even smoking marijuana in your car?

ZZZZ: Yes.

Me: Are they Chinese international students?

ZZZZ: Yes.

Honestly, I did not know what to say after he described what his labour was like. There was so much more involved other than driving around the city and making money "by the way", which was often said to be one of the advantages of this job in both the platforms' advertisements and the drivers' comments. I was, therefore, interested in the reason behind ZZZZ's choice of part-time job. To give a fuller account of his rationale, I asked ZZZZ to talk about why he chose to be a ride-hailing driver and what other jobs he as a Chinese international student can do in Metro Vancouver.

4.4.2. ZZZZ's job list

When I asked ZZZZ to talk about the part-time jobs he and other international students usually do in Metro Vancouver, he smiled, "Well, I have tried many" (2018, August 3). He seemed to be proud of himself doing part-time jobs while completing schoolwork. According to his own experience and that of those around him, he wrote down a list of 10 jobs: 1) dish washer; 2) waiter; 3) food-delivery driver; 4) ride-hailing driver; 5) assistant cook; 6) sales; 7) WeChat blogger; 8) agent (which he clarified later to be an associate working at a local education or immigration agency); 9) private chef; 10) bank (which he specified later as being a teller or receptionist at local bank branches).

Although ZZZZ admitted he had not tried every job he listed, he had done most of them in his past six years as a student in Metro Vancouver. As a university student who actively engaged with both the campus and the community, ZZZZ always made his schedule very full with schoolwork, campus events, community volunteer or paid work, as well as part-time jobs, sometimes, having more than one simultaneously. As we can see from his explanation of the job experiences below, different part-time jobs have different requirements for immigration statuses, skills and time commitments. Those jobs, at the same time, also showcase the life experiences of international students with their intersections with the diasporic communities, transnational capital[71] and the local mainstream economy.

[71] Martin (2017) uses "transnational capital" to explain why and how Chinese students in Australia can make money by selling cosmetics, nutrition products and infant formula from Australian drugstores to people in China and set up and run this transnational import/export business on their own.

The following is ZZZZ's explanation of the jobs on his list:

Dishwasher and waiter: "First, dishwasher and waiter. Dishwashing is usually for new-coming students. They don't have SIN card. At first, they can only do black labour. As dishwashers are always at the backside of the kitchen, they won't be seen by anyone."

"A dishwasher gets the minimum wage, sometimes even less than that. For a waiter, it is the minimum wage plus tips. The income [of waiter] is not bad. It also depends on the restaurant."

Food-delivery driver: "Food-delivery was what I had been doing at this Pizza place. When there was no order, I helped them clean [the restaurant]. When there was an order, I would put the pizza in the bag, drive to *laowai*'s (literally translates to "the foreigner") place, pass the pizza to him and get paid … All of the tip would be mine…Sometimes a food-delivery driver earns more than being a waiter. It depends on the restaurant. For Chinese restaurants, *laowai* give less tips. For *laowai*'s restaurants, they give more [tips]."

Ride-hailing driver: According to ZZZZ, being a food-delivery driver for a restaurant requires regular time commitment.

In comparison, being a driver on ride-hailing platforms is freer. "You log on when you want to log on. You don't take orders when you don't want to", ZZZZ summarized.

Sales: As "sales" was a general term, I asked ZZZZ for some clarification. What kinds of sales did he or his fellow international students do? What did they sell? "Like selling clothes…Some sell on WeChat and some work at local stores, like Metrotown. Some of my schoolmates or other international students who graduated earlier would often work as a sales for one year after they graduate." For sales activities on WeChat, ZZZZ gave an example, like ride-hailing, was also on the radar of local regulation. "Private chef, also, is what a lot of my schoolmates do. They make meals in their own kitchens and then sell them to fellow international students."

Assistant cook: "At kitchen, labour is divided. There are dish washers, cleaners, the chef. An assistant cook helps the chef to prepare and do some basic processing of food."

WeChat blogger: "[They] just write articles for public accounts."

Agent: At first, ZZZZ just wrote down the word, *zhong jie*, meaning "agent", on the paper. Yet like the meaning of "agent" in English, *zhong jie* is a general concept in Chinese. So I asked him what kind of agent he was referring to, the real estate agent? ZZZZ said, "That would be very high-level. Just an education agent. Helping people to apply for visas, for permit extension or for immigration." In Metro Vancouver, there were numerous education and immigration agencies which provide services helping international students, workers, immigrants and others prepare immigration

> documents, file applications and apply for schools. Yet I have also heard that there are people who do businesses as individuals, providing similar services, rather than working as an associate affiliated to an immigration or education company. I asked ZZZZ if he meant students like him would contact clients directly and work for pay by preparing applications or other documents for them, or they would work at existing immigration or education agencies. “At agencies”, ZZZZ confirmed.
>
> Bank: “When it comes to bank work, those whose English is good enough and who have strong enough communicative abilities, can even get their offers when still studying at school. Just send the resume to places like TD and Scotiabank, and you’ll very probably get the chance to work as a teller or receptionist.”
>
> After ZZZZ’s explanation about all those jobs he or his friends or schoolmates had done or had been doing, I asked him to rank them. Although ride-hailing did enter the top three, it was far from being the most wanted part-time job for ZZZZ. Instead, it was more like a flexible supplement.
>
> “Different people would have different ideas. Like working at a bank, the income is not very good, just a little higher than the minimum wage. Yet, you can learn a lot. It would also make your work experience look good on your CV. Therefore, if I am to choose, all things considered, this will be the best. In fact, jobs can overlap. For example, I can work at a bank in the daytime and then work as a driver at night. Sales would be my second choice, and, driver, the third.”

ZZZZ’s answer above already makes it clear why he chose to be a ride-hailing driver as one of his part-time jobs. The income is okay. The time is flexible. What is more, the basic requirements for the job, according to ZZZZ, are not too high. “You just need to have a car”, which, compared to the requirements of other jobs, say, high language proficiency, professional skills or relevant work experience, is comparatively easy to satisfy for him. Most importantly, he can be a driver at night while accumulating work experience in other positions during the day. He said he did not enjoy talking to passengers during the rides and he did not think he was benefiting much in other aspects from being a driver, especially being a driver on what he called “*huaren*” ride-hailing platforms. From his perspective, he worked as a driver on the platform mostly for its income and flexibility.

As an international student who also did part-time jobs besides academic study, I was shocked by the list. To put it more accurately, I was shocked at ZZZZ’s familiarity with such a variety of jobs and at the rich experiences and hard labour that such familiarity clearly bespoke. Listening to him as he gave detailed descriptions of each job

he had done, I could imagine what a tight schedule he had at that time with schoolwork, campus and community engagements and all those part-time jobs. According to ZZZZ, many of his peers did part-time jobs on a regular basis and some of them, like ZZZZ, would do more than one job at a time.

In addition to actively seeking for opportunities to relieve their families' economic pressure to finance their studies abroad, students desire more than financial gain from part-time jobs. Like ZZZZ, they may also look for work experience that could be written on their CVs, boost their profiles and acquire knowledge and skills that would help to pave the way to satisfactory future careers. However, part-time jobs of this kind, benefiting in multifold ways, are hard to find. On the one hand, due to their status as international students, choices available to them are limited, as they are subject to certain restrictions, for example, the restriction on the maximum hours permitted for off-campus employment. On the other hand, as international students seeking jobs in the local host society, the requirements of English language proficiency, previous work experience, and professional capabilities may all be disadvantages for them.

In contrast to the limited access to such part-time jobs as ZZZZ's favorite – working as a teller at a local bank – there are abundant opportunities for Chinese international students to find part-time jobs by taking advantage of their membership in the diasporic or ethnic community, and recently their transnational capital. 4 of the 10 jobs ZZZZ listed (dish washer, waiter, assistant cook and agent) are jobs related to diasporic or ethnic economy. Certainly, to be a dish washer or waiter, the international student does not have to work at a Chinese restaurant. Yet as discussed by Martin (2017), in the context of Australia, diasporic economies like Chinese restaurant businesses, are a grey zone in urban regulation and serve as a common haven for underground and vulnerable labour like workers who are international students. In the meanwhile, 3 jobs (ride-hailing driver, sales and WeChat blogger) on the list require the employed international student to be familiar with WeChat and the connected life experiences in China. Martin (2017) observed that female international students from China in Melbourne, Australia utilize their transnational capital to do parallel trading where they make the supply of Australian commodities, especially health products and cosmetics, available to customers in China through WeChat and in this way relieve the financial burden of their families. Although ZZZZ's list does not mention parallel trading as a regular part-time job for Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver, those

jobs on his list – being a ride-hailing driver on WeChat-based platforms, selling home-cooked meals on WeChat, or writing articles for WeChat public accounts – more or less require transnational capital. They not only need to know WeChat, more importantly, they have to know how to utilize WeChat and their memberships as intensive WeChat users to make money, acquire the necessary job skills and gain work experience.

It is not uncommon for international students to work part-time jobs in their host society. This aspect of experience in their overseas education, especially in the context of Chinese international students in Canada, however, has rarely been discussed. Although ZZZZ's list of part-time jobs does not paint a full picture of the Chinese international student labour in Metro Vancouver, it reflects, from his own perspective, the complexity of the issue and the need for further exploration.

4.4.3. A "flexible" job

When discussing how they were drawn to the job of ride-hailing, my participants kept repeating the word "flexibility" or its synonyms when telling their stories. Those stories of "flexibility", however, seem to be different from the stories I read in the advertorials or ordinary advertisements of more well-known platforms like Uber and Didi. Indeed, Uber and Didi foreground the "flexibility" of the job to attract drivers. Uber, for instance, explains "flexibility" as the freedom to design one's working schedule in heart-warming language of individual empowerment:

> "Need something outside the 9 to 5? As an independent contractor with Uber, you've got freedom and flexibility to drive whenever you have time. Set your own schedule, so you can be there for all of life's most important moments." (Retrieved on August 20, 2019)

To promote their ride-hailing job as "flexible and decent", Uber's ex-competitor[72] in China, Didi Chuxing, told a similar empowerment story with Chinese characteristics:

> Previously, Driver Zhao worked as a full-time chauffer at a local *danwei*[73]. But the middle-aged man faced multiple crises. His parents got sick. His

[72] Uber was once the biggest competitor of Didi in China. Yet around August 2016, Didi merged with Uber and Uber left the market of PRC.

[73] *Danwei* refers to the place of employment. The word has strong Chinese characteristics and usually has stronger association with state-owned enterprises. Thus when Driver Zhao said he was once a chauffer at a local *danwei*, he was probably a chauffer for government officials or staff at a state-owned institution.

> only child also came to school age. So he quitted the job at the *danwei* and signed up with Didi. Working at Didi had a flexible schedule. Now he can make money, which is not any the less than the last full-time job brought him; and he has also the time to take care of his family.[74] (Retrieved on August 20, 2019)

The ride-hailing platforms in Metro Vancouver seem to replicate in one way or another the empowerment stories of "flexibility" told by Uber and Didi and thus brand themselves as professional ride-hailing platforms like those better-known names. One of the platforms' recent slogans to recruit drivers, as described at the beginning of this thesis, is "Why should you choose to join Raccoon Go? This is a magical money-making tool with flexible working schedule".

Despite the similar branding strategy, the drivers in Vancouver, however, seem to form a different relationship with the platforms. They told unique stories reflecting the context of the local business environment with factors like the lack of effective control over registered drivers due to the current illegal status of ride-hailing in Vancouver.

What those drivers said about their work experience and their lives differ drastically from both the individual empowerment stories celebrated by ride-hailing platforms – and more broadly the neoliberalist economy – as well as the stories showing the dark side of flexibility underlined by Uber critics (Chee, 2018; Rosenblat, 2018). The two sides of flexibility – the empowering side and the dark side – do play their parts in the student-drivers' working lives. For example, the flexibility of the job made it almost impossible for any of my participants to pin down a specific meeting time and place for an interview in advance, which might be one of the ways in which the so-called flexibility of the job overwhelms other needs and opportunities of their lives while the platforms tend to reiterate the empowering side of their stories. Nevertheless, through strategic engagement, these international students use the "magical money-making tool" in a variety of ways and give new meanings to the "flexibility" of ride-hailing, whose meaning is shaped by their life experience as Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver.

For ZZZZ, driving for a ride-hailing platform was one of the few jobs he could do at night, when he could not sleep. For a long period of time, even if ZZZZ stayed up till very late and had but a few hours' sleep, he would not feel any negative effect of

[74] The story is from Didi's recruitment page on WeChat. The story is originally written in Chinese and is translated to English by the researcher. The data was retrieved on August 20, 2019.

insomnia the next day. As a versatile and energetic student actively engaged on campus and in the community, he used to make his schedules very full. During the daytime, he participated in all kinds of campus events and volunteer work. At night, however, there were few things he could do to fill the two to three hours when he wanted neither to sleep nor study. Having heard that ride-hailing platforms had many orders at midnight because people going to bars and clubs would need rides, he registered on one of the biggest ride-hailing platforms that was well-known among his friends and started to work as a ride-hailing driver for a couple of hours every night. (Interview with ZZZZ, 2018, August 3)

The "benefits" this "flexible" ride-hailing job brought to DDJ were different from those of ZZZZ. Among the 4 jobs that DDJ believed a Chinese international student like himself could do in Metro Vancouver – "Ride-hailing, food delivery, waiter, parallel trading" (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28) – ride-hailing was rated the best in the spiritual dimension but the runner-up in terms of material gain. Being a waiter at a local restaurant, instead, was the most profitable part-time job but also meant having a relatively fixed schedule and long hours of work each week. The long hours would bring higher income; yet one's life would also be bound up with the working schedule. In contrast, ride-hailing offered more freedom and, as DDJ frequently emphasized in our conversation, flexibility. You could work as little or as much as you were willing to; and the income is determined by the hours you have committed. I asked DDJ, "So if you work for more hours, you would have a better income as a ride-hailing driver than a waiter?" He replied with a rhetorical question: "if people like me are willing to work many hours every day, why would we do ride-hailing in the first place?" (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28) Here DDJ seemed to suggest that if he was willing to work for three to four hours a day, he would be able to make more money. As there are over 15,000[75] Chinese international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the Lower Mainland[76] (Heslop, 2018), he was not worrying about not being able to find customers if

[75] The figure is calculated from the data in the report of Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training, "International student in BC's education systems: Summary of research from the student transitions project" (Heslop, 2018). The specific data used from the report includes the number of international students enrolled in post-secondary institutions in BC, the percentage of Chinese international students, and the percentage of those enrolled in institutions in Lower Mainland of BC.

