



The Reproduction of “Petro-Nationalism” in Ethnic Media: A Case Study of WeChat Public Accounts’ Coverage of the Trans Mountain Pipeline Controversy

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Over the past 2 decades, Alberta’s bitumen industry has emerged as a major point of contention in Canadian politics, with the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion (TMX) project being a recent controversy that has attracted both domestic and international media attention. This brief research report focuses on news coverage of TMX in a rarely studied form of ethnic media: WeChat newsfeeds (known as “public accounts”) targeting Chinese diasporas across Canadian metropolises. A thematic analysis of TMX-related WeChat articles published between January 2016 and May 2021 reveals an overall negative attitude toward the project’s opponents. This stance is mainly due to WeChat public accounts’ heavy reliance on the Canadian mainstream media’s framing of TMX. As a result, the Canadian mainstream media’s downplay of the climate emergency and decarbonization sets the news agendas of the surveyed WeChat public accounts. Accordingly, there is an urgent need to develop non-English alternative media to engage ethnic minority groups in broader public conversations on climate change mitigation.

Keywords: WeChat, trans mountain, intermedia agenda setting, environmental controversy, ethnic media

INTRODUCTION

People of Chinese descent have grown rapidly in Canada since the early 1990s. According to the 2016 Canadian Census, they were the second largest visible minority group in the country. It is expected that the 2021 Census will find a similar, or even stronger growth trend of the Chinese Canadian population.

Along with this trend, people of Chinese descent have acquired additional significance in Canadian politics. During recent elections at all levels, many candidates have set up private and public accounts on WeChat—the most popular social media/messaging app used by immigrants from Mainland China—for better engagement with Mandarin-speaking constituents.

As WeChat’s impact in Canada is increasingly felt, there is a growing concern over the app’s role in domestic political communication. Since 2019, this concern has been especially noticeable due to heightened tensions between Canada and China. While Canadian content published by WeChat newsfeeds (known as “public accounts”) does not conform to conventional criteria of fake news, it is susceptible to disinformation and extreme opinions from other sources due to two factors: 1) WeChat’s lack of regulation over information targeting Chinese diasporas and 2) a dearth of

professional journalistic training among WeChat public account authors. Consequently, WeChat's tolerance of polarized messages concerning Canadian politics receives criticism for cultivating a toxic discursive environment.

The deteriorating information environment of WeChat reflects a disturbing trend pervading the digital media landscape. Previous research (e.g., Vargo et al., 2018) suggests that although fake or polarized news may only appeal to specific segments of the public, such content's very presence online may influence the agendas of news outlets and social media platforms by forcing them to respond with constant fact-checking information.

Popular mass media's far-reaching impact on social networks thus presents a vivid case of intermedia agenda setting (Guo & McCombs, 2016), a theoretical model focusing on the interplay between different media outlets. From this theoretical perspective, what is conspicuously missing in ongoing public discussions on WeChat's growing influence in Canada is the app's relationship with domestic legacy media: To what extent do the agendas of legacy titles such as the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post* influence Canadian news circulating on WeChat?

Although previous research on WeChat has discussed the various roles the app plays within oversea Chinese communities (e.g., Zhang and Wang, 2019; Sun and Yu, 2020), an analysis addressing WeChat's framing of Canadian political controversies is still missing. Yet, scholarly attention to this research topic is urgently needed considering Canada's rapidly changing political landscape and digital media environment. This article addresses the research gap via an explorative study of WeChat public accounts' coverage of the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion (TMX), a high-profile controversy in recent years' Canadian energy politics.

TMX presents a telling case of Canadian "petro-nationalism," which can be understood as "an ideological framework promoting extractivism as a national public good and positioning critics as anti-Canadian and foreign to the body politic" (Gunster et al., 2021, p. 58). As a subset of the broader conservative populist trend, petro-nationalism is characterized by a rigid "us versus them" binary that conceptualizes political conflicts as struggles between the grassroots "people" and the political, economic, or cultural "elites" who exploit them.

In comparison to the manifestations of resource nationalism (Koch and Perreault, 2019; Conversi, 2020) in other oil exporting states such as Russia, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, and Nigeria, pro-bitumen discourses in Canada exhibit both conceptual similarities and differences. Koch and Perreault (2019) define resource nationalism as a political discourse emphasizing that "the people of a given country, rather than private corporations or foreign entities, should benefit from the resources of a territorially-defined state" (p. 612). This definition addresses both the distribution of profits derived from natural resources and the expression of collective belonging through the idiom of natural resources.

