SUPER-STICKY WECHAT AND CHINESE SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

1.1. RISE OF A MEGA-PLATFORM

Jay was born in Detroit, Michigan, but he has worked for more than 10 years as a photographer in Shanghai, China, a mega-city of 24 million. Jay describes his lifestyle as 'very Chinese.'[1] To buy his breakfast or other mundane business transactions, Jay does not usually need to carry his wallet around. Instead, he scans a QR code via WeChat Pay (a virtual wallet operating similar to Apple Pay). He talks with his coworkers and friends mainly through WeChat audio messaging because 'they would feel strange if you ring them.' Jay has taught his family members in the US how to use WeChat so that they can have video chats on a regular basis without paying exorbitant fees for international calls or SMS.

Jay probably would have never realised how entrenched WeChat has become in his everyday life until he signed up for a 12-hour WeChat Sabbath experiment initiated by WeChat. When the experiment started, the first thing Jay found himself doing was to stop by an ATM to withdraw cash. When regular work hour started, he faced an immediate challenge – he did not have the phone number of the sponsor

with whom he had to work that day because they normally communicate through WeChat. Without access to WeChat, Jay ended up calling a mutual friend to ask for his sponsor's number. By the time Jay reached his sponsor, he already missed the appointment. In the evening, he missed his regular video chat with his daughter in the US because of WeChat Sabbath.

As the 12-hour fast on WeChat ended, Jay confessed, 'leaving WeChat means leaving [social] life' in Shanghai. Jay takes for granted many of the services that he can get by tapping into his WeChat account without noticing how his daily routine and social life have come to rely on WeChat. WeChat is now inseparable from its users' everyday habits: checking status updates from their friends, purchasing items from local stores or online shops, hailing a taxi and transferring money (Hariharan, 2017). One tends to underestimate the power of habits until the routine is disrupted. As bestseller author Charles Duhigg pointed out, '[habits] often occur without our permission […] They shape our lives far more than we realize […]' (2012, p. 25).

'Leaving WeChat means leaving [social] life' in China – think about it for a moment. To some who have never used WeChat, this statement may sound hyperbolic. But to many Chinese and people like Jay who live in Chinese cities, this is not at all an exaggeration. As researchers who use and are familiar with WeChat, we also see something extra about this app – or, more precisely, a super-app: primarily operating on mobile devices, WeChat defies the conventional notions of social media known by most Westeners. For example, in one of the earliest attempts to define social media, Kaplan and Haenlein stated, '[social] media is a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content' (2010, p. 61).

Subsequent scholars continue to stress the feature of user-generated content as what makes social media distinctive from other medium forms or communication tools that can also be used for socialising (e.g. SMS). For instance, according to Carr and Hayes (2015, p. 50), '[social] media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.'

Is WeChat such an instance of social media defined by its function as a platform for user-generated content? Applying this Western idea, we would soon find something strange: as we shall detail Chapter 2, WeChat was initially was not social media but it gradually *grew into* one and then *outgrew* it. When first released in the App Store on January 19, 2011, its Chinese name Weixin meant micro-messages.[2] It was an instant audio messaging application – a cell phone walkie-talkie according to its self-description (Figure I.2) (http://bit.ly/2C4Nsmz). Many reviews at the time accused WeChat of copying Kik, Talkbox and WhatsApp – three widely-used messaging applications then. By November 2017, WeChat had accumulated 980 million monthly active users globally, increasing from 899 million the previous year (China Academy of Information and Communications Technology, 2017; Tencent, 2017b). WeChat is among the most popular apps used in China: 8 out of 10 Chinese smartphone owners use WeChat (Long, 2017).