[76] Most of the customers for these ride-hailing platforms are Chinese international students. The figure of Chinese international students in Metro Vancouver to some extent shows the size of the market. However, the figure cannot represent the actual customer base as some students may

he worked for longer hours. He simply did not want to work that much time or on a regularly basis. To work whenever he wanted and in what frequency he liked seemed to be a very important reason for him to join ride-hailing platforms as a driver.

For DDJ, "flexibility" meant he was free from a fixed work schedule and could thus determine when and where to take an order. It meant that he could choose the orders that worked best with his personal schedule and thus made money "by the way". He did not make very much from working on ride-hailing platforms because he decided not to work that much.

> "Say I am at Lougheed and I want to go to SFU to study for my finals. I am ordered to go to Metrotown, where I don't want to go. Then I will tell the passenger that I may need half an hour to get to that destination and they can switch to another driver if they would love to. I take rides that match my destination and schedule. That's my strategy." (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28)

DDJ consciously made use of the resources and opportunities provided by the platform and made them work for him. Despite being registered as a driver on the platform, DDJ did not go out of his way to obtain orders. He had his own schedule of life, for instance, preparing for finals or looking for jobs. Driving for money was not the priority.

In Metro Vancouver, the ride-hailing platform economy is officially banned and most underground ride-hailing platforms are operated by recently-established local start-ups rather than more professionalized transportation companies like Uber. In this context, "flexibility" also means that drivers are not effectively supervised or regulated by the platforms where they have registered. According to DDJ, once registered as a driver, one can maintain that identity forever. Even if he may not want to take any order for weeks or months to come, "there is no reason to delete the [driver's] app" (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28). He would choose to keep it, just in case he wants to do one ride or two someday. As discussed in Chapter 3, such "flexibility" resulting from the lack of control of platforms over registered users provided more room for drivers to engage with the platform – and the community connected by the platform – creatively. Nevertheless, such "flexibility" may result in the platforms facing loss, crisis and even destruction.

---

take public transit and some may have cars. The actual customer base is important and to get the actual number, further research needs to be conducted, for example, by conducting a larger-scale study and by forming trusting relationships with the operation platforms.

4.4.4. For the flexibility, but also for the money

In the previous section, I focus on "flexibility" as one of the most referenced reasons for signing up as a ride-hailing driver. "Flexibility", however, is not the only reason. Although ZZZZ did not comment on his own financial motivation for joining the trade of ride-hailing while studying in Metro Vancouver, he revealed the financial rationales for some international students who chose to work as ride-hailing drivers: make money and drive good cars (Interview with ZZZZ, 2018, August 3).

> ZZZZ: "On the ride-hailing platforms here, actually you would find that many cars, especially if put in China[77], are really good, high-end cars. There are the 5 series, the 6 series, and even Porsche or fairly luxurious cars."
>
> Me: Does Raccoon Go has such cars?
>
> ZZZZ: Yes. All ride-hailing platforms have these cars. These types of cars are generally driven by international students. New immigrants generally would not drive such good [cars]. For new immigrants, they choose cars that can best save money for them. Maybe international students, young people, are keen on face-saving. They may want a good car, but their family may not give them that much money. So they rely on themselves and satisfy their own wishes by driving for platforms. It's also like standing on their own feet. A good thing, I think. In this way, you can buy a better car and [the money you make from ride-hailing] can also offset some life expenses.

According to ZZZZ, the stereotype of Chinese international students being so rich that a lot of them drive luxury vehicles and dress themselves in luxury brands has been formed because a tiny fraction of the Chinese international student population is extravagant. A lot of students come from middle-class and lower-middle class families. Besides keeping up with their academic performance at school, they have to do part-time jobs to offset the spectacular cost of studying and living in Metro Vancouver. On the other hand, the luxury vehicles these students drive may not be as expensive as one might assume. According to ZZZZ, leasing certain models of good cars like BMW,

---

[77] China charges high taxes on luxury cars. As a result, the prices for these luxury cars in Canada are a lot cheaper. In addition to the phenomenon of international students from China driving luxury cars in Canada, the incredible price gap of luxury cars between Canada and China also led to the grey market of luxury car export. For details, see Proctor's (2019, May 29) report on CBC, "'Do not be duped': BMW targets 'straw buyers' in race to stop luxury SUV exports" and Pearson's (2019, May 7) report on Bloomberg, "Dirty Cash Probe Finds Booming Vancouver-China Luxury Car Trade".

Mercedes and Audi would cost students $400 to $500 every month[78], which they can earn from their part-time jobs. They may look rich driving these vehicles but their rich-looking appearances also depend on their labour as and also beyond working as drivers. (Interview with ZZZZ, 2018, August 3)

4.5. The space of "illegal Richmond ride-hailing"

At the beginning of this chapter, I discussed how the environment of the WeChat-based ride-hailing was precarious for the drivers registered on those platforms. Following the first section, I moved away from the narrow view of the crackdown narrative and the "ethnic exclusive" criticism as evident in the local English media and presented a picture that distinguishes the so-called "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" from established and better-known ride-hailing platforms like Uber and Didi. The way the users of the platform navigate the digital interfaces on WeChat, the social possibilities for making connections with other co-ethnic strangers during the transient shared space of the ride, and the labour drivers perform to utilize the "flexibility" of ride-hailing, however, cannot tell the full story of ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver. Where these rides and where the controversy are happening is equally important. In this section, I will describe the spaces of ride-hailing, the spaces where such underground business are boldly visible and where the rides draw invisible and culturally meaningful routes through the complex landscape of Metro Vancouver.

4.5.1. The "underground" business that boldly advertises

A quick scan of English news media's coverage of WeChat-based ride-hailing in BC will lead to names such as "the illegal Richmond ride-hailing company" "secret Chinese ride-hailing services" "underground ride-sharing services" … Adjectives like "illegal" "secret" and "underground", however, present a problematic framing of the space ride-hailing occupies in Metro Vancouver.

To start, what does "underground" mean when it is used to define WeChat-based ride-hailing services? If we borrow Canada Revenue Agency (CRA)'s definition,

[78] The monthly lease price would be possible with a significant down payment. The total expense for the car should also include monthly insurance and gas.

“underground” economy refers to “any activity not reported for income tax and GST/HST purposes” (Government of Canada, 2019, January 7). Sometimes called “moonlighting or working for cash or working under the table”, underground economy includes “not reported or under reported income from…money earned through the sharing economy, such as renting out a room of your home and ride sharing” (Government of Canada, 2019, January 7). Since ride-hailing has not been legalized in BC and thus no such income would be reported for tax purposes, ride-hailing in BC seems to fit easily into the category of underground economy. The word “underground”, nevertheless, has connotations not entirely covered in CRA’s definition of “underground economy”. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “underground” as an adjective means “in or into hiding or secret operation” and as a noun it refers to “a subterranean space or channel” (Underground, n.d.). Thus, in addition to not or under reporting taxes, being “underground” means these ride-hailing services operate in secrecy. Do they?

As an international student, I have encountered the presence of such “secret” ride-hailing, in its various forms, on a regular basis in various spaces, including spaces that are as legitimate as public universities or Cineplex theatres, the surprise of which pushed me to reconsider the concept of “underground”.

One night in August 2018, I went to the SilverCity Riverport Cinemas located at the southeast corner of Richmond, BC, which was one of the few Cineplex cinemas that regularly present some of the recent popular Mandarin films in Metro Vancouver. That night, a friend and I went to watch a Mandarin film called “Go Brother” that was trendy in Mainland China at that time. We arrived at Auditorium 8 about five minutes before the official start time of the film. One of the pre-screening advertisements, however, caught my attention. The advertisement was composed of multiple shots of the same girl getting into uber-like rides again and again. Each shot reflected a different stage in the girl’s life in Canada and each ride was taken at different time of the day and under different weather conditions. In one shot, the girl held lots of binders in her arms and seemed to be coming out of a classroom. In another shot, she had tears in her eyes but, when she received a phone call from her mother during the ride, she tried to conceal her sob and low spirits, comforted her mother and said she’s doing all right. In one of the last shots, it seemed that the girl already graduated from school and had started to work. Holding a box of files, the girl in her smart casual dress looked mature but upset. She got into the vehicle and laid back to the leather rear seat, again with tears in her eyes. The

advertisement did not include too many ambient sounds or the voices of the drivers, who in each shot took the girl to her home. Instead, a phrase in Mandarin meaning “treat yourself better today” was repeated in a soft, heart-warming voice. At the end, four bold letters in black emerged from a pure white background: K, A, B, U. Beneath the name of the ride-hailing platform was a line in Chinese characters with a smaller size – “Every time we set off, we spare no effort.” I was not sure whether this line was designed to promote the passion and effort that KABU, as a platform, and its drivers put in for every ride, or to reflect “pain points” the advertisement tries to capture – the state of mind of the international student at each stage of life in Canada (from studying alone in Canada, graduating from university to encountering challenges in work). Maybe both. What startled me most was that such an advertisement of “underground” ride-hailing service was played as one of the pre-screen commercials in an auditorium of Cineplex, which operates over 160 chain cinemas across Canada and has its headquarter in Toronto, Ontario.

The so-called “underground” ride-hailing platforms also surface in spaces that are difficult to be described as secret: the posters can be found on local public universities’ bulletin boards. The bulletin boards at public universities like SFU are spaces of varying sizes where students and others can paste posters on to monochromatic surfaces made of wood, cement or other materials. One day when I was walking past the meters’ long wooden bulletin board on the cement wall next to the entrance of my university’s main library, I was drawn to the board, which was so colorful because of the overlapping posters in multiple styles and languages. Three groups of identical posters in the center right position grabbed my attention. The top line of posters were already half covered by a line of four identical white posters advertising for free workshops. The upper half that was left uncovered and written in light blue and red Chinese characters was “Buy Chinese commodities online and mail to Canada”. Underneath these big-sized characters were some supplemental information in smaller characters: “Arrive at the overseas customer’s doorstep in three days the fastest’”. The white posters advertising free workshops were themselves half covered by a line of six identical posters advertising *shan song*, literally translating to “Lightning Delivery”, which was a recently launched food delivery service powered by KABU (which KABU names “KABU EATS”). The posters, as the name of the food delivery service, feature the lightning color scheme of black and yellow, lightning bow symbols and the slogan of

“lightning speed, deliver attitude”. In the center of the posters were a QR code, if scanned through WeChat, WeChat users would be redirected to the public account of KABU and be able to use the *shan song* food delivery service (KABU EATS) right away. At the very bottom of the posters, *shan song* showed off the variety of their payment options using the signs of MasterCard, VISA, Union Pay, AliPay and WeChat Pay together. Beneath the *shan song* posters were also six posters of KABU, but for their ride-hailing service. Compared to the food delivery posters, these posters were designed in less of a creative, cartoonish style. The upper half of the posters were a photo taken from the perspective of the driver of the left side mirror and the wooded landscape that the vehicle was passing by. In the side mirror was the typical snow mountain scene that someone can easily find in Google Images after typing in “Vancouver”, or more so “Vancouver landscape”, in Google search. It seemed that the photo was taken in the dusk when the main tone was dark blue against some yellow, orange and pink sunset glows. Against the dusk-toned photo was two lines of Chinese characters in handwritten style: “Every time we set off, we spare no effort”. The bottom half of the poster was mostly white, with four lines of key information in Chinese characters of varying sizes: “KABU”, “Your No.1 Ride-hailing Platform”, “GVRD·Victoria” and at the bottom “Our sincere service is available wherever you are”. At the bottom of the posters were a black strip with KABU’s symbol on top – a specially designed “K”, a paragraph of fairly small characters and two QR codes. Surrounding these posters of KABU’s food delivery and ride-hailing services were posters of a variety of topics: on the left of these posters were overlapped colorful ones promoting “Psychology Research Lab Fair 2018” “Clothing Drive” “SFU WYNS” “Essay Better” “Marketing In Focus 2018” “Join The GSS Executive Team” “Welcome Back BBQ” “Third Language Programming” and a simple advertisement printed on a letter-sized paper looking for roommate. On the right side of the KABU posters, there were posters for “Christmas Cantata Vancouver” “CAPUMA’s 6^{TH} Annual Winter Social”, four posters advertising for SFU’s Halloween parties at the Burnaby Campus and the Vancouver Campus, themed in “phantom” and “scream” respectively, and CJSF’s poster with the bold letters spelling out, “Get Involved”, in the center left position. The posters at the top of the wooden bulletin board were mostly torn off. Only a few words – “BIBLE” “TUTOR” “MATH” “Student Party” and the Chinese character “*lao shi*”, meaning “instructor” – were recognizable.

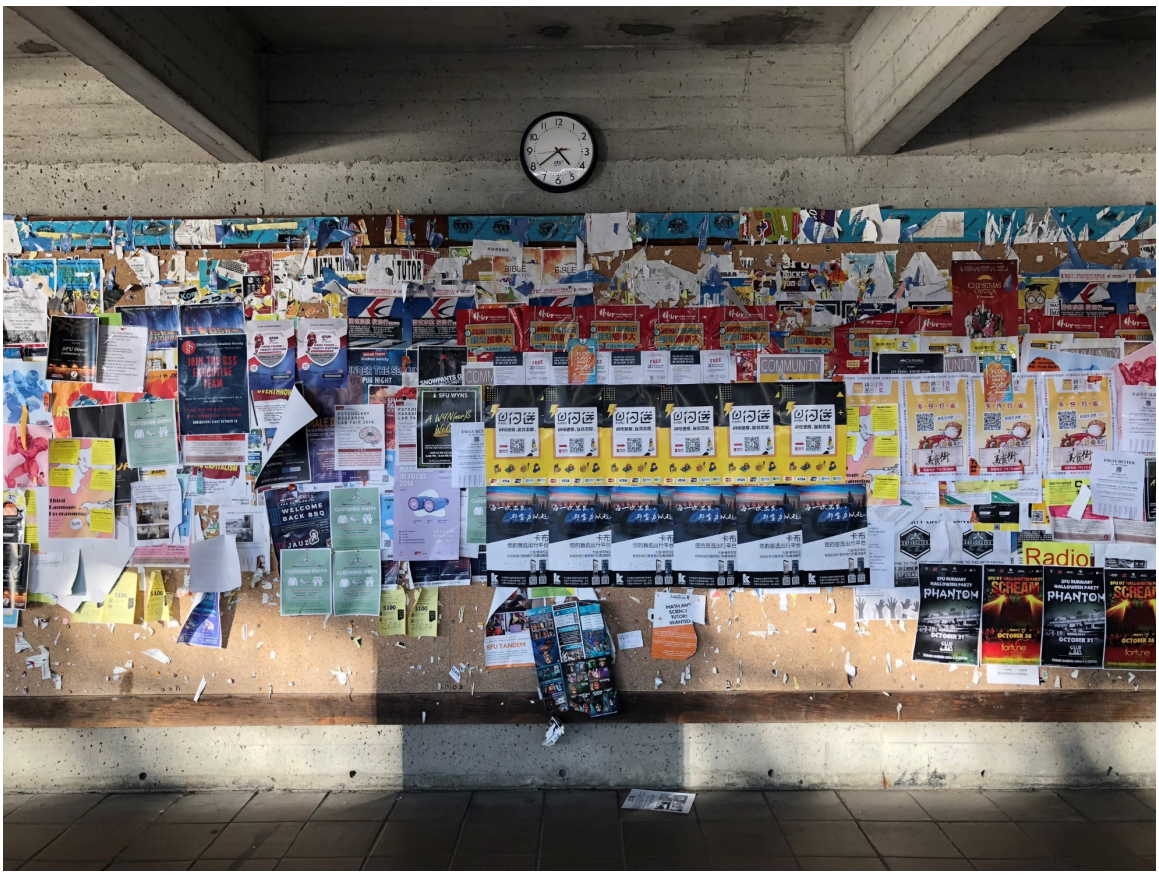

Figure 4.2. The bulletin board at a public university in Metro Vancouver
Note: Photo taken by the researcher in October 2018.