While Canadian petro-nationalism echoes resource nationalism's rhetorical strategies by framing bitumen as a public good, this framing contradicts the fact that Alberta's

bitumen industry is dominated by private corporations and investors who have reaped disproportionate benefits from the boom in bitumen production (Taft, 2017). Thus, in the Canadian context, petro-nationalism's celebration of collective belonging (e.g., The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producer's "Canada's Energy Citizens" campaign) is intended to obscure critical questions about how the economic benefits and environmental costs of bitumen production is distributed. As Conversi (2020) notes, the glaring contradiction between what homogenizing populist appeals promise and the reality on the ground is constantly contested by environmentalists.

Consequently, the reproduction of Canadian petro-nationalism hinges upon the effective construction of a "fossil fuel hegemony," which, by appropriating nationalist rhetoric, 1) downplays Alberta bitumen's enormous environmental impact, 2) justifies the massive subsidies the bitumen industry receives, and 3) hinders economic and political efforts of reducing Canada's dependency on fossil fuel extraction (Kraushaar-Friesen and Busch, 2020).

This hegemony primarily exerts cultural influence through the media, and its effectiveness is contingent on the reach of all Canadians, including ethnic minorities whose main news sources are non-English media outlets. While much has been said and written about Canadian mainstream media's close relations with the bitumen industry (see Gunster and Neubauer, 2018 for an overview), to date no scholarly attention has been paid to WeChat public accounts' framing of Canadian pipeline politics, which warrants the current study.

WECHAT PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

First released by China's Internet giant Tencent back in 2011 as a messaging app, WeChat has subsequently grown into a ubiquitous and versatile platform offering a wide range of functions to its mass user base. The app reached over 1.2 billion monthly active users as of the fourth quarter of 2020 (Statista.com, 2021).

This study focuses on WeChat's newsfeed function, which imitates RSS readers (e.g., Feedly and Flipboard) by allowing WeChat users to subscribe to different "public accounts". Although technically a public account can be set up by any WeChat user, usually only those run by full-time bloggers or professional companies are able to thrive by attracting tens of thousands of subscribers. Because of WeChat's immense popularity among Chinese netizens (including those living overseas), many influential public accounts have become their primary news sources.

For Chinese diasporas in Canada (esp. those living in major metropolises), public accounts such as "52van," "Toronto Life," and "Calgary Life" have been their go-to sources for local information. Although these public accounts mainly publish lifestyle related content (e.g., real estate ads, restaurant discounts, upcoming local events, etc.), in recent years they have regularly stepped into the political domain with content addressing Canada's current affairs. For instance, following the high-profile arrest of Huawei's CFO Meng Wanzhou in

Vancouver, these public accounts reacted with posts strongly criticizing the Canadian government's lack of independence and "hypocrisy," which corresponded to the perception of injustice felt by many Chinese diasporas.

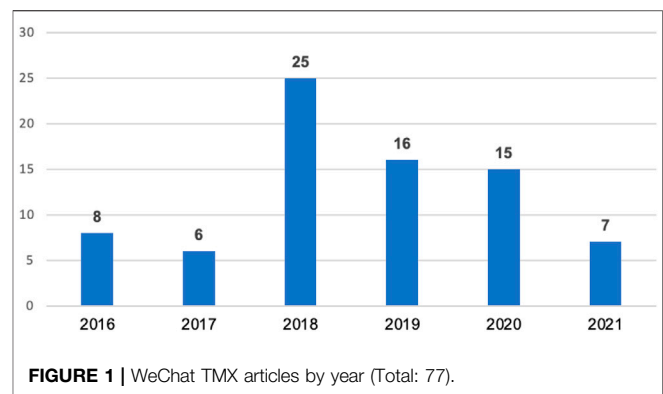
In short, despite being filled with commercial content, public accounts like "Toronto Life" and "52van" have taken the role of ethnic media for many young, net-savvy Chinese diasporas in Canada. Like other ethnic media, the rapid expansion of these public accounts is propelled by their importance as a critical communications structure for Chinese Canadian communities and the marginalization of these communities' voices in mainstream Canadian media (Karim, 2003; Yu, 2016).

Considering WeChat's ubiquitous presence in Chinese netizens' daily lives, its impact has reached almost every corner of Chinese society. Previous research has found that WeChat public accounts tend to have reciprocal relations with other forms of media within China's domestic media ecology (Pan, 2020). This trend is especially notable in public discussions on topics such as government policies and technology. Due to such topics' inherent political risk or knowledge barrier, relevant posts circulating via WeChat public accounts are dominated by voices that simply repeat or compliment news released on other media.