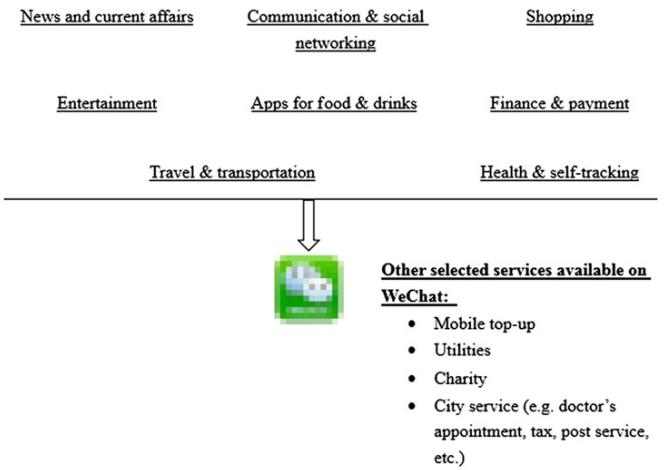
Similar to WhatsApp, WeChat is mostly used for small groups and private communication among friends, family members and work-related contacts (China Tech Insights, 2017, p. 8) as opposed to 'the more public-facing platforms' like Twitter and Instagram (Harwit, 2016; Miller et al., 2016). WeChat users may share personal life moments, news

and op-ed articles and content related to their work. They may subscribe to news and other topics of interest through a service called Official Accounts (similar to corporate accounts on Twitter), but they cannot use WeChat to create public groups or forums for communication with total strangers. It is therefore primarily a tool for private conservation like Facebook Messenger, although both WeChat and Facebook can create large-scale public influence through private and semi-private connections.

People also use WeChat for activities more than creating and sharing content. Eighty per cent of users reported having completed work-related tasks on WeChat such as sending documents and files, making transactions and having conference calls. In business communication, WeChat has a much higher penetration rate (90%) than email (less than 30%) in China (China Tech Insights, 2017, p. 12). In addition, third-party services keep growing on WeChat. Plugging into their WeChat accounts, users can order takeaway food, hail taxis, check-in for flights, book hotels, search nearby restaurants, pay utilities, enquire about their tax and social security benefits, start an online business, engage in in-store and online shopping, trade stocks and manage their wealth and the list goes on. In 2017, WeChat rolled out a service called Weixin Smart Transport that allows users to scan a QR code to pay public transport fares even without internet access at the point of transaction.

WeChat has grown into a mega-platform that has no equivalent elsewhere in the world. If you have never used it, imagine you could combine 'lite' versions of Facebook, Yelp, TripAdvisor, Priceline, Groupon, DealCatcher, Quora, TD Ameritrade and much more, and WeChat is the resulting combination. The aspiration to integrate add-on functions to app development is not unique to WeChat. Consider Google's many services – Google Reader for news, Google

Figure I.1. An Illustration of WeChat As An All-in-one App.



Hangouts for social networking that replaced Google Talk and Google+. While some of those Google products achieved mediocre success or were discontinued, WeChat has outstripped them by developing into a one-stop gateway to more than 20 functions. The *Economist* named WeChat 'one app to rule them all' (2016). To many Chinese today, for example, senior citizens, using mobile internet means little more than WeChat. This unique capacity to grow and glue together an increasing array of activities marks WeChat as a mega-platform set apart from social media apps known to Westerners (Figure I.1)[3].

I.2. THE SUPER-STICKY WECHAT

WeChat is super-sticky because it includes so many functions and it keeps growing to the extent that its average Chinese

users are glued to the meta-platform whenever they use their smartphones. In software development and interface design, one principle is to cultivate loyal users, to 'hook' customers (Eyal, 2014) or use 'sticky' design, because it tries to attract users permanently while preventing them from leaving the platform (Edelman & Singer, 2015). At its extreme, a sticky design turns into an addictive design (Schüll, 2014), which means a series of design decisions are made to stimulate and enhance addictive behaviours. Take casinos as an example. Anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll found that the electronic gambling interface of slot machines, the interior lighting and floor plans, and the gambling ambiance, are all devised to entice gamblers to lose track of time so that they can spend as much time as possible in the casinos (Schüll, 2014). Digital products including gadgets like smartphones and software applications are becoming a fertile land for design tweaks and tricks that make them difficult to resist (Alter, 2017). The autoplay function on video streaming sites like YouTube and Netflix is one of the early designs for retaining viewers. The red notification dot showing the number of unread messages for social media apps and email apps is another example of sticky design. The goal is to lure users to tap or click on the app icon to enter and immerse themselves in the app-mediated world.