What I want to point out through this laborious description of a bulletin board at a local public university, is not only how the presence of the underground economy on WeChat is easily visible in public and legitimate spaces like public universities and chain cinemas, but how it is, in many ways, interwoven into the less “underground” landscape of Metro Vancouver.

Despite being interwoven with the more “legitimate” urban landscape, ride-hailing activities are difficult to be tracked or observed from outside. Different from the vehicles used for WeChat-based food delivery services (for example, Van Food and KABU EATS) that put platform stickers on one side of the car, ride-hailing vehicles on the roads of Metro Vancouver do not have any platform stickers on them indicating their membership in the trade. Thus, unless you know the driver or the plate number, it is almost impossible to spot a vehicle that is participating in “underground” ride-hailing.

To sum up, it is interesting as well as problematic to describe the Chinese-language WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver as “underground”. Although they are not officially recognized transportation companies contributing taxes to the local and the federal governments, these WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms are not completely “underground”. To some extent, they are quite daring, taking spaces that are seldom described as “secret” or “clandestine” to promote their services to their potential users in a variety of ways.

4.5.2. The boundaries, destinations and routes of the “invisible” rides

Fieldnotes: *A failed attempt to book a ride*

I was doing research at Simon Fraser University’s downtown campus at Harbour Centre, an iconic skyscraper close to Vancouver’s Waterfront Station. After finishing the day’s work, I decided to take a ride back home, for it would take only half the time of the public transit would take. I tapped the screen of my phone to wake it up, and then tapped on the green WeChat icon, typed in “浣熊” (the first two characters of “Raccoon Go” in Chinese, meaning “raccoon”) in the top search box and the public account of the ride-hailing platform “Raccoon Go” became the top search result in my contact list. I tapped into the public account, filled in details of the locations, confirmed and submitted my order. Then something I had never seen before showed up in the screen – a line of red characters, “no drivers are available in the area”. I opened the public account of another ride-hailing platform “Kabu”, typed in the same destination and found there were only two drivers and both of them were several kilometers away. After a number of failed attempts, I put my phone in my pocket, packed up and walked to the Skytrain station.

This experience reminded me of a tip that one of the drivers told me during our small talk *en route*: as a ride-hailing driver, if you want to make money, stay on the east side of Boundary, and on the west side of North Road. According to his experience, there are an abundance of ride-hailing orders in the area between these two roads. If you get one order from place A to place B within this region, you are highly likely to grab another order starting somewhere near place B. In other words, by taking orders within this region, drivers are less likely to come back with an empty passenger seat after finishing the first order and thus waste the time and the gas spent on the way back.

This driver's words of course cannot represent the views of all drivers and all platforms. For example, Kabu is famous for its market share in Richmond. Also at least 3 of the drivers I interviewed mentioned taking rides at night from downtown area. Both Richmond and downtown Vancouver are outside the area the driver identified. They are on the west side of the Boundary Road, which the driver advised to stay east side of. However, the driver's words suggest that the orders and thus routes of these rides are not evenly distributed in Metro Vancouver. The space of ride-hailing is uneven.

Below is the map that DDJ sketched during our interview. It is clear that his experience of being a ride-hailing driver on Raccoon Go has centered around SFU, one of the biggest public universities in the Lower Mainland of BC and close to where he lives. For him, there are several typical routes and most of them start from SFU. Lougheed, right on North Road in between Burnaby and Coquitlam, is one of the most popular destinations. Lougheed, for DDJ, is a region, where more specific destinations are located: a student tutoring centre called SpeedUp (which he singled out because it is *the* most popular destination), Coquitlam College (which he referred to as "CC"), bubble tea shops and restaurants. Another popular area, which DDJ himself visits frequently, is the Metrotown Area, which he called "Metro" during the interview. Less frequented destinations include Richmond and the downtown area. According to DDJ, there used to be a lot of orders from people coming out of clubs at 3 or 4 AM in downtown Vancouver. Recently, however, such orders seemed to be less. His guess was that because Raccoon Go launched a new service called "designated drivers" in which people who drive to clubs can ask drivers to come and drive them in their cars back home, people would just use the designated driver service rather than the regular ride-hailing. According to DDJ, there are few orders going to "other" regions like New Westminster, Surrey, Delta, and so forth.

> "Even if there are orders to these places, none would grab the order". Because it is not reasonable economically. For you would spend time and gas to drive to and from these places, chances are that you won't even get an order back from these places" (Interview with DDJ, 2018, July 28).

Thus, as discussed, the drivers in that situation would be returning with an empty passenger seat and thus waste the time and gas.

These popular and unpopular routes and destinations, however, are not static. According to DDJ, in late April and early May there are usually so many orders to YVR

airport that he goes to the airport almost every day; and in late August before the fall semester starts, he usually picks up passengers from YVR airports regularly.

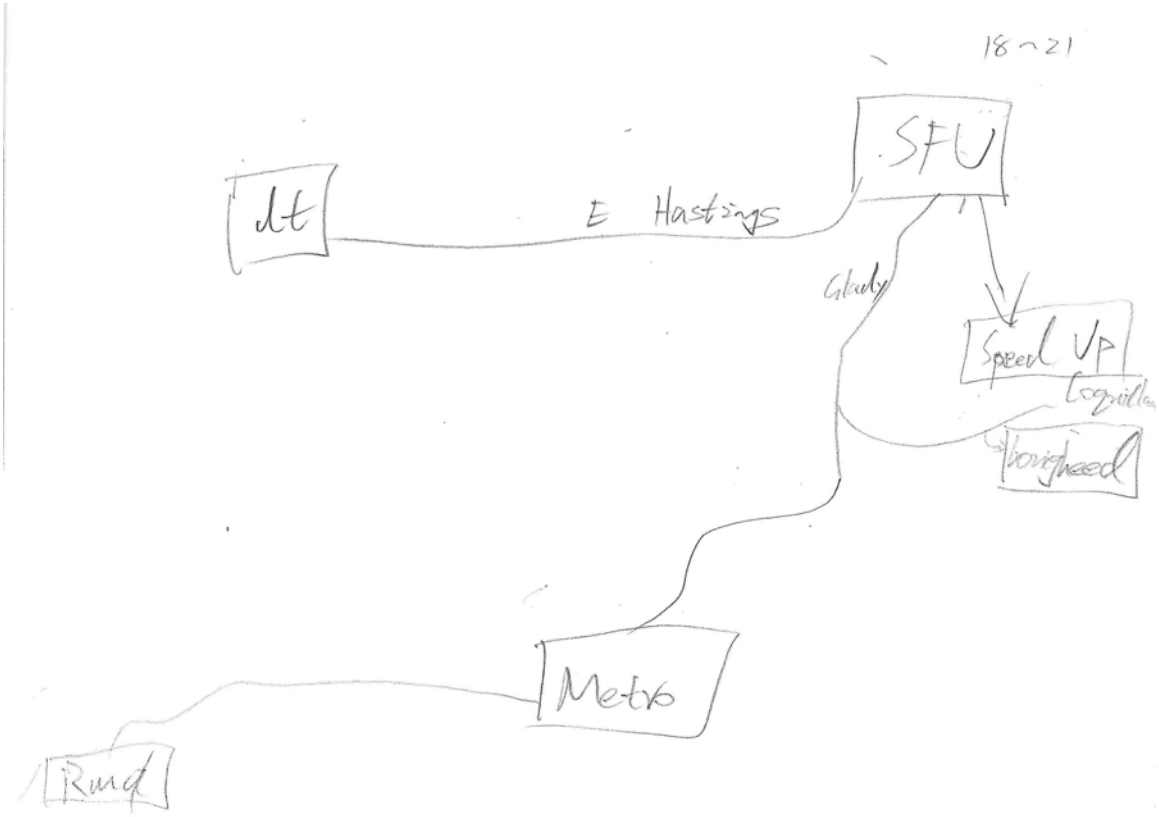

Figure 4.3. The ride-hailing map that DDJ drew during the interview

During the interviews, I often asked the drivers to draw a map and label the places they frequently go to when working as a ride-hailing driver. It turned out that although every driver's map is shaped by their own home, school, everyday routes and working strategies, there are quite a number of places labeled that are common among the drivers.

Most of these places, in fact, can be found in the lists of frequently visited destinations provided by platforms for passengers' convenience. Raccoon Go, for example, provides the longest and most comprehensive list that I know among WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms. The list has been created as a two-level menu that would pull down when the passenger taps on the blank text box for destination. The idea is that if one finds his or her destination in the embedded menu he or she will not need to type in the name or address of the destination. Just tap on the destination, for example, "McArthurGlen Outlets" ("McArthurGlen 奥特莱斯"), and the destination will be filled out

automatically. The comprehensive list of destinations provided by Raccoon Go, structurally, looks like something below[79]:

Table 4.1. The list of frequently visited destinations provided by Raccoon Go

Famous business district	My addresses[80]	History	*My translation of the full title (if applicable)
airport, wharf (transportation junction)	pacific central station 火车站		pacific central station "railway station"
	马蹄湾码头 horseshoe bay		"horseshoe bay wharf" horseshoe bay
	图瓦森码头 Tsawwassen		"tsawwassen wharf" Tsawwassen
	温哥华国际机场		Vancouver international airport
night club	Celebrities Nightclub		N/A
	V+ Club		N/A
	Prive		N/A
	Aura		N/A
	Venue Nightclub		N/A
shopping mall	Lansdowne Centre		N/A

[79] The table above resembles the structure of the frequently visited destination list on Raccoon Go. In terms of the spelling of the names of the destinations, the names included in the central column, whether they were combinations of English and Chinese or poorly formatted English names, look exactly the same as the original list on Raccoon Go, including the inconsistent capitalization of the letters. The table above aims to replicate the list, which categorizes local places of importance for its intended passengers and also captures its unique status as a not so professionalized platform co-created by local international students and immigrants. The column furthest to the right, "My translation of the full title (if application)" is not part of the original list provided by Raccoon Go. I added it to explain each shorthand or Chinese name of the destination in the central column.

[80] "My addresses" and "History" are two tabs paralleled with "Famous business district", which seems to be the umbrella concepts Raccoon Go programmers, UI/UX designers and other decision-makers choose to use to summarize the diverse categories of transportation junctions, night clubs, shopping malls, schools and famous scenic spots. The terms, "Famous business district" "my addresses" "history", and all the categories like "night club" are translated from Chinese to English by me.

Famous business district	My addresses[80]	History	*My translation of the full title (if applicable)
	Pacific Centre		N/A
	Oakridge centre		N/A
	McArthurGlen 奥特莱斯		McArthurGlen “outlets”
	richmond center		N/A
	lougheed town center		N/A
	HR 购物中心		HR “shopping centre”
	aberdeen centre		N/A
	高贵林中心		“Coquitlam Centre”
	metrotown		N/A
	丽晶广场		“crystal mall”
school	SFU (Burnaby)		N/A
	SFU (素里)		SFU (“Surrey”)
	BCIT		N/A
	Coquitlam College		N/A
	FIC		“Fraser International College”
	Langara		N/A
	AC (Metro)		“Alexander College” (“Metrotown”)
	速成教育 (Lougheed)		“SpeedUp Education” (Lougheed)

Famous business district	My addresses[80]	History	*My translation of the full title (if applicable)
	VPC		"Vancouver Premier College"
	Douglas College (new west)		N/A
	kPU (richmond)		"Kwantlen Polytechnic University" (richmond)
	ubc		N/A
famous scenic spot	和平拱门 Peace Arch Park		"Peace Arch" Peace Arch Park
	史丹利公园		"Stanley Park"
	煤气镇		"Gastown"
	吊桥公园		"Capilano Suspension Bridge Park"
	唐人街		"Chinatown"
	渔人码头 Richmond		"Fisherman's Wharf" Richmond
	惠斯勒-冬奥村		"Whistler - Olympic Village"
	Granville Island		N/A

When locating these frequently visited destinations on the map of Metro Vancouver, it is easy to see how they spread across the landscape of Metro Vancouver unevenly. To show their interesting distribution against the city boundaries, neighborhoods, roads and natural landscape of Metro Vancouver, I created the following map[81] using an interactive mapping tool called ZeeMaps.