While there is some optimism about WeChat's potential for cultivating counter-narratives that challenge official doctrines, controversial information and viewpoints tend to circulate exclusively within semi-public WeChat groups. When a critical piece on social and political affairs gains wide-spread public attention, it often ends up being taken down by WeChat's real-time censorship mechanism. Thus, when it comes to political news reporting, WeChat remains a peripheral contributor to China's media landscape. This explains why in Su and Xiao (2020) study of intermedia agenda-setting across WeChat public accounts, party newspapers and metropolitan newspapers, no correlation was identified between WeChat public accounts and party newspapers.

WeChat's strict regulation of domestic political news, however, contradicts its "laissez-faire" approach to public accounts targeting Chinese diasporas. Such public accounts are even allowed to post political advertisements, which is unthinkable back in China. During the 2019 Canadian federal election, the federal Conservative party sparked controversy by running an attack advertisement on several public accounts targeting Chinese Canadians, which claimed that "a re-elected Liberal government under Justin Trudeau would legalize hard drugs" (Thompson, 2019 October 19, para. 5).

Like Canada, Australia has also witnessed the growing influence of WeChat among Chinese diasporas and the broader communities they live in (Zhang and Wang, 2019; Sun and Yu, 2020). For example, Sun and Yu (2020) analysis of how the 2019 Australian federal election was discussed in the digital space of WeChat found that "the use of WeChat enabled a much higher level of political engagement among Mandarin-speaking Australians" (p. 9). More interestingly, communications concerning Australian politics facilitate the political integration of new Chinese immigrants to Australia by connecting them with older-generation Chinese community leaders as well as engaging



them in informal political debates. Thus, WeChat serves as an indispensable digital space for virtual interactions among Australia's Chinese communities.

Informed by previous research on WeChat's critical role in connecting overseas Chinese communities, this study examines how WeChat public accounts covered the TMX controversy. The findings reported below provide a preliminary assessment of WeChat's potential to engage Chinese Canadians in public debates about domestic energy politics.

METHODS

This study aims to explore 1) how WeChat public accounts report on the TMX controversy and 2) how their coverage relates to the Canadian mainstream media. To answer both research questions, the research team collected WeChat articles mentioning "Trans Mountain pipeline" or its Chinese translation using "Sougou Weixin" (<https://weixin.sogou.com/>), a Chinese search engine specifically designed for indexing content published by WeChat public accounts.

The initial search identified over 100 articles, but further validation found many of them simply mentioned "Trans Mountain pipeline" by passing. Such articles were subsequently removed from the dataset. The finalized dataset contains 77 articles published between January 2016 and May 2021, indicating that WeChat public accounts' attention to TMX is periodic, primarily in response to the issue's prominence in mainstream media coverage (Figure 1).

Given the modest data size, the research team settled on thematic analysis (CTA) as the coding framework. According to Lawless and Chen (2019), CTA focuses on how reoccurring topics, ideas, or patterns within discourses are related to larger social ideologies. As a qualitative research method, it tends to employ an inductive analytical approach, beginning with the identification of salient themes in one text and continuing by monitoring their recurrence in subsequent texts evaluated. After detecting the recurring and pervasive patterns of information in a dataset, it then examines how these patterns highlight certain themes while concealing others.

The current analysis focused on the "storylines" (Dryzek, 2013) embedded in the TMX dataset and the ways in which

TABLE 1 | Storylines and their sub-themes.

	Number of articles
Storyline 1: TMX as a political Drama	38
B.C. oil prices	9
Federal and provincial politics	25
Impact on real estate	4
Storyline 2: An industry besieged by environmental radicals	21
Grassroots support for TMX	6
TMX's economic significance	15
Storyline 3: TMX as a threat to the local environment and public safety	18

Total numbers of articles in each storyline

they construct simplified and selective entry points into Canada's complex energy politics. Accordingly, each article was first coded to categorize its primary topic. Common themes were subsequently developed inductively based on the coding results. The coding process followed three steps to ensure its trustworthiness and consistency. First, a research assistant coded the dataset to identify each article's primary topic. The preliminary results were then returned to the principal investigator (PI) who examined the coding results and developed the thematic categories. Finally, the research assistant reviewed articles in each thematic category and resolved any coding discrepancy with the PI.