As far as retaining users and sticking them to the app is concerned, WeChat is probably the world's most outstanding case of sticky design. In fact, we see WeChat as *super-sticky*, because it aspires to create a gateway platform for its 980 million users such as Jay to carry out most of their daily business. Most importantly, users can access this wide range of services without switching between WeChat and other apps or web pages. As Jay implied in his comment at the end of the WeChat Sabbath experiment, they do not have to *leave* WeChat. WeChat is almost everything and users are happily

stuck to the adhesive mega-platform. Many see their WeChat habit as such due to their own free will. Or so they think.

Connie Chan (2015), a partner at the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, explained WeChat's approach. She wrote, differing from Facebook's business model of data-driven ads delivery, WeChat 'cares more about how relevant and central WeChat is in addressing the daily, even hourly needs of its users […] [It] has focused on building a mobile lifestyle – its goal is to address every aspect of its users' lives, including non-social ones.' Offering a space '[…] that allows [users] to easily connect with family and friends across countries' remains a core service of the app (WeChat, 2017). A new slogan 'WeChat is a lifestyle' was put to use from 2016 (Figure I.2). With those ever-growing functions increasing the

Figure I.2. Comparison of WeChat between 2011 and 2016.

Source: Internet Archives.

value of the platform exponentially – commonly known as the network effect, WeChat becomes central to users as well as service providers and content creators. This super-sticky platform is, of course, also a convenient one-stop site for state censorship and surveillance (Kessel & Mozur, 2016).

WeChat raises important questions for anyone who hopes to venture beyond the garden of Silicon Valley to explore the fertile grounds of Chinese social media, and to learn a few new things that enrich our understanding of digital platforms globally. You may wonder:

- How does WeChat work?
- How has it evolved both as a communication tool and as a socio-technical artifact?
- Why does it become super-sticky? Why is it able to weave itself into China's daily social fabric in ways hardly seen elsewhere?
- How can we understand this super-sticky platform in the contexts of Chinese society with its specific media practices, cultural traditions and political climate?
- What are the dangers in this one-stop site for social interactions and commerce, as well as surveillance and censorship?
- WeChat has been expanding globally – its wallet function (WeChat Pay) is now available in 19 countries outside China. In this context, what are the consequences of the globalisation of the model of WeChat? How do we assess its promises and pitfalls both in China and in the world?

This book presents our answers to these questions. In the remaining sections of this introductory text, we explain our approach to studying the stickiness of WeChat. We also

demonstrate how studies on non-Western platforms like WeChat may contribute to our knowledge about social media and online environments in general. This chapter will end with an overview of the book structure.

1.3. HOW WE STUDY WECHAT

Social media is not so easy to define. Scholars, nonetheless, have studied the transformative impact of social media applications on people's media practices, social networking, political participation and activism (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Chakravartty & Roy, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2012; Lee, 2015; Rotman et al., 2011). They deploy different theories and various methods of studying social media, many of which inform our approach toward studying super-sticky WeChat.

The first set of ideas that we call 'platform studies' stress the technological properties of social media. For instance, the internet was believed to reduce the costs of organising a protest because information generally spreads faster and wider at a lower cost than through more established media like print or broadcasting (Earl & Kimport, 2011). This perspective of technological affordance leads scholars to define social media as a cluster of internet-based applications that share the attributes to foster peer-to-peer connections and content creation and sharing. Our earlier quote of Kaplan and Haenlei's (2010, p. 61) definition of social media as 'a group of Internet-based applications […] that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content' is representative of this perspective. Others also pointed out that social media allow 'formerly passive media consumers to make and disseminate their own media' (Mandiberg, 2012, p. 1). Social media users become prosumers because they create and curate online

content by and for themselves while consuming media content.[4] Subsequent scholarly definitions elaborate on the means and purposes of user-generated contents. For Sloan and Quan-Haase, 'Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organisations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modifies, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible' (2017, p. 17).