[81] The map was created by the researcher based on the list of frequently visited destinations (Table 4.1.) in one of the ride-hailing platforms. The destinations are colour coded: those in the first category, "airport, wharf (transportation junction)", are red; those in the second category, "night

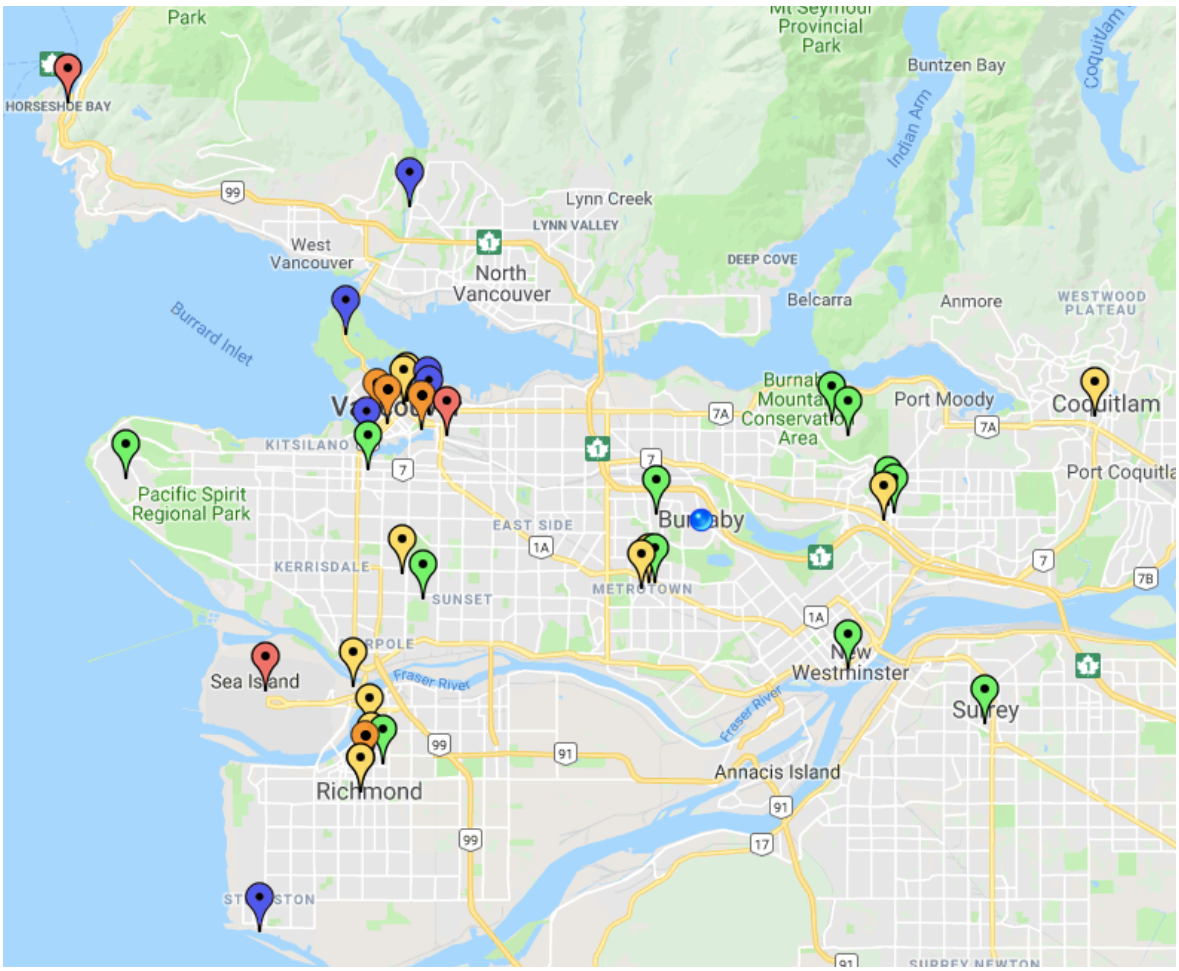

Figure 4.4. Mapping out the frequently visited destinations
Note: The map was created by the researcher based on Table 4.1. using ZeeMaps.

This popular ride-hailing destination list[82] outlines the uneven space of ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, which to some extent reflects the life experience of its target passengers, the majority of whom, according to the drivers I interviewed, are international students. From this list, it seems that the life of Chinese international

club", are orange; those in the third category, "shopping mall", are yellow; those in the fourth category, "school", are green; and those in the fifth category, "famous scenic spot", are blue.

[82] The list is a very interesting one and contains many curious details, most of which cannot be exhaustively examined in this section. For example, most of the destinations under the category of "famous scenic spot" and "transportation junctions" are written in Chinese, rather than English or combinations of Chinese and English. One of the reasons might be that those who go to these places are often international tourists from China or other Chinese-speaking areas and their English language proficiency may not always be enough to recognize destinations in English. In contrast, other destinations like nightclubs, schools and malls that local Chinese-speaking residents like international students, work-permit holders and new immigrants often go to are written in English, accompanied by Chinese explanations only occasionally.

students in Metro Vancouver revolves around school, shopping, entertainment, tourism and transportation junctions. Just briefly scan the school category and we will see how diverse Raccoon Go's passengers' educational backgrounds are: SFU, UBC, BCIT, KPU are all public universities scattered in Metro Vancouver. Colleges like Coquitlam College, Fraser International College, Langara College, Alexander College and Douglas College offer diplomas and in some cases degrees. Nevertheless, many students studying at these colleges would transfer their credits to universities like SFU and UBC. Yet there are also cases where students' GPAs cannot match the academic requirements set by these popular universities, especially since recently the minimum GPAs required for several popular majors have been rocketing up. On the other hand, many universities and colleges have multiple campuses. For example, SFU has campuses in Burnaby, Surrey and Vancouver. BCIT has campuses in Burnaby, Vancouver and Richmond. KPU has campuses in multiple locations including Richmond and Langley. For colleges, Alexander College has campuses in Burnaby and Vancouver and Douglas College has campuses in New Westminster and Coquitlam. It is interesting that the list excludes all campuses located in downtown Vancouver, except for VPC whose only campus is located in downtown Vancouver. Furthermore, the campuses that are not located in the area that DDJ drew in his ride-hailing map are also neglected. For example, the Coquitlam Campus of Douglas College, the Langley and Surrey Campus of KPU and the Richmond Campus of BCIT.

What attracted me most is a unique entry in the school category – SpeedUp Education. Technically, it is not a school registered at the local education board and does not offer college or university courses like other public or private institutions. Rather, it is a student tutoring centre, mainly targeting students at universities and colleges including SFU, FIC and UBC, and providing one-to-many or one-to-one tutoring sessions to offer instructions for specific courses for students who wanted to pass or get good grades. What amazed me is that almost every driver mentioned SpeedUp as one of the most popular destinations on Raccoon Go and DDJ even said that the route from SFU on the top of Burnaby Mountain to SpeedUp at Lougheed, which is a 10 to 15 minutes' drive, is one of the most requested destinations. What's more, Raccoon Go included SpeedUp as one of the entries under the school category and paralleled it with all other public and private schools that international students go to almost on a daily basis. It is apparent how such a space almost visible and meaningful only for Chinese

international students plays a key role in Raccoon Go's perception of the uneven ride-hailing landscape, and thus the life experience of Chinese international students.

Entries in other categories also reveal the landscape of Chinese international students. According to the list, the most frequently visited malls for users of Raccoon Go are in Vancouver, Burnaby and Richmond – 3 out of 17 cities in Metro Vancouver Regional District of Lower Mainland of BC. Also the diverse entries in the shopping category showcases how the city center shopping malls with similar floor plans and food courts[83] (for example, Lougheed Town Centre and Richmond Centre) are as important for the life of international students as the diasporic and transnational landmarks (for instance, Crystal Mall and Aberdeen Mall).

The life space of international students will not be accurately represented by just the diasporic landscape. "HR shopping centre", for example, is one of the most popular shopping centres among Chinese international students and new immigrants, many of whom David Ley in his book calls "millionaire migrants" (2011). "HR" is a popular shorthand for the official English name of a high-end Canadian department store, "Holt Renfrew", among Chinese international students and migrants. At first glance, this shopping centre located in the heart of downtown Vancouver has nothing to do with Chinese diaspora or migrants. Yet it does. Holt Renfrew in Vancouver is one of the first local department stores to accept Chinese mobile payment methods like WeChatPay and AliPay. Its diverse collections of leading and luxury brands such as Chanel, Gucci, Dior, Prada, Louis Vuitton, etc. have been attracting Chinese who "has more money than God"[84], retail analyst and *Retail Insider Media* owner Craig Patterson said when responding to the striking expansion of Chanel from 1,900 to 5,060 square feet ("Expanded Chanel store in Canada sells US$3 million broach", 2016, June 9). The Chinese immigrants in recent decades, often called "new immigrants", are frequently associated with incredible wealth and recently Vancouver's rocketing housing prices. The Chinese international students in Vancouver have also been associated with coming

[83] The food courts in these city centre shopping malls are different from the Asian-themed food courts (for example, Crystal Mall food court) described at the beginning of this thesis.

[84] In his own *Retail Insider*, he also revealed that the sales at Holt Renfrew Vancouver contributes around 40% of the entire volume of the company, which has eight department stores in Canada and several in Europe. According to Patterson, the explosive sales could not be achieved without the store's efforts to cater to Asian shoppers, including expanding their luxury collections and accepting Chinese mobile payments.

from super rich families, driving luxury vehicles and wearing luxury brands. However, as ZZZZ explained in the interview, not everyone is born in rich families, but those who are super rich create such impression that later becomes the tag for all Chinese international students, most of whom, according to him, study hard, work hard and do not lead an extravagant lifestyle as depicted in the news about the "ultra rich Chinese". Nevertheless, as we can see in Raccoon Go's list, luxury stores and outlets like "HR shopping centre" and "McArthurGlen outlets" are truly key places in the ride-hailing landscape, which to some extent does reflect the space as frequently visited by Chinese international students and immigrants.

In terms of entertainment, the landscape is more complex than indicated by the seemingly simple definition of "night club". Although 4 of the 5 entries under the category are truly nightclubs, V+ Club, though having the word "club" in its name, is a karaoke bar in Richmond where Chinese-speakers love to go. Given that the activities of singing karaoke are distinct from activities like dancing and drinking in clubs, it is interesting that Raccoon Go chooses to put this Chinese entertainment venue in a list called and made of night clubs. The V+ is just one representative of many Chinese entertainment places in Metro Vancouver. Drivers and passengers in my interviews have revealed a more complex map of Chinese places to have fun in the city besides clubs and karaoke bars. For example, Lily mentioned board game stores that provide a wide selection of role-play board games, where friends can play the popular board games in China while enjoying bubble tea, desserts and snacks served by the store (Interview with Lily, 2019, November 6). Besides light entertainment like these board game stores, two interviewees mentioned more underground entertainment spaces – illegal "booze cans". According to the report of lahoo.ca (2017, December 6), such illegal booze cans are underground entertainment venues that are already an open secret in the circle of Chinese international students. They are often opened by young Chinese in Metro Vancouver and serve mainly Chinese international students. Without checking IDs, at these illegal booze cans, these students can purchase and enjoy alcohol, cigarettes and even drugs. Some booze cans would even provide gambling facilities and young Chinese girls as company.[85] These spaces are even "underground" in underground ride-

[85] For local English coverage on the issue, please see "Elaborate 'booze can' shut down by RCMP in Richmond" on *CBC*, 2017, December 5.

hailing platforms like Raccoon Go, where drivers might be ordered to go but they cannot be found in the list.

Lastly, transportation junctions, which is listed as the No.1 category in Raccoon Go's popular destination list. Transportation junctions are important spaces. From there, international students are connected to their homelands, other areas of the host country, and the broader world. The airport, train station and wharfs are not only the connecting point between their student life in Vancouver and their home in China, but the link between their temporary residence in Vancouver and all kinds of escapes from it[86], whether it is to their homeland or not.[87] The rides that take these student-tourists from their home in Vancouver to the transportation junctions, then, perform as loosely-organized shuttles between Vancouver ("here" – which is where they study, live, do part-time jobs, shop and have fun with friends) and the world out "there".[88]

Thus, from DDJ's map and the list of frequently visited destinations provided by Raccoon Go, we can see that these popular destinations are not evenly distributed on the land of Lower Mainland of BC. Rather, it is shaped by the life routes of international students, the long-existing diasporic geography and the more recent transnational geography of Vancouver, as well as local infrastructures like transportation junctions and community shopping centres. The life routes of international students can be more accurately understood if putting equal attention on "international" and "student" to equal attention. On the one hand, the students' life spaces are shaped by the ethnic, creative and sometimes underground activities and organizations in the Lower Mainland of BC. The way that the Chinese student tutoring centre became an important destination in the ride-hailing list is a case in point. On the other hand, different from immigrants and tourists coming to Vancouver under different categories and with different purposes, students' life spaces are fundamentally based on the education industry of Vancouver and Canada in general, where international education, like other popular destinations

---

[86] For an interesting study on how international students may want to escape from the study life to more cosmopolitan "world cities", see De Costa, Tigchelaar and Cui' (2016) study.

[87] During holidays and longer vacations, many international students choose to travel to resorts in Canada (Victoria, Tofino, Kelowna, Banff, Toronto, Montreal, to name a few) or popular tourist destinations in the United States or even Mexico.

[88] Studies have discussed how international students and highly-skilled workers imagine and identify themselves as fluid, transnational and cosmopolitan citizens. For example, see Gomes's (2018) study on siloed diversity.

like the US, Australia and the UK, becomes a profitable industry that benefits schools and promises to benefit students but is also filled with problems[89] – the lack of support for an overwhelming number of international students is one of them.

In other words, presenting these rides as mobile social spaces for co-ethnic strangers flowing freely on top of the landscape of Vancouver is not the best way to understand ride-hailing as a slice of Chinese international students' lives in Metro Vancouver. In fact, the landscape of Metro Vancouver has become uneven long before the recent crisis of WeChat-based ride-hailing.[90] In this sense, these rides are temporary spaces moving through the layered landscape of the cities, which have changed over time thanks to a historical combination of economic, political and cultural factors. And like other studies, I would argue that the space war between the Chinese (as well as other Asian and racialized) diaspora(s) and the so-called hegemonic colonial mainstream is one of the key shaping forces of this layered landscape. The rides in this research, to some extent, inherited this contestation of space but have also reworked it and suggested a different type of space – one that is more mobile (at least in the physical sense) compared to the old Chinatowns situated at a specific district in the city. And this mobile solution led it to its own conflicts regarding legality that make Chinese international students as well as Chinese in general the targets criticized not only for their illegality but for their ethnic exclusivity.

* * *

As discussed in Chapter 1, an assemblage is not a random list of things. It is the situated existence of a construct resulting from the contingent interaction of heterogeneous elements. In this sense, this chapter is the second part of the argument that I started in the previous chapter.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how WeChat should not be studied as just another social media brought by international students to counter acculturative stress in Vancouver. It should be studied as an assemblage, since the very possibility of using

---

[89] The issue has been studied in great quantity and depth in the context Australasia, but not in Canada.

[90] For example, the tutoring centre may not mean anything for the landscape of public urban planning or mainstream geography. Yet it is a key part in the transnational and especially international students' landscape in Metro Vancouver.