RESULTS

The various themes identified in the dataset constitute three storylines that frame the TMX controversy from different perspectives (Table 1). The "TMX as a political drama" storyline focuses on the British Columbia (B.C.) government's opposition to TMX, which put itself in political and legal battles against Alberta and the federal government. Pervading the storyline's articles are complaints about the negative impacts of pipeline politics on people's daily lives, especially with respect to rising oil prices in British Columbia. Such complaints collectively make the case that it was unfair for hardworking taxpayers to pay the price for the blockade set by the B.C. government and TMX opponents.

Echoing the previous storyline's criticism of the anti-TMX movement, the "an industry besieged by environmental radicals" storyline offers more provocative arguments emphasising TMX's significance to local and national economies. The sentiments expressed by such arguments align with the "petro-nationalism" rhetoric frequently featured in Canadian conservative media (Kraushaar-Friesen and Busch, 2020). By framing the bitumen industry as central to the national interest, the rhetoric portrays Alberta as a victim whose right to expand its resource economy is under coordinated attack by environmentalists and left-leaning politicians.

The third storyline, "TMX as a threat to the local environment and public safety," consists of reports on environmental protests and concerns over TMX's environmental and public safety risks. Not only is this storyline's argumentative strength dwarfed by the number of pro-TMX articles, its framing of TMX opponents is

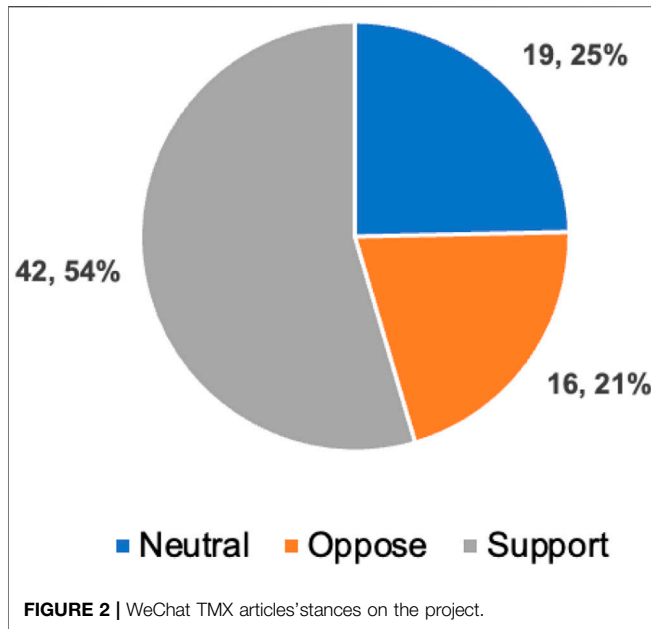
also problematic. None of the 18 articles following this storyline discussed TMX's global environmental impact. Additionally, there was no "call for action" encouraging readers to join the anti-TMX movement, which implicitly constructed public opposition to TMX as an endeavour not particularly relevant to Chinese diasporas. Thus, the storyline would leave readers without sufficient background knowledge with the impression that a minority of Metro Vancouver residents opposed TMX due to its threat to public safety, the local environment, and regional property prices.

According to the narratives of the three storylines, The TMX controversy's timeline can be divided into three distinctive stages: 2016–2017 as the stage of escalating political tensions, 2018–2019 as the stage of intense public conflicts, and 2020–2021 as the stage of gridlock. Below, I summarize how the collected WeChat articles reported on the TMX controversy at each stage.

2016–2017: Environmental opposition to TMX first drew national media attention back in November 2014 when more than 100 people were arrested for blocking crews from conducting drilling and survey work in preparation for the pipeline expansion. This incident, however, did not receive any coverage in the dataset. TMX-related content began to appear in 2016, but these early posts simply mentioned the controversy without explicating its details. A February 2016 post, for instance, warned Chinese real estate buyers to avoid the North Burnaby neighbourhood because the construction of TMX would negatively impact its properties' future salability.

In November 2016, a large anti-TMX protest in Vancouver downtown became the first event that received coverage from multiple WeChat public accounts. Yet, they all published the same article originally appearing at lahoo.ca (a Canadian Chinese ethnic media), which only attended to the scale of the protest (approx. 3,000 protestors). For Chinese Canadians who became aware of the TMX controversy via reading this article, it was difficult to understand why the project's environmental concerns had brought mounting political tension.