This framework of technological affordance draws people's attention to new patterns of user behaviours associated with the widespread adoption of the internet and digital platforms. It also offers scholarly vocabularies to describe the mainstreaming of a subtype of media and its cultures in a similar manner as for previous media forms such as radio and television. Despite the promises of the technological potentials, media practices are not *determined* by platform technologies. Take protest as an example, social media platforms usher in new 'logic' of 'connective actions' (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012) that boosts the spread of collective political actions because users personalise their media content and share it through their networks. Simultaneously, however, the rapidly growing momentum for protest is also a challenge with regard to ways of organising and sustaining the actions in order to achieve substantial outcomes (Tufekci, 2017).

Another perspective to understand social media sets its entry point of enquiry at media practices instead of platform or technological configurations. John Hartley went as far as to argue that '*social* media is a 'tautology'', because '[all] sociality is mediated' (Hartley, 2017, p. 13, *italic* for emphasis). What matters in this line of enquiry is how users achieve, maintain and manage sociality when there are many choices of media and communication tools. Media scholars Madianou and Miller (2013), for example, developed the concept of 'polymedia' to describe the relationship between

digital media, users and their social world. The framework of 'polymedia' treats social media as part of a larger system, rather than being discrete platforms, which together form an 'integrated structure of affordances' with many 'communicative opportunities' (Madianou & Miller, 2013, p. 170). The actual functioning of social media is therefore almost always 'in relation' to other means of communication and sociality. Because users exploit 'communicative opportunities' made possible by different media and communication tools in order to fulfil their real-life needs, this framework centring on media practices prompt us to examine what causes people to select different communication tools and how their social media usage patterns emerge.

The 'practices' perspective is rooted in the media studies tradition that sees media and society as mutually constitutive. It leads scholars to focus on how social and economic background and specific cultural contexts shape communication and sociality needs, which in turn gives rise to different cultural formations and media practices. For instance, internet cafes and family shops for affordable mobile phones flourished in urban China in the late 1990s and early 2000s because they satisfied the needs for communication, sociality and entertainment among millions of migrant workers (Qiu, 2009). Furthermore, moral and emotional investments in interpersonal relations also affect individuals' media behaviour. Studies have shown that teenagers were able to navigate a variety of social networking sites with considerable sophistication and develop complex understandings and practices of online friendship (Livingstone, 2008). When expressing their online identities and presences, they carefully calculated opportunities (for socialisation, friendship and intimacy) and risks (of privacy violation and the possible threat of abuse and so on) (boyd, 2014; Livingstone, 2008). Expanding the polymedia concept, Miller and colleagues (Miller et al., 2016)

suggested that the choice of media platforms and what people do on them are essentially inseparable. In other words, '[s]ocial media should not be seen primarily as the platforms upon which people post, but rather as the contents that are posted on these platforms.' (Miller et al., 2016: 61).

The two perspectives outlined earlier are not mutually exclusive, and this book on WeChat benefits from them both. Specifically, the platform studies perspective informs us with regard to capturing and articulating the super-sticky character of WeChat, which sets WeChat apart from other social media platforms. We shall see that WeChat defines new 'rules of engagement' (Burgess et al., 2017) for its users, not only on the media platform per se, but also for their daily experiences in a much wider scope, such as booking flights, or paying at local business vendors. The platform mediates and sticks together many social and cultural activities that would otherwise be carried out more or less discretely. Using this approach, we are able to look into key social-technical objects on WeChat, such as Red Packet in the WeChat Pay function that has added new cultural meanings and social utility to a centuries-old cultural tradition in China – giving away money wrapped in red envelopes, now performed on a new digital platform.