WeChat to navigate students' local lives relies on the WeChat's technological infrastructure; the ease for individual users to create platforms; the diverse groups and communities who have consciously or unconsciously contributed to the popularity and the applicability of WeChat in Metro Vancouver; and different from platforms used for just one or two set purposes, on WeChat, an alternative discursive sphere has formed in connection with other popular Chinese websites for local Chinese-speaking WeChat users. The previous chapter ends with a metaphor, that WeChat in Vancouver is like a "New Chinatown", where fellow Chinese speakers get together, exchange goods and information, seek merchandises and services that mainly cater to Chinese international students and immigrants. As the ride-hailing platform is like a *shanzhai*-ed Didi, the "New Chinatown" seems to be born out of the fantastic efforts to replicate Chinese ways of life in Metro Vancouver.

It is important to distinguish the "New Chinatown" from China. At best, what the WeChat assemblage creates is a fantasy of the digitally-connected lifestyle in China. In its nature, the "New Chinatown" is rooted in the Vancouver, Canada. As is more explicit from the thick description of the WeChat-based ride-hailing, the ride-hailing platforms are far from a business model imported from China and then built, operated and branded in a way consistent with their Chinese counterparts. Rather, BC's repeated delays to setting up ride-hailing regulations has created a unique layer of precariousness for the international students working as ride-hailing drivers in Metro Vancouver. In addition to facing the commonly criticized precariousness of gig labour in platform economies, the drivers also can be subject to financial loss and dangers that can threaten their lives. What's worse, and shows how ride-hailing is rooted in BC is the fact that its illegal status means they might actively marginalize themselves and not contact the police to report when they are victims of robberies for fear of getting fines. But also, beyond the precariousness and dangers of working as ride-hailing drivers in Metro Vancouver, the co-ethnic stranger relationship formed during the ride makes ride-hailing distinct from the regular service relationship between the professional driver and the passenger found elsewhere. The latter scenario is typically viewed as exploitative for the driver and dangerous for the passenger. In contrast, the co-ethnic stranger relationship between two international students or peers in Metro Vancouver affords opportunities to disrupt the power dynamics between the driver and the passenger and even to create potential connections during or after the ride. In this sense, the mobile space of the ride in

Vancouver is a social space for students where they can meet and connect with peers from similar backgrounds. Moreover, the international-student drivers do not just let the platform economy and gig labour invade their lives, whether their studies or entertainment life. They take advantage of the platforms and more accurately the developmental status of the platforms which do not have effective methods for monitoring the drivers. They employ various strategies to make money by maximizing the flexibility promised by the platforms and take orders only when they do not disrupt their main schedules. Some of them use the money to deal with the expensive living costs in Vancouver. Some may use the income to give them access to the lifestyle to which they aspire and which Vancouver is famous for. For instance, ZZZZ provided a rationale behind how ride-hailing as a part-time job can help students afford a luxury vehicle. Last but not least, the boundaries, destinations and routes of the rides are shaped by the geography of the metropolitan area. For example, from the list of frequently visited destinations, it is explicit how universities and colleges, which are such a key part in Canada's education industry, are important destinations for the platforms' predominant passengers – international students. The list also reveals the developing status of the WeChat-based ride-hailing industry that local authorities had a hard time to crack down.

As indicated above, the WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms have been designed to be a *shanzhai*-ed Didi in Vancouver. Yet its appearance and development are rooted in a series of local and global elements: the local absence of similar services; the ambiguous legislative environment that has been anticipating the legalization of ride-hailing for so long; the introduction and popularity of WeChat in China and its programmability by users not trained in programming; the scarcity of local part-time jobs for international students intensified by the high living cost and luxurious lifestyle that Vancouver is famous for. In sum, the *shanzhai*-ed Didi, as an effort to replicate their former lifestyles in PRC and as a "New Chinatown" in Canada, has resulted from contingent interactions of elements, which happen to form this unique phenomenon in Vancouver, among Chinese international students, for a certain period of time.

As will be elaborated in the Afterword, this co-ethnic stranger relationship and the international students' strategic utilization of the platform is subject to change, as the platforms are increasingly professionalized and international-student drivers are cast out as more middle-aged immigrants join the platforms as devoted, professional drivers. As

the elements go to or come from other assemblages, the WeChat assemblage that this thesis hopes to capture is not fixed. Yet, through the thick description and the revelation of nuances that go beyond the typical findings from Berry's widely used acculturation framework, I hope this thesis has made the case that it is important to approach WeChat, as well as other technologies in migrant's everyday practices, as part of an assemblage.

Conclusion

"Whitewash"

Once seated, sitting across from me, DDJ asked. "Why did you choose this topic?"

Doing my first academic interview, I was quite clumsy. I did not answer DDJ's question right away. Instead I asked him to go through the consent form with me and allow me to start recording. After explaining the consent form to him, I briefly told him about my observation that Chinese ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver had been covered in a kind of homogeneous and partial light in local English media while the complexity of the phenomenon had not been presented.

"So…you want to whitewash it?" DDJ laughed.

Compared with its English equivalent, the word for "whitewash" in Chinese carries a much stronger positive meaning. It does not mean simply to cover up, to gloss over (something bad) in a heavy-handed way. Rather, it is synonymous with to rationalize, to justify, or even to embellish. Ride-hailing in Vancouver is illegal and Chinese-language ride-hailing platforms are "notorious" for operating an "underground" trade despite the local Uber-ban policy, police' crackdowns, as well as warnings and fines from the region's PTB. Thus, to DDJ, with a research project like this, I was trying to explain away the negative associations with Chinese-language ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver and to present it in an alternative light in contrast to the discourse of local authorities and English media. Perhaps he thought I was too idealistic.

The thesis of this thesis

As said by my supervisor, this thesis can be written in a hundred ways. Not only can all the stories be told by different narrators, for different audiences, and encoded in different languages and cultural norms. But the multiscalarity of the WeChat assemblage, which I have chosen to frame my description and analysis with, made it almost impossible to pick a single storyline from the "mess" I was spinning. Yet one thing that this thesis argues is that WeChat, or digital technologies as employed by

international students or migrants in their everyday lives, should not be studied as just one social media, one app or one technology that is picked up by international students or migrants that in turn facilitates or obstructs their integration into the local mainstream society. This is a common conclusion made in ethnic media studies, especially by those striving to incorporate digital technologies into their field. This thesis, however, argues that WeChat should be approached as an assemblage. The scrutinizing of the app's functionalities cannot be separated from the international students who use it for a variety of purposes, the metropolitan area where these students live and the relevant infrastructures and policies that prevent these students from living in a lifestyle that they were used to in China before coming to Canada, and the aspects including but not limited to the scarcity of part-time jobs for international students, the English media environment where anti-Asian discourses still circulate, the scattering and clustering of Chinese communities and their businesses, entertainment and shopping centres, the heterogeneity within the blurry category of "Chinese diaspora" and their varying association with the old and the "New Chinatowns".

Shouldering an almost impossible task to summarize this MA thesis, I will spare no effort in providing a systematic review of the descriptions, discussions and arguments made about this WeChat assemblage in what follows. This thesis focuses on the WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, a metropolitan area in the west-coast province of British Columbia. In BC, ride-hailing services as provided by Uber, Lyft and, their equivalent in China, Didi are prohibited, though efforts to change the legislation have been ongoing for several years. From this context emerged WeChat-based ride-hailing, which is frequently referred to by the local English media as an underground Chinese-only economy, which is one out of many more ethnic economies that operate clandestinely in the Chinese community of Metro Vancouver. The name "illegal Richmond ride-hailing", as given by *Global News*, is interestingly problematic. For it not only points to the illegal nature of the business, but highlights another characteristic about it – Richmond, which in this context refers to the city sitting south of Vancouver across the Fraser River and is famous for the clustering of immigrants and especially those of Chinese origins. By connecting WeChat-based ride-hailing to other local controversies in Richmond involving Chinese residents, the local English news have replicated the long-existing yellow peril discourses of the Lower Mainland of BC. In addition to the discursive attack on these newly rising platforms, local authorities

including the RCMP, have been actively figuring out measures to eliminate such illegal rides before Uber and other ride-hailing platforms can legally come to the province. Such is the context for the research on a local level.

Local English media as well as the research participants frequently referred to the WeChat app as a super app. At the very beginning of its development, WeChat has been given a mission that distinguishes it from other social media – “WeChat is a lifestyle”. In China, the subsequent development of WeChat proved its power as the indispensable app in almost every aspect of people’s everyday lives. And users of WeChat have grown used to navigating their lives with a few taps in WeChat.

As a Chinese app, designers of WeChat did not set it up to support this lifestyle in Vancouver, Canada. Nor was there a local platform facilitating a digitally connected lifestyle comparable to that in China. It is from this vacuum of digital platforms that WeChat-based ride-hailing, as well as other WeChat-based services (such as food delivery, online supermarket and private kitchen), emerged as a social phenomenon. The WeChat-based ride-hailing services in Vancouver, however, are not provided by a branch of WeChat or Didi in Canada. Rather, individual ride-hailing platforms were established by international students and immigrants and operated without direct intervention from Tencent in China. As WeChat did not support such ride-hailing services in Vancouver, these platforms appropriated WeChat’s programmable public accounts and comprehensive payment ecosystem and transformed them into full-featured ride-hailing platforms that can operate in Vancouver among WeChat users. On such ride-hailing platforms, users can hail a ride immediately or book a trip in the future, select the car or the driver they want to ride with, get a free estimate of the time and fare for the trip, pay the driver within WeChat and rate him or her afterwards.

These platforms, however, are not just for ride-hailing. In Chapter 3, I described how the ride-hailing platforms maximized the potential to transform their public accounts as marketing platforms, where, for example, a restaurant owner or a real estate agent can post their advertisements. These advertisements will be seen by all subscribers of the platform’s public account, including the drivers, the passengers and those who have never used ride-hailing services but subscribe the public account because it produces interesting local content. Indeed, in addition to providing ride-hailing, marketing and possibly other for-profit services, these public accounts are also local content creators.

Although some of its beautifully written articles are in fact advertisements for local businesses, most public accounts create content closely related to international student's life experiences. In addition to producing content by themselves, some platforms actively engage in establishing community media. The international student radio co-established by Kabu is a case in point.

The (controversial) existence of these ride-hailing platforms, however, is not just attributable to the technological infrastructures of WeChat – which, as mentioned above, provides infrastructures, functionalities and ecosystems for users and enables them to create their platforms without systematic training in web design or programming. The easiness of creating multifunctional platforms on WeChat is as important as the labour of Chinese international students who sign up to be the drivers and who take advantage of the WeChat-based ride-hailing platform in a variety of ways. The diverse approaches these international-student drivers take to utilizing the ride-hailing platforms are particularly important, for they actively prevent the gig labour common in platformed economies like ride-hailing from invading their lives too much. For example, by only taking orders that match with their schedules and intended routes, the drivers use these WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms to make money "by the way" and make sure it remains as a "flexible" supplement to their studies and work lives in Metro Vancouver.

The passenger, sharing the temporary space of the ride with the driver, forms a special relationship with him. The special relationship, which I named "co-ethnic strangers", is full of future networking possibilities. The relationship differs from the service relationship between the regular taxi or ride-hailing driver and the passenger – who, for example, would rarely exchange phone numbers, Facebook or WeChat contacts. On the other hand, the relationship is also different from the co-ethnic international students and immigrants who tend to "flock together" for the exchange of information or emotional support. Thus, for the duration of the ride, which roughly ranges from 10 minutes to 30 minutes and even longer, it is the driver and the passenger who decide whether or how a relationship beyond co-ethnic strangers can be formed. After all, until recently, international students made up a great proportion of the registered drivers and a predominant majority of the passengers. It is not unusual to bump into someone who is studying or has studied in the same school, or a school one knows. If not, there are a wide range of other topics to start a good conversation with, as elaborated in greater detail in Chapter 4. Whether the driver will get along with the

passenger can be determined by a series of factors. Once clicked, the driver and the passenger can lock their relationship by adding each other on WeChat and, starting from then, are able to see each other's status on WeChat's Friends' Moments.

No matter how flexible my participants told me their jobs are, it is labour. And driving around the city for money is not always effortless and enjoyable. For instance, they can encounter drunk passengers who make the passenger seat a total mess during the ride. And just as these drivers can decide how many hours they spend on this "flexible" job, the hours they spend on it usually determine how much they make. And recently, international students have found that they can no longer make easy money "by the way", for due to changes in the platforms, the most profitable orders are now often grabbed by more devoted middle-aged drivers.

One might wonder, with all the complexity and competition described above, if it is "underground", how is it known by so many people? In the last section of Chapter 4, I described the space of ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, including how the allegedly "underground" platforms boldly advertise in public spaces like a public university's bulletin board and Cineplex's pre-movie advertisements. Moreover, the routes covered by such rides frequently overlap with local education, commuting, shopping and entertainment landscapes. Given their illegal status, unlike those vehicles used for food delivery, these rides do not put stickers tagging themselves as members of the ride-hailing industry. They move across the cities like random vehicles driven by twenty-something or thirty-something Asians. Their membership in the ride-hailing business will only emerge when one opens their WeChat public account and clicks for a ride.

The above description of WeChat-based ride-hailing cannot be accurately understood without contextualizing it in the WeChat assemblage, which I metaphorically called the "New Chinatown". By approaching WeChat as part of an assemblage, rather than an app, I hope to bring into sight the interactions between the people, the media and the spaces that lead to the phenomenal ethnic economies that WeChat is often said to support as their technological infrastructure.

As elaborated in Chapter 3, platforms like WeChat-based ride-hailing would not be possible without the conscious or unconscious collaboration between different groups and communities in Metro Vancouver. In addition to international students, recent

immigrants from China who are used to the digitally-connected lifestyles contribute to the establishment, operation and maintenance of such platforms; immigrants who do not use WeChat personally may use related services at their business (for example, WeChat Pay is becoming a widely accepted method of payment in local Chinese restaurants); and people may encounter WeChat or related services in their place of work (for instance, the Holt Renfrew cashier who had to process WeChatPay and the Transit Link staff who framed the advertisement with WeChat QR code on the top advertisement banner inside the Skytrain).

Another important element in the assemblage is the media. The public accounts on WeChat, including but not limited to those facilitating the ride-hailing services, and other Chinese-language websites form a discursive sphere that almost operate as an alternative media in a broad sense. As the two stories – "When the illegal ride-hailing driver called the police…" and "The international student radio" – reveal, in this alternative discursive sphere, stories are framed in a different way and attention is given to marginalized groups like ride-hailing drivers and international students, compared to the partial and often negative coverage in local English media.