In January 2017, TMX received its initial regulation approval from the federal government. In response, WeChat public accounts, especially those based in Alberta (e.g., "Calgary Life") celebrated this decision. Echoing the optimism expressed by local legacy media, they framed the project as Alberta's economic hope. Meanwhile, the opposition side also received considerable attention, but even Vancouver-based



WeChat public accounts deemed such actions as “desperate fights” that were unlikely to reverse the situation.

In May 2017, the B.C. NDP and Greens agreed to form a coalition government following the provincial election. A major premise of the coalition is that the new B.C. government would “employ every tool available” to stop TMX. This key political development, however, received no mention in the dataset until 2018 when a legal battle on TMX between British Columbia and Alberta splashed across national headlines.

2018–2019: The inter-provincial legal battle dominated WeChat public account’s TMX coverage during this period. Between February and March 2018, the primary concern expressed on WeChat was how the growing inter-provincial tension would influence the daily lives of Metro Vancouver residents.

Over subsequent months, the legal battle was accompanied by a series of ups and downs, including Kinder Morgan Canada’s decision to suspend non-essential spending on TMX (April), the federal government’s decision to acquire the project (May), the Federal Court of Appeal’s overturn of the project’s original approval (August). The project eventually got re-approved in February 2019. These developments received sustained national media attention, which also reflected in the frequency of related WeChat articles. Yet, unlike national legacy media such as *CBC News* and the *Globe and Mail*, which maintained a balanced view on both supporters and opponents of TMX, the dataset demonstrated an evident bias against TMX opponents. More importantly, the articles paid no attention to the issue of Indigenous sovereignty, which was at the heart of the TMX controversy.

As the TMX controversy continued in 2019, the WeChat public accounts offered a new perspective: How the project’s outcomes may be affected by escalating Canada–China tensions due to the detention of Huawei’s CFO Meng Wanzhou. While being critical of the Canada government’s action (which was in line with the public anger expressed across the Chinese Internet),

these public accounts also expressed the concern that the federal government’s inability to suppress British Columbia’s resistance to TMX would deepen the political division between Western provinces.

2020–2021: TMX-related content dropped significantly during this period, mainly because of COVID-19. Overall, the WeChat public accounts maintained their support for TMX. For instance, in December 2020, an accident occurred at TMX’s Burnaby construction site, multiple WeChat public accounts reported this incident, but they all ended up accepting the official narrative that this was an extremely rare accident; and TMX remained a very safe project.

Taken together, the thematic analysis reveals an overt pro-TMX stance shared by the surveyed WeChat public accounts (Figure 2). Apart from a few articles discussing Canada’s relationship with China and TMX’s detrimental effect on regional property prices, these public accounts have framed the TMX controversy as irrelevant to Chinese Canadians, obfuscating the pipeline’s local and global consequences. Notably, this framing pattern echoes a pro-bitumen discourse frequently found in Canadian mainstream media: Environmental elites, not ordinary citizens, are the primary participants in the ongoing political resistance to fossil fuels (Carroll, 2021; Gunster et al., 2021).

DISCUSSION

This brief research report has provided an overview of WeChat public accounts’ coverage of the TMX controversy from 2016 to 2021. The surveyed WeChat public accounts’ support of TMX can be attributed to two factors. First, WeChat public accounts targeting Chinese diasporas consider affluent immigrants—who tend to be politically conservative—as their primary readership. This explains why WeChat’s coverage of TMX has featured issues like property value.

Second, in the absence of professional editors and journalists, these public accounts must rely heavily on English-language legacy media reports for content creation. This reliance makes WeChat’s Canadian content inextricably linked to the Canadian mainstream media, whose news agendas are under the bitumen industry’s powerful influence (Gunster and Neubauer, 2018; Carroll, 2021). Thus, WeChat public accounts inevitably become a digital echo chamber for pro-fossil fuel rhetoric, reinforcing its denial of the climate emergency and the need for decarbonization among Chinese Canadians.

The lack of attention paid by WeChat’s public accounts to TMX’s global environmental impact and encroachment on Indigenous sovereignty is equally alarming. With growing public support for both decarbonization and decolonization, Chinese Canadians need to be engaged in relevant public conversations. Nevertheless, some Chinese Canadians may be hesitant to join such conversations due to WeChat public accounts’ neglect of both issues. Thus, there is an urgent need to develop non-English alternative media to engage ethnic minority groups in broader public conversations on climate change mitigation.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The dataset supporting this study's findings are available upon request from the corresponding author.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SC conceived and designed the study, led the data collection and analysis, and wrote the manuscript.

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