We, however, do not treat the development of WeChat from a mobile walkie-talkie to a mega-platform as a natural process. The framework of media practices, in particular, leads us to examine the historical, cultural and social preconditions in China that have shaped the emergence and evolution of WeChat. For example, we trace the rapid ascendency of WeChat back to the earlier popularity of QQ, an antecedent social networking and entertainment platform also developed by Tencent, the parent company of WeChat. QQ remained China's largest social media platform until

December 2016 when the number of WeChat users surpassed that of QQ users for the first time (Tencent, 2017a).

Corporate software and platforms are notorious for their opaqueness – legal scholar Frank Pasquale used the term 'black box society' to describe the dominance of these secret and opaque corporate algorithms in our society (Pasquale, 2015). We examine the stickiness of WeChat as the outcome of complex social mechanisms involving users, interface design and Chinese social and cultural contexts.

To provide a comprehensive portrait of WeChat, we apply a multi-method approach (Denzin, 1989; Yin, 1994) to collect, triangulate and analyse relevant data. Our materials come from three major sources. First, we gather official statistics on the internet and social media usage such as those provided by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). We also examine reports published by WeChat's holding company Tencent and the WeChat team.

Tencent is one of the most valuable publically traded company in Asia and in November 2017, it became the first Asian tech firm to be valued over $ 500 billion (Kharpal, 2017). We examine the company's financial statements, its stock price history, reports released by both Tencent and WeChat, as well as interviews and presentations done by WeChat employees or former employees. The rationale behind this is that understanding the business model of Tencent and WeChat will help us to grasp the complex and sometimes obscure and conflicting narratives around WeChat. The mindsets and aspirations of top executives (e.g. tech company founders) have a huge impact on the design of their products and the entire ecosystem that anchors on WeChat. As Marwick's (2013) study on the tech scene in Silicon Valley documented well, the social media metrics were designed by tech elites to encourage self-promotion, the effect of which trickles down to general users who pick up

status-seeking behaviours and apply them to other social contexts.

Secondly, we focus on the various features and functions of the platform, including its historical versions, updates and services provided. We utilise WeChat app data retrieved from Internet Archive Wayback Machine and a third-party app data provider called App Annie. Wayback Machine is the oldest and largest Internet Archive that has accumulated cached pages since the early 2000s. App Annie is a private company that keeps track of mobile applications from both iOS and Google Play. We retrieve relatively comprehensive data about WeChat from App Annie covering its historical downloads, rankings and reviews of WeChat from its release in 2011.

Meanwhile, we document our own exploration of different functions on WeChat and deployed 'a walkthrough method' (Light, Burgess, & Duguay, 2016) to identify key logic of governance on the platform. The walkthrough is an experimental method that allows scholars to examine the intended users and the purpose of the platform as envisioned by its designers. Alongside this line of enquiry, we are attentive to differences between Chinese and English versions of WeChat including functions that were available in the Chinese version but omitted from or only permitted with restrictions in the English version.

Thirdly, we consult other secondary data and academic works about WeChat and social media in general. We are interested in people's daily activities and influential movements and events presented on the platform to see how WeChat users fulfil individual communication needs, mobilise for collective action, or use the platform for both purposes. For the topics on internet surveillance and censorship, in particular, we primarily draw on secondary sources (e.g., studies by the Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto). The book

focuses on the character of WeChat and how it embeds into Chinese society. Therefore, although state surveillance and censorship is a built-in feature for all media in China with WeChat as no exception, we aim to extend our research focus beyond a censorship-centric lens.

Since the data are from different sources, we deliberately compare the patterns emerging from various sets of materials and identify consistency and inconsistencies among them in order to piece together WeChat's metamorphosis into a super-sticky mega-platform from 2011 to 2017.

1.4. BOOK STRUCTURE

This book consists of five chapters. This Introduction offers an overview of our goals, questions and perspectives. We identify WeChat's key feature as super-stickiness to describe both its historical development and its present all-inclusive quality. We also explain our basic approach and data sources.