The spaces, the people, the vehicles, the platforms and the discursive sphere are all situated in the local space of Vancouver, which is a popular immigrant destination with a complex history of Chinese immigrants framed through the anti-Asian yellow peril discourse. The ride-hailing platforms which have been locally created using WeChat public accounts, despite local regulations that ban ride-hailing, is a unique phenomenon in Vancouver. So is the phenomenal growth of the Chinese ethnic economies, including ride-hailing, food delivery and online supermarkets, to name a few. For the WeChat assemblage, Vancouver is not just a geographical container passively receiving the establishment and evolution of such platforms and economies. Instead, as elaborated in Chapter 4, Vancouver, whose land has been shaped by generations of immigrants, also leaves its mark on the contingently changing WeChat assemblage.

Thus, with the multiple factors that shape the "New Chinatown", this thesis argues it needs to be approached as an assemblage. Indeed, participants of this research feel the WeChat-based ride-hailing platform in Vancouver is just a *shanzhai*-ed Didi, a poor copycat of what they used to enjoy before coming to Canada. Other aspects of the booming WeChat-based platforms and economies seem to also prove their point –

the WeChat lifestyle is replicated in Vancouver and one can manage multiple aspects of their local life without leaving the WeChat app. In this light, the WeChat assemblage shows the formation of spaces where Chinese international students and immigrants convene and are connected by public accounts, platforms and occasional encounters, as in rides with co-ethnic strangers. And these spaces, connections and clustering of co-ethnics indeed bring more opportunities for their needs to be met. The "New Chinatown" metaphor, on the other hand, reflects the fundamental difference between the lifestyle replicated here in Vancouver and the lifestyle in China it attempts to replicate. But China does not have Chinatowns. And these *shanzhai*-ed services, like the WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms, no matter how identical their interfaces are to well-known platforms in China, are, by nature, Vancouver's Chinatown, though not physically located anywhere in Vancouver.

To avoid further extending the length of this thesis, many details and minor arguments have been omitted in the above summary. But one thing this summary aims to do, in addition to telling a story that is not too multifaceted to grasp, is to hold on the framework of assemblage. The concept of assemblage is essential to this thesis, not only because it enables me to tell the multiple aspects of this complex story of WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, but because it helps me go beyond the counterproductive acculturation narrative in studies on migrants' use of media[91]. The most important takeaway from this study, I guess, is not that WeChat is different from previous social media brought by international students from China to their respective host countries. Rather, it is the lens through which the relationship between media and migrants should be examined. Rather than being used to acculturate, which is what many existing studies assume should be the trajectory of Chinese international student, leading to the fate of home social media they brought to the host country, WeChat and its users in Vancouver overturn this model. International students who come to the host society to study may not settle down, acculturate or eventually become part of the

[91] Characteristics of assemblage being "heterogeneous, contingent, unstable, partial, and situated" (Collier & Ong, 2004, p.12), also made it possible to incorporate changes in the research. The ride-hailing industry has been constantly changing, including before and after I conducted my research. And the topic this thesis examines, how international students' participation in WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms, has been changing as well, along with how the platforms have been changing and updating their algorithms and how more middle-aged drivers have become fierce competitors for these international students who wanted to make money "by the way". Thus, the WeChat assemblage captured in this thesis is indeed has a contingent existence as it has been changing even during my research.

mainstream. Rather, they travel frequently between China and Canada and constantly compare the two places without prioritizing the Canadian ways of life over the Chinese ways. Furthermore, these international students, with their practices, actively redefine the local ways of life. As revealed in the case of WeChat-based ride-hailing, this counter-acculturative shaping force of international students and the platforms they use unsettle local authorities and long-existing discourses, whose framing of "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" goes far beyond the debate of ride-hailing to push for "cultural harmony" (Quan, 2018, October 19) and upholding Canadian values (Todd, 2018, February 23).

The multi-sited ethnography echoes the heterogeneity, instability and situatedness of the assemblage. However, as the researcher I only realized the productivity, and necessity of this methodology after getting into the field. As elaborated with more details in Chapter 2, at first, the methodological design was centered around the "ride-along" as a commonly employed method in Uber and other transport studies. This method, however, was questioned by the Research Ethics Board as problematic, since the Board claimed it would be practiced in a combination of participant observation and interviewing without proper consent from the participants. After adjusting the method and proposing participant observation, with the emphasis on observation rather than participation in the rides and a separate interview with drivers, however, I realized that it was more difficult to recruit participants than I imagined. In response I added recruiting on WeChat as a supplementary method and forwarded recruitment posts for research participants on my WeChat Friend's Moments and a dozen Vancouver-based WeChat groups. While I recruited participants slowly, I started to archive the media coverage of ride-hailing in the Lower Mainland of BC, the posts of ride-hailing platforms' public accounts, and the reactions of drivers I tried to recruit and the members in the chat groups that I sent recruitment posts to. While not a small number of drivers seemed to be interested in the study – and there were also many drivers who could not understand why I would waste time doing research about them – most of them refused to trust the study or me as the researcher unless they had friends who had already been interviewed by me. In the end, only 6 drivers gave their consent and completed the interview. Though there were two others who gave oral consent, I was never able to settle on a time and place to meet with them. For those who completed interviews, I either went across the Lower Mainland's cities to meet them at a place and time that worked best for them, or I connected with them through the digital means that they

preferred, whether it was WeChat audio call or messaging. For the passengers that I added to my recruitment list (at a later phase of the study) similarly, I had to follow their schedule, preferred place and means of communication. In the interviews, I found myself not simply finishing all the questions I prepared but I also followed the stream of topics the participants seemed interested to elaborate on. In other words, the "following" method restricted me from assuming or framing the storytelling practices of my participants. The researching process was less structured than I assumed. Yet at the end of the fieldwork, when I reviewed the data I collected, I was amazed at its richness and realized what I would have missed were I not following these multiple important sites of WeChat-based ride-hailing, even as it is just a corner of the WeChat assemblage.

Positionality: Research with participants

Throughout the course of this research, I interviewed 6 drivers and 6 passengers and conducted participant observation on 15 rides. No one encounter can be said to be representative, but my first encounter with DDJ, as described in details in Chapter 2, showcased some important elements of ride-hailing that I repeatedly experienced later in the field. Like DDJ, most of the participants were international students around the same age as me, ranging from 20 to 30. Our similar age and background made it impossible for me to pose as a detached and knowledgeable investigator. Rather, I was more like a peer who wanted to learn from them about this particular aspect of their life in Vancouver. Sometimes, the interviews turned into more casual conversations and the participants would diverge from the questions I asked. Sometimes they started to tell me their personal stories and complained about the local "inconveniences" or the policies that seemed "incomprehensible" to them.

As we shared the same background – coming from Mainland China mostly over the last five years, having experienced the digitally connected life in China with apps like WeChat, AliPay and Taobao and studying in Metro Vancouver as an international student – our conversations were always already encoded with our shared experiences and knowledge. As a result, in the writing process, there were quite a number of times that I had to stop translating what my participants said, and supplementing their words with the contexts that we both understood and needed not to verbalize.

Despite our similar backgrounds, what the participants said about Chinese ride-hailing frequently overthrew my preconceptions about their work, WeChat and the diverse life experiences of students in Vancouver. Since the drivers I interviewed worked for different platforms for varying lengths of time, their experience and their accounts of ride-hailing were dissimilar to one another. However, the information they shared about each platform may not be of most importance here. After all, the aim of my study is not to provide an industry report for a board of directors. Rather, my role was to be, first, a listener, hearing their varied and complex experiences and views rather than asserting a homogeneous account, and then, a good writer, telling the stories that have been either deliberately or accidentally left out of the local English mainstream narratives about WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver and about Chinese in general, and to recount, as much as I could, the stories with their complexities, layers and depths.

Limitations

One of the biggest challenges for this study was the lack of previous research. On the one hand, up to the time when this thesis is written, no research had been done on the WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver or other ethnic economies supported by WeChat and other platforms popular among Chinese international students and immigrants. Chen, Butler & Liang's (2018) and Yu's (2016, 2018) papers are two exceptions where they briefly mentioned how WeChat and similar technologies international students and immigrants brought from China are used to navigate their commuting and other essential aspects of life. Yet neither of them scrutinized this encounter between migrants' home technologies and their local practices. On the other hand, there has been little research done on Chinese international students in Canada, let alone Vancouver, except for challenges and solutions they face during their academic and linguistic adaptation when studying in the Canadian society. As a result, the study had to borrow from studies on Chinese international students done in the context of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and European countries. Thus, to some extent, the study is not solidly built on the literature focusing on Chinese international students in Canada and lacks quantitative data of the size, status and experience of the students. As a result, I had to rely on studies done in similar but obviously different contexts and qualitative descriptions of my own observation of international students' experiences in Metro Vancouver, Canada.

As elaborated in Chapter 2, another challenge for this research was the legal conditions for ride-hailing in British Columbia at the time of the research. For example, as early as the ethics application phase of this study, I had to consciously design the research methodologies with the thesis committee as well as the Research Ethics Board to maximize the protection of participants, who, if they were the drivers, could face fines up to 1,150 dollars if caught driving for ride-hailing platforms. The protective measures, nevertheless, added to the difficulty for recruiting participants. On the other hand, given the regular crackdowns from police and the negative portrayal of the ride-hailing business in local English mainstream media, the drivers often distanced themselves from potential risks of exposure, for example, like participating in research on ride-hailing led by someone claiming to be a Masters student from a local public university. Thus, recruiting was extremely time-consuming. Most of the recruited participants, especially for the 6 drivers, were referred to me by drivers who have participated in the research and confirmed my trustworthiness as someone who would neither give them up to the police, nor impose the limited anti-Asian discourse they encountered in the mainstream media. Given the number of participants recruited in the field, this remains a rather small-scale and exploratory study of the WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, which is not representative of all drivers or all elements of the fast-changing realm of ride-hailing for Chinese international students.

Future directions of study

If the legal conditions for ride-hailing become more friendly in the near future, it will be likely for me to establish and maintain long-term relationship with the platforms. Such long-term relationship would bring benefits for the research, for example, opportunities to observe and interview people other than drivers and passengers that contribute to the platform, and the possibility of obtaining key data including the number of drivers registered on the platforms and the number of subscribers of the platforms' public accounts.

When the legal environment changes for the ride-hailing industry in general, it would not only be easier to recruit participants but also conduct research on larger scale with more chances to meet with participants. Future studies could include repeated interviews with each participant at different times and thus the study would be able to track their changes in status, experience and views about the ride-hailing work, the

industry and their life in Metro Vancouver in general. In this way, a larger-scale study would provide more in-depth and nuanced data about the WeChat “New Chinatown” assemblage.

In addition to a larger-scale study of WeChat-based ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver, this study also points to the need for future research on international students and their media use. This topic has been touched upon by ethnic media studies, focusing on the role digital media play in the process of facilitating or obstructing students’ adaptation in their host society. However, international students should not just be studied as individuals overcoming acculturative stress at school. Rather, as temporary and in some cases potential permanent residents, who lead a life outside the school gate, which intersects with local and transnational communities. As indicated in Murray, Yu and Ahadi (2007), international students make up an important part of the market for ethnic media. This observation echoes findings in this study, which revealed that international students were not just consumers, but active producers of the ethnic media as well as contributing to the development of various ethnic economies including WeChat-based ride-hailing. Qualitative research methods, especially ethnography, can provide important insights about international students’ experience. Especially in Canada, which is one of the most important destinations for international students worldwide, it is important to study international students by observing their nuanced and complex life experience before resorting to existing acculturation theories and frameworks, which was the aim of this thesis.

Afterword: The assemblage in change

"Assemblages are always works in progress."

(McCann, 2011, p.145)

As I argued in Chapter 3 and 4, what Metro Vancouver's English media call "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" is produced by multiple factors including the transnational ride-hailing business model, local demands, communities and the regulatory environment. It is not like a chain store, like those newly erected bubble tea shops, whose everything, from recipe to interior design, is imported from abroad and thus remain strictly "faithful" to the original brand and flavour. These ride-hailing platforms, though not starting from scratch, accumulate experience, material and knowledge from multiple sources by operating locally, upgrading their business to accommodate the changing local market and regulatory environment and growing into an everyday service that people use, observe and criticize. Not only over the past two years – he period over which I have been observing the ride-hailing industry in Metro Vancouver – has the Chinese-language ride-hailing industry in Metro Vancouver witnessed a tremendous shift, even during the past few months as I wrote this thesis, the industry has been changing. To conclude, I would discuss the changes I experienced as both a passenger who regularly uses the underground ride-hailing platforms and a researcher who talked to drivers and other passengers participating in the industry, and thus gained insight into their experiences of the changes from their perspectives.

To start with, the platforms periodically "improve" their interface. When I was writing the proposal for this project, as discussed above, on many platforms, the passenger was able to view the real-time location of the coming driver and also there was not as much space dedicated to advertising as there is now. At that time, on Raccoon Go, as a passenger, I could see who was around me and I could choose the driver I preferred – maybe or maybe not the one that is geographically closest to me. If my friend tells me a driver's alias in Raccoon Go, I can even find his alias in the available drivers' list and take a ride with him.

However, at the time I started to do fieldwork after the ethics application was approved in July 2018, the interface of Raccoon Go had already changed. On the

platform, I could no longer know whom I was choosing from the pool of drivers who was available at that moment. The only option I could choose was the style of ride experience I wanted: comfortable (1-4 passengers), luxury (1-4 passengers) or big-sized vehicle (5-7 passengers). I would no longer choose the make and model of the vehicle from a list of drivers with their vehicle information and distance laid out clearly or hail a ride deliberately with a driver I knew through the platform, for I would not know who was available or who was coming to pick me up, until the driver called me over the phone.

This feature has been maintained in Kabu until recently. As I mentioned in previous sections, Kabu not only maintained the list of available drivers but provided spaces for drivers to add notes about their preferred destination, the vehicle they were driving that day, and even their hobbies and interests. Recently, Kabu upgraded their system and changed its platform interface. According to the article they posted to their public account to explain the recent regulatory change about ride-hailing in BC and this recent upgrade of system, "after this upgrade, the minimalist interface, the accurate positioning of pick-up and drop-off points, the upgrade of algorithm, the algorithm-based analysis of the most frequently visited places, will provide the most professional technological support for your trips." The result of this upgrade, from a passenger's perspective, is that the list of drivers disappeared, along with the creative notes the drivers used to add. What's there instead are three categories of ride experiences: economy, luxury and spacious. The interface looked very similar to the current interface of Didi, in which, a car symbolizing the category of service – economy, luxury or spacious -- was in the middle of the ride questionnaire interface, with details of the pick-up and drop-off locations at the top and the maximum of passengers allowed, passenger's phone number and two buttons at the bottom – "book an appointment" and "take the ride now".

Another change common to the ride-hailing platforms is the composition of drivers. Here it goes back to the question I discussed in Chapter 4 – who are the drivers of these ride-hailing platforms that legally ambiguous in the region? According to Philip, "the drivers used to be mostly students." Yet that phenomenon has been changing. "Recently there are more and more '*xin yi min da shu*'". What Philip meant by "*xin yi min da shu*" literally translates to "middle-aged new-immigrant men". They usually immigrated to Canada earlier from Mainland China, sometimes along with their families. Most of them did not go to school in Canada. Thus, different from international students,

who may spend their high school, college and university and even postgraduate years immersed in Metro Vancouver – a metropolitan region famous for and also actively branding itself of its diversity – many of these "middle-aged new-immigrant men" go to school in China (their education level varies), work in China and then move to Canada for various reasons.[92] This change in composition of drivers is acutely felt by passengers like me. When I first connected with Chinese-language ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver in 2017, all of the drivers I met were international students, studying in local universities or colleges, making some extra money in their extracurricular time. However, when the fieldwork started for this research, about half of the drivers I encountered looked much older than college students and their status as middle-aged immigrants were often confirmed in our small talk.

Another key change is the regulatory environment. In the last two to three years, it has been said a number of times that that Uber and similar ride-hailing operators will soon get legal permission to run on the roads of BC. In early 2017, BC government announced that Uber and other ride-hailing companies would be able to operate starting December of that year. However, fulfilling this promise became difficult in the context of the polarized discussion of ride-hailing, and rather than progress with the legislation, ride-hailing got an increasing amount of coverage in news related to the 2017 BC Provincial Election. Amid the heated discussion of whether and how ride-hailing should be legalized in the province, coverage on underground ride-hailing companies that already dispatching cars on the roads of the Lower Mainland of BC emerged. Starting from this time, these underground ride-hailing companies which were operating despite BC's Uber ban, became an oft-referenced phenomenon in the discussion of ride-hailing in Metro Vancouver. While a legislative committee composed of PTB, taxi unions and other stakeholders was working on a solution for ride-hailing in BC, local authorities were trying to crack down the underground WeChat-based ride-hailing activities and dozens of drivers were caught doing underground ride-hailing and given tickets with fines of over one thousand dollars. In March 2019, debates were in the air as the first ride-hailing company – Kater – started to operate in BC. Nevertheless, many criticized that its business model was in nature similar to that of taxis, rather than ride-hailing. Thus, for

[92] Some of them may take some courses when they come to Canada, but different from the international students who may not have a clear idea about whether they would settle down in Canada when they are at school, new immigrants usually are quite immigration-oriented.

Kater's critics, Kater's launch, though claiming to be the first ride-hailing platform in Vancouver, did not mean that ride-hailing was coming to BC. After all, Uber and other ride-hailing platforms had not hit the roads of BC as of the time I wrote this thesis. In July 2019, BC government announced that ride-hailing companies would be able to operate in BC as early as September 16, 2019 and related regulations on driver licensing and vehicle insurance were supposed to also take in effect on that date. Initially it was not clear what kind of insurance the ride-hailing drivers needed to purchase for their vehicles, but then the provincial government confirmed that rather than doing ride-hailing using their regular Class 5 driver's license, ride-hailing drivers would have to take a test and get Class 4 driver's license, which is the commercial license originally for taxi and limo drivers.

Either in the aforementioned legislative committee, or in the general discussion on the legalization of ride-hailing in BC, the topic of Chinese-language ride-hailing did not seem to have a strong presence. Except for Kabu, none of the Chinese-language ride-hailing platforms have participated in the committee's discussion on BC's solution of ride-hailing industry. The most common response, as well as strategy, used by ride-hailing drivers over the last two years, has been to remain "secret" "underground" and "Chinese" – which, according to the drivers I interviewed, is to reduce the risks of meeting police pretending to be passengers and by taking passengers who were only Chinese. The ethnicity-oriented strategy, as discussed in Chapter 3, raised a huge controversy.[93] Yet still, despite the drivers' attempts, in a joint crackdown of Richmond authorities, 12 drivers were caught and fined for doing ride-hailing by PTB (January 2018). Perhaps that is one of the reasons why Richmond drivers were less interested in participating in my research and even alarmed by it.

Kabu, as one of the most vocal underground ride-hailing operators, has published articles on their WeChat public account to explain, analyze and even respond to BC's legislation on ride-hailing. In two of its recent articles, Kabu asks the government to stop its "Game of Throne" on the issue of introducing ride-hailing to BC but also says that Kabu will keep working with the government to bring convenient and legal ride-hailing service to its passengers, which, as stated in the most recent article, includes

[93] To figure out whether these Chinese-language ride-hailing platforms take passengers based on their ethnicity, *Global News* conducted an experiment and wrote two reports after being refused by the driver. See Ferreras (2018, January 8) and Ferreras and Beja (2018, January 9).

launching Class 4 training groups and encouraging drivers to pass the test and get the license as soon as possible.

At the time of writing, though some details of ride-hailing regulations in BC have been revealed, ride-hailing platforms like Uber cannot legally operate in BC till mid-October 2019. Just like the past two to three years, the next few months, and probably years, underground ride-hailing platforms will likely continue to witness ongoing changes. Given the limited amount of the space in this thesis, it is impossible to wrap the entire history of BC's ride-hailing regulation into this thesis. Nevertheless, in this thesis I have focused on recording the changes these underground WeChat-based ride-hailing platforms have witnessed and embraced, as these changes have formed the environment where they operate and have been and will be shaping their presence in Metro Vancouver for a long time. After all, Raccoon Go, Kabu, and other "illegal Richmond ride-hailing" platforms are local platforms that will keep growing, serving as well as problematizing.

References

“Another ‘sidou’ was cracked down in Richmond”. [列治文又一间华人开的“私斗”被端了，中国留学生哭晕在厕所里]. (2017, December 6). *Lahoo.ca*. Retrieved from https://www.lahoo.ca/article-116194-1.html

“City Student radio” [同城学生电台（电台音频）]. (2018, April 13). *Kabu*. (audio file)”. Retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/w_udbL9SoTwX3z_HqlS60Q

“Didi are recruiting drivers”. [滴滴司机火热招募中]. (n.d.). *Didi*. Retrieved August 20, 2019 from https://dpubstatic.udache.com/static/dpubimg/ff08708915d9a03ae7d0a2fdd62415be/index.html

“Elaborate 'booze can' shut down by RCMP in Richmond”. (2017, December 5). *CBC*. Retrieved from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/elaborate-booze-can-shut-down-by-rcmp-in-richmond-1.4434649

“Expanded Chanel store in Canada sells US$3 million broach”. (2016, June 9). *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved from https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/fashion-luxury/article/1970425/expanded-chanel-store-canada-sells-us3-million-broach

“I say it three times because it is important! And it is three things.” [重要的事情说三遍，更何况是三件事]. (2018, June 21). *Kabu*. Retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/CvYr-XS1v2Wm4FGR6lQV4w

“Interested in partnering with us?” (n.d.). *Uber*. Retrieved August 20, 2019 from https://get.uber.com/cl/radio/?utm_source=tv&utm_campaign=local

“Police ask for help in finding missing Richmond teen”. (2017, September 15). *Richmond News*. Retrieved from https://www.richmond-news.com/news/police-ask-for-help-in-finding-missing-richmond-teen-1.22749042

“WeChat Privacy Protection Summary”. (2018, May 10). *WeChat.com*. Retrieved from https://www.wechat.com/en/privacy_policy.html

Allen Zhang’s speech on WeChat’s open class pro event 2019, summarizing the 8 years of WeChat. [2019 微信公开课张小龙演讲全程回顾，总结微信 8 年] (2019, January 10). Retrieved from https://v.qq.com/x/cover/b86kk0n60chvn5j/b0029zsv8t9.html

Alonso, A., & Oiarzabal, P. J. (Eds.). (2010). *Diasporas in the new media age: Identity, politics, and community*. University of Nevada Press.

Amelina, A., Faist, T., & Nergiz, D. D. (Eds.). (2014). *Methodologies on the move: The transnational turn in empirical migration research*. Routledge.

Anderson, B., & McFarlane, C. (2011). Assemblage and geography. *Area, 43*(2), 124-127.

Anderson, D. N. (2014). “Not just a taxi”? For-profit ridesharing, driver strategies, and VMT. *Transportation*, 41(5), 1099-1117.

Anderson, K., Ang, I., Del Bono, A., McNeill, D., & Wong, A. (2019). *Chinatown Unbound: Trans-Asian Urbanism in the Age of China*. Rowman & Littlefield International.

Beer, D. (2013). *Popular culture and new media: The politics of circulation*. Springer.

Berry, J. W. (1997). Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation. *Applied psychology*, *46*(1), 5-34.

Biao, X., & Shen, W. (2009). International student migration and social stratification in China. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *29*(5), 513-522.

Büscher, M., & Urry, J. (2009). Mobile methods and the empirical. *European Journal of Social Theory*, *12*(1), 99-116.

Campbell, A. (2018, January 30). Dozens of ride-hailing drivers fined in Richmond during crackdown. *Richmond News*. Retrieved from https://www.richmond-news.com/news/dozens-of-ride-hailing-drivers-fined-in-richmond-during-crackdown-1.23158672

Campbell, N., & Zeng, J. (2006). Living in the West: A study of Chinese international students' adaptation. *Communication Journal of New Zealand, 7*(1), 1-32.

Candidatu, L., Leurs, K., & Ponzanesi, S. (2019). Digital Diasporas: Beyond the Buzzword: Toward a Relational Understanding of Mobility and Connectivity. In J. Retis & R. Tsagarousianou (Eds.), *The Handbook of Diasporas, Media, and Culture*, 31-47. Wiley Blackwell.

Chee, F. M. (2018). An Uber ethical dilemma: examining the social issues at stake. *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, *16*(3), 261-274.

Chen L., & Hanasono, L. L. (2016). The effect of acculturation on Chinese international students’ usage of Facebook and Renren. *China Media Research, 12*(1), 46-60.

Chen, H., Butler, E., & Liang, X. (2018). Facilitating or impeding acculturation: A qualitative study on mobile social messaging in first-generation Chinese immigrants’ everyday lives. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 47*(6), 510-529.

Chen, L., & Yang, X. (2015). Nature and effectiveness of online social support for intercultural adaptation of mainland Chinese international students. *International journal of communication*, *9*, 2061-2181.

Chen, Y., Mao, Z., Qiu, J. L. (2018). *Super-sticky WeChat and Chinese society*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.

Collier, S. J., & Ong, A. (2004). Anthropological Problems. In A. Ong & S. J. Collier (Eds.), *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems* (pp. 3–21). London: Blackwell.

De Costa, P. I., Tigchelaar, M., & Cui, Y. (2016). Reflexivity and transnational habitus: The case of a 'poor' affluent Chinese international student. *AILA Review*, *29*(1), 173-198.

Deer, G. (2006). The new yellow peril: The rhetorical construction of Asian Canadian identity and cultural anxiety in Richmond. In C. Teelucksingh (Ed.), *Claiming space: Racialization in Canadian cities* (pp.19-40). Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

DeLanda, M. (2006). Deleuzian social ontology and assemblage theory. *Deleuze and the Social*, 250-266.

Diminescu, D. (2008). The connected migrant: an epistemological manifesto. *Social Science Information*, *47*(4), 565-579.

Dyson, E., Gilder, G., Keyworth, G., & Toffler, A. (2004). Cyberspace and the American Dream: A magna carta for the knowledge age. In F. Webster (Ed.), *The information society* (pp. 295-308). Oxon, OX: Routledge.

Ellison, N. B., & Boyd, D. M. (2013). Sociality through social network sites. In W. H. Dutton (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of internet studies*. Oxford University Press.

Ferreras, J. (2018, January 8). The illegal Richmond ride-hailing app that allegedly won't take non-Chinese fares. *Global News*. Retrieved from https://globalnews.ca/news/3953538/richmond-ride-hailing-illegal/

Ferreras, J., & Beja, T. (2018, January 9). Illegal Richmond ride-hailing company denies having Chinese-only policy. *Global News*. Retrieved from https://globalnews.ca/news/3955792/kabu-illegal-richmond-ride-hailing/

Gomes, C. (2018). *Siloed diversity: Transnational migration, digital media and social networks*. Springer.

Government of Canada. (2019, January 7). The underground economy: Be part of the solution. *Canada Revenue Agency*. Retrieved from https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/corporate/about-canada-revenue-agency-cra/tax-alert/about-underground-economy.html#toc1

Guo, S. (2014). Immigrants as active citizens: Exploring the volunteering experience of Chinese immigrants in Vancouver. *Globalisation, Societies and Education, 12*(1), 51-70.

Han, H. (2012). Being and becoming “a new immigrant” in Canada: How language matters, or not. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, *11*(2), 136-149.

Hannam, K., Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2006). Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings, Mobilities. *Mobilities*, *7*(1), 1-22.

Hanser, A., & Li, J. C. (2015). Opting out? Gated consumption, infant formula and China’s affluent urban consumers. *The China Journal*, (74), 110-128.

Hao, J., & Welch, A. (2012). A tale of sea turtles: Job-seeking experiences of hai gui (high-skilled returnees) in China. *Higher Education Policy*, *25*(2), 243-260.

Hennig, C. (2018, January 13). Richmond struggling to shut down unregulated ride-hailing services. CBC. Retrieved from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/richmond-struggling-to-shut-down-unregulated-ride-hailing-1.4483181

Hepp, A., Bozdag, C., & Suna, L. (2013). Mediatized migrants: Media cultures and communicative networking in the diaspora. In F. Fortunati, R. Pertierra, & J. Vincent (Eds.), *Migrations, diaspora, and information technology in global societies*, (pp. 172-188). Routledge.

Heslop, J. (2018, December 19). International students in BC’s education systems: Summary of research from the student transitions project. *Student Transitions Project*. Retrieved from https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/education/post-secondary-education/data-research/stp/stp-international-research-results.pdf

Hess, A. (2015). The selfie assemblage. *International Journal of Communication*, *9*(1), 1629–1646.

Hiebert, D. (1999). Immigration and the changing social geography of Greater Vancouver. *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, (121), 35-82.

Holmes, P. (2008). Foregrounding harmony: Chinese international student’s voices in communication with their New Zealand peers. *China Media Research, 4*(4), 102-110.