Chapter 1 documents the chronological development of WeChat and positions it within China's long march toward a mobile society and within the coordinates of Chinese social media platforms. This chapter charts the political and economic conditions conducive to the success of WeChat and traces its inception back to the dominance of QQ and the making of mobile culture in China – to this day, QQ is still one of the most popular social media in China. WeChat began as the spinoff from QQ owned by Tencent. QQ's tremendous user base (700 million in 2011) gave WeChat an incomparable jumpstart. The ambition to create an integrative platform or media ecosystem initially experimented on the online system built around QQ and then passed down from QQ to WeChat as part of Tencent's design philosophy.

This chapter also compares WeChat with Sina Weibo and other popular social media and communication platforms in China, with respect to the user demographics, market share and stock price, media culture and platform functions. Overall Chapter 1 offers a sophisticated and historical account on WeChat, QQ and their holding company Tencent and their respective and collective roles in shaping Chinese internet and mobile cultures.

Chapter 2 explores and explains the benchmark functions of WeChat, highlighting Moments, Official Account and WeChat Pay (including Wallet and Red Packet). The chosen functions are emblematic of what WeChat allows its users to do for social networking, information dissemination and mobile payment. We argue that, together these functionalities reveal the accumulative construction of the app to become social, informational, transactional and infrastructural. We analyse the introduction, affordance and significance as well as the limitations of these functions. Through these key techno-social objects built into WeChat, we discuss the technical designs of these functions along with Chinese cultural traditions and some of the most popular social activities nowadays. This chapter shows that WeChat's growth and its super-sticky design builds on, mediates and expands popular communication and cultural practices in China. Gluing increasingly number of services onto the platform and straddling the online and offline world, in turn, enhance the accumulative and integrative trend.

Chapter 3 focuses on media activism and critical events on WeChat. The chapter presents three case studies on how different people use WeChat, namely, (1) Chinese American diaspora 'Supporting Peter Liang', (2) the deadly scandal of cancer hospitals paying Baidu for ranking, which was exposed by We Zexi's tragic death, and (3) the viral story about a female migrant worker named Fan Yusu. Facilitated

by WeChat, these events either created collective memories or instigated social change. This process is by no means smooth or easy. Chinese government intervenes quickly in some cases but not others. Alongside this line of enquiry, we also examine how censorship operates on WeChat to contain activism on social media.

Tencent declares '[to] enhance people's quality of life through Internet services' as its core value (Tencent, 2016a) (See http://tiny.cc/85u6qy). In conclusion (Chapter 4), we assess the super-sticky design of WeChat considering Tencent's core value. We ask: what makes a good platform? What does it mean to enhance the life quality of social media users and to address their diverse needs – for users, for China, and for a global society?

NOTES

1. The opening story about Jay is from the short film on his 12-hour WeChat Sabbath experiment. The experiment was sponsored and conducted by WeChat Lab. It selected 6 people from diverse backgrounds and filmed their life without WeChat for 12 hours. The video of Jay's story is available at https://v.qq.com/x/cover/u1l082cs86frqom/e0023p4mnsb.html

2. The app changed its name into WeChat in 2012. In this book, we use WeChat throughout to avoid confusion and inconsistency.

3. The grouping of applications in the illustration corresponds to the categories in App Store. We created this figure based on one of the author's personal use of apps. The Figure only serves the purpose of visualising WeChat's inclusion of a wide range of activities that typical Americans or Europeans can only access through individual apps. The figure is by no means exhaustive or

representative of all users. The idea was inspired by Jessie Chen (2016).

4. The concept of prosumer first appeared in Alvin Toffler's *The Third Wave*. It went popular and became a signature of interactive online media that distinguished from previous media forms (e.g. print press) thanks to scholars like Alex Bruns (2009) and George Ritzer, Paul Dean, and Nathan Jurgenson (Ritzer, Dean, & Jurgenson, 2012).