How China is changing your internet. (2016, August 9). *The New York Times*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAesMQ6VtK8

Hui, S. (2013, March 15). Richmond residents outraged because they can’t read Chinese signs. *The Georgia Straight*. Retrieved from https://www.straight.com/blogra/362801/richmond-residents-outraged-because-they-cant-read-chinese-signs

Ip, S. (2017, March 21). Uber shifts into election gear with petition campaigning for ride-hailing in B.C. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/uber-shifts-into-election-gear-with-petition-campaigning-for-ride-hailing-in-b-c

Ip, S. (2017, September 20). Richmond RCMP still searching for missing teen Linhai Yu. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/richmond-rcmp-still-searching-for-missing-teen-linhai-yu

Jia, F., & Koku, E. (2019). Making American friends: The effects of musical tastes and English proficiency on Chinese international students' social networks in the United States. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 48*(1), 4-20.

Keightley, E., & Reading, A. (2014). Mediated mobilities. *Media, Culture & Society*, *36*(3), 285-301.

Kennedy, R., Zapasnik, J., McCann, H., & Bruce, M. (2013). All those little machines: Assemblage as transformative theory. *Australian Humanities Review, 55*(108), 45-66.

King, R., & Raghuram, P. (2013). International student migration: Mapping the field and new research agendas. *Population, Space and Place*, *19*(2), 127-137.

Kong, V. W. Y. (2014). Diasporic media and transcultural journalism: A case study on OMNI TV Chinese news in Greater Vancouver (Master thesis). Simon Fraser University, Canada. Retrieved from SFU Summit (identifier: etd8507).

Kong, Y. (2005). Acculturation in the age of new media. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New York. Conference of the International Communication Association, New York.

Lai, D. C. (2003). From downtown slums to suburban malls: Chinese migration and settlement in Canada. In L. J. C. Ma, & C. Cartier (Eds.), *The Chinese diaspora: Space, place, mobility, and identity* (311-336). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Laurier, E. (2004). Doing office work on the motorway. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *21*(4-5), 261-277.

Lee, J. (2016, March 1). Even before Uber arrives in B.C., it has the taxi industry in disarray. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from http://www.vancouversun.com/news/even+before+uber+arrives+taxi+industry+disarray/11755601/story.html

Leurs, K. H. A. (2015). *Digital passages. Migrant youth 2.0.: Diaspora, gender & youth cultural intersections*. Amsterdam University Press.

Leurs, K., & Smets, K. (2018). Five questions for digital migration studies: Learning from digital connectivity and forced migration in (to) Europe. *Social Media+ Society*, *4*(1), 2056305118764425.

Levin, S. (2018), Uber accused of silencing women who claim sexual assault by drivers. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/mar/15/uber-class-action-lawsuit-sexual-assault-rape-arbitration

Ley, D. (2011). *Millionaire migrants: Trans-Pacific life lines*. John Wiley & Sons.

Li, E., Li, P., & Zong, L. (2016). Profile of Small Businesses Among Chinese in Vancouver. *Canadian Ethnic Studies, 48*(2), 53-70.

Li, L. N. (2018). Tencent myapp (Yingyong Bao): Android app stores and the appification of everything. In J. W. Morris & S. Murray (Eds.), *Appified: Culture in the age of apps* (pp. 42-50). University of Michigan Press.

Lim, S. S., & Pham, B. (2016). If you are a foreigner in a foreign country, you stick together: Technologically mediated communication and acculturation of migrant students. *New Media & Society, 18*(10), 2171–2188.

Liu, C. (2013). From language learners to language users: A study of Chinese students in the UK. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 23*(2), 123-143.

Liu, H., & van Dongen, E. (2013, November 27) "The Chinese Diaspora." *Oxford Bibliographies* in "Chinese Studies". New York: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from https://www-oxfordbibliographies-com.ezproxy.library.ubc.ca/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0070.xml?rskey=VJXnLE&result=1&q=chinese+overseas#firstMatch

Lo, S., Gidlow, B., & Cushman, G. (2014). Adventure education and the acculturation of first-generation Chinese Canadians in Vancouver, Canada. *Journal of Experiential Education, 37*(2), 113-128.

Madokoro, L. (2011). Chinatown and monster homes: The splintered Chinese diaspora in Vancouver. *Urban History Review, 39*(2), 17-24.

Maeder-Qian, J. (2018). Intercultural experiences and cultural identity reconstruction of multilingual Chinese international students in Germany. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *39*(7), 576-589.

Mao, Y. (2015). Investigating Chinese Migrants' Information-Seeking Patterns in Canada: Media Selection and Language Preference. *Global Media Journal*, *8*(2), 113.

Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the world system: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology, 24*(1), 95–117.

Martin, F. (2017). Rethinking network capital: Hospitality work and parallel trading among Chinese students in Melbourne. *Mobilities, 12*(6), 890–907.

Matsaganis, M. D., Katz, V. S., & Ball-Rokeach, S. J. (2011). *Understanding ethnic media: Producers, consumers, and societies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.

McCann, E. (2011). Veritable inventions: Cities, policies and assemblage. *Area*, *43*(2), 143–147.

McCann, E., & Ward, K. (2012). Policy assemblages, mobilities, and mutations: Toward a multidisciplinary conversation. *Political Studies Review*, 10(3), 325-332.

McFarlane, C. (2011). The city as assemblage: Dwelling and urban space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, *29*(4), 649–671.

Meng, Q., Zhu, C., & Cao, C. (2018). Chinese international students' social connectedness, social and academic adaptation: The mediating role of global competence. *Higher Education*, *75*(1), 131-147.

Morley, D. (2011). Communications and transport: The mobility of information, people and commodities. *Media, Culture & Society*, *33*(5), 743-759.

Murray, C., Yu, S., & Ahadi, D. (2007). Cultural diversity and ethnic media in BC. *A report for the Department of Canadian Heritage, Western Region, SFU: Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Communities*. Available at: http://www.bcethnicmedia.ca.

Ng, W. C. (2000). *The Chinese in Vancouver, 1945-80: The pursuit of identity and power*. UBC Press.

Ong, A. (2003). Cyberpublics and diaspora politics among transnational Chinese. *Interventions, 5*(1), 82-100.

Papastergiadis, N. (2000). The Deterritorialization of Culture. In *The turbulence of migration: Globalization, deterritorialization and hybridity*. Polity Press.

Pearson, N.O. (2019, May 7). Dirty cash probe finds booming Vancouver-China luxury car trade. *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-08/dirty-cash-probe-finds-booming-vancouver-china-luxury-car-trade

Peng, Y. (2016). Student migration and polymedia: Mainland Chinese students' communication media use in Hong Kong. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 42*(14), 2395-2412.

Ploner, J. (2017). Resilience, moorings and international student mobilities – exploring biographical narratives of social science students in the UK. *Mobilities*, *12*(3), 425-444.

Pottie-Sherman, Y., & Hiebert, D. (2015). Authenticity with a bang: Exploring suburban culture and migration through the new phenomenon of the Richmond night market. *Urban Studies*, *52*(3), 538-554.

Proctor, J. (2019, May 29). 'Do not be duped': BMW targets 'straw buyers' in race to stop luxury SUV exports. *CBC*. Retrieved from https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/bmw-export-money-laundering-1.5153224

Quan, D. (2018, October 19). In search of 'cultural harmony' in Richmond, B.C. – North America's most Asian city. *National Post*. Retrieved from https://nationalpost.com/feature/richmond-b-c-in-search-of-cultural-harmony-in-north-americas-most-asian-city

Rosenblat, A. (2018). *Uberland: How algorithms are rewriting the rules of work*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Saltman, J. (2017, March 14). B.C. Taxi Association flags public safety fairness of ride-hailing firms. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from https://vancouversun.com/news/local-news/b-c-taxi-association-flags-public-safety-fairness-of-ride-hailing-firms

Savage, G. C. (2019). What is policy assemblage? *Territory, Politics, Governance*, *2671*, 1-17.

Sheller, M. (2011). Mobility. *Sociopedia.isa*, 1-12.

Sheller, M., & Urry, J. (2016). Mobilizing the new mobilities paradigm. *Applied Mobilities*, *1*(1), 10-25.

Shi, Y. (2019, March 27). Ministry of Education: Outbound international students in 2018 reach 662,100. [教育部：2018 年度我国出国留学人员总数达 66.21 万人]. *Xinhua Net*. Retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/2019-03/27/c_1124291948.htm

Slack, J. D. (2012). Beyond transmission, modes, and media. In J. Packer & S. Wiley (Eds.), *Communication matters: Materialist approaches to media, mobility and networks* (pp.143-158). London: Routledge.

Smith, C. (2017, March 8). City of Vancouver and province on collision course over Uber and other ride-sharing services. *The Georgia Straight*. Retrieved from https://www.straight.com/news/878596/city-vancouver-and-province-collision-course-over-uber-and-other-ride-sharing-services

Smyth, M. (2018, July 25). Mike Smyth: Chinese ride-hailing thrives in B.C. despite Uber ban. *The Province*. Retrieved from https://theprovince.com/news/bc-politics/mike-smyth-chinese-ride-hailing-thrives-in-b-c-despite-uber-ban

Stanley, T. J. (2007). " By the Side of Other Canadians": The Locally Born and the Invention of Chinese Canadians. *BC Studies: The British Columbian Quarterly*, (156/7), 109-139.

Statistics Canada. (2013). National Household Survey: Immigration and Ethnocultural Diversity. Retrieved from https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/as-sa/99-010-x/99-010-x2011001-eng.cfm

Sterling, B. (2018, August 24). New Shanzhai. *WIRED*. Retrieved from https://www.wired.com/beyond-the-beyond/2018/08/new-shanzhai-%E5%B1%B1%E5%AF%A8-shanzhai/

Todd, D. (2018, February 23). Douglas Todd: Chinese 'ethnic economies' alive and well in Metro Vancouver. *Vancouver Sun*. Retrieved from https://vancouversun.com/opinion/columnists/douglas-todd-chinese-ethnic-economies-alive-and-well-in-metro-vancouver

Trimikliniotis, N., Parsanoglou, D., & Tsianos, V. (2014). *Mobile commons, migrant digitalities and the right to the city*. Springer.

Underground. (n.d.). *Merriam-Webster.com.* Retrieved August 20, 2019 from https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/underground

Vandrick, S. (2011). Students of the new global elite. *TESOL Quarterly*, *45*(1), 160-169.

Wang, M. (2018). Cultural adaptation and maintenance: Chinese international students' use of Facebook and WeChat (Master thesis). University of South Florida, the United States. Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations & Thesis A & I (ProQuest Number: 10784123).

Wang, Y., & Lim, S. S. (2017). Mediating intimacies through mobile communication. Chinese migrant mothers' digital 'bridge of magpies'. In Andreassen, R., Petersen, M. N., Harrison, K., & Raun, T. (Eds.), *Mediated intimacies: Connectivities, relationalities and proximities*. Routledge.

Waters, J. L. (2002). Flexible families? 'Astronaut' households and the experiences of lone mothers in Vancouver, British Columbia. *Social & Cultural Geography, 3*(2), 117-134.

What is WeChat's dream? WeChat founder Allen Zhang explains. (2019, March 18). *WeChat Chatterbox: The Official WeChat Blog*. Retrieved from https://blog.wechat.com/2019/03/18/what-is-wechats-dream-wechat-founder-allen-zhang-explains/

Wickberg, E. (2007). Global Chinese migrants and performing Chineseness. *Journal of Chinese Overseas*, *3*(2), 177-193.

Wise, J. M. (2005). Assemblage. In C. J. Stivale (Ed.), *Gilles Deleuze: Key concepts* (pp. 77–87). Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Wise, J. M. (2013). Attention and assemblage in the clickable world. In J. Packer & S. B. C. Wiley (Eds.), *Communication Matters: Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility, and Networks* (pp. 159–172). London: Routledge.

Wong, L. L., & Ng, M. (2002). The emergence of small transnational enterprise in Vancouver: The case of Chinese entrepreneur immigrants. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *26*(3), 508-530.

Xiong, D. (2017, August 11). Trunk trade: Unlicensed food market quietly growing in Richmond. *Richmond News*. Retrieved from https://www.richmond-news.com/news/trunk-trade-unlicensed-food-market-quietly-growing-in-richmond-1.21805131

Xu, X. (2017, July 3). B.C. ride-sharing companies slip through cracks as Uber faces pressure from provincial regulators. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/ride-sharing-companies-slip-through-cracks-as-uber-faces-pressure-from-regulators/article35538333/

Xu, X. (2018, January 29). B.C. cracks down on illegal ride-hailing services. *The Global and Mail*. Retrieved from https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/bc-cracks-down-on-illegal-ride-hailing-services/article37784322/

Yan, K., & Berliner, D. C. (2011). Chinese international students in the United States: Demographic trends, motivations, acculturation features and adjustment challenges. *Asia Pacific Education Review, 12*(2), 173-184.

Yang, C., Wu, H., Zhu, M., Brian, G., & Southwell. (2004). Tuning in to fit in? Acculturation and media use among Chinese students in the United States. *Asian Journal of Communication*, *14*(1), 81-94.

Ye, J. (2006a). An examination of acculturative stress, interpersonal social support, and use of online ethnic social groups among Chinese international students. *The Howard Journal of Communications*, *17*(1), 1-20.

Ye, J. (2006b). Traditional and online support networks in the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students in the United States. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*(3), 863-876.

Yin, H. (2015). Chinese-language cyberspace, homeland media and ethnic media: A contested space for being Chinese. *New Media & Society, 17*(4), 556–572.

Yu, L. (2008). An empirical study of recent mainland Chinese migration to Vancouver. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association/Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, *19*(2), 180-196.

Yu, S. (2016). “I am like a deaf, dumb and blind person”: Mobility and immobility of Chinese (im) migrants in Flushing, Queens, New York City. *Journal of transport geography*, *54*, 10-21.

Yu, S. (2018). Mobilocality. *Urban geography*, *39*(4), 563-586.

Zhang, J., & Goodson, P. (2011). Acculturation and psychosocial adjustment of Chinese international students: Examining mediation and moderation effects. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*(5), 614-627.

Zhang, K., & Hao, X. (1999). The Internet and the ethnic press: A study of electronic Chinese publications. *Information Society, 15*(1), 21–30.

Zhang, Y. (2017, September 25). Heartbroken! RCMP responded. Yu’s body was found. His parents will take him home. [心碎！骑警回应本报查询 于林海遗体列市寻获 双亲带儿回家]. *Dushivan*. Retrieved from https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LZRWkJZl6tfJIX4cNj9_aQ

Zhang, Z., & Brunton, M. (2007). Differences in living and learning: Chinese international students in New Zealand. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11*(2), 124-140.