Chinese Social Media

Face, Sociality, and Civility

Shuhan Chen and Peter Lunt

Digital Activism and Society

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Shuhan dedicates this book to Xiaoqiang, Xinai, Yingjun and Xiangquan with love.
Peter dedicates this book to Sonia, Joe and Anna

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Chapter 1

China's Compressed Modernisation and Development of Digital and Social Media

Introduction

This book presents an analysis of the social media practices and experiences of young adults who moved to Beijing from various districts of mainland China to study, with the hope of work, to gain their independence and to immerse themselves in the new, intense modernity of China. We studied this group to see how their social media practices and their deliberations about online social relations and civility reflect tensions arising from the interaction between a technology which embodies Western conceptions of individualism and social networked connection and Chinese culture which, by contrast, gives prominence to kinship obligations (*xiaoshun*), normative conceptions of social relations based reciprocity (*guanxi*) and the legacy of socialisation in a collectivist system.

We started to explore these ideas through participants' reflections on the contrast between the freedoms of self-expression and presentation online compared to the constraints of both tradition and the history of collectivism in China. However, it immediately became clear that when our participants talked about self-expression and self-presentation they did so not from the perspective of Western frames of networked individualism (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) or the networked self (Papacharissi, 2011), but in relation to traditional concepts of reputation and social standing (*mianzi* and *lian*). They talked about how to balance using social media to sustain their relations with and fulfil their obligations towards family and friends while also seeking to establish networks of connection with new friends, romantic partners and peers. However, alongside resonances of tradition and collectivism, our participants talk of forms of mediated sociality that are more instrumental and linked to their desire for personal freedom and advancement reflecting Western concepts of individualism.

Another theme that emerged in our initial discussions with participants and our observations of their social media practices was their consciousness of issues of online civility. They are aware of government regulations that separate them from global social media applications and selected websites behind the great firewall of China, but they talked more about government-inspired directives and initiatives aimed at sustaining the internet as a 'clean', civil space

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in the interests of China's sovereign nationalism (Plantin & de Seta, 2019). Their accounts of their social media practices reflect their embedding in the dynamic, fast moving context of the compressed modernisation of China (Beck & Grande, 2010) in the form of a variety of tensions: in the relation between traditional obligations and emerging freedoms and choices in civil society and online; between their identities as Chinese people brought up according to collectivist principles and the Western values of individualism in consumer culture; between their experience as children of the one-child policy and the consequent intensity of their relations with their parents and living alone in Beijing exploring their autonomy through their social and professional lives. The themes we explore in this book reflect several areas of social transformations arising from these tensions: the nature of social identity or selfhood; the meaning of family and friendship and the meaning of social obligations and responsibility (Yang, 2013).

Radical changes have swept through China within the lifetime of our participants. Their generation has experienced economic reforms and social transformations on a massive scale, resulting in many moving to the rapidly developing cities in China from rural or provincial areas or travelling abroad for education. Socialised in a collectivist system, children of the one-child policy and intensive parenting, this generation has the freedom to develop and express their individuality in ways that their parents and grandparents could not have imagined. This generation has also eagerly embraced the rapid expansion of mobile internet access provided by companies, exemplified by Tencent, that now rank among the largest providers in the world. The development of mobile, digital and social media in China reflects similar social transformations in the West creating what Beck and Grande (2010) describe as a third industrial revolution in science, technology and economy and constituting a second modernisation of society and politics. Beck and Grande (2010) recognise the global spread of these changes while acknowledging that different regions, including China, are taking different paths to modernisation. The social media practices and reflections of our participants, young adults who moved to Beijing for higher education and work opportunities represent a fascinating combination of elements of traditional Chinese philosophy and culture, collectivism and individualisation, and the development of a market economy and associated civil society in China are embedded in the continuing rule of a single party state.

As academics with an interest in communication and social media in China in the context of these seismic changes, we faced a dilemma resulting from the fact that most academic studies of social media are from Western, often US-based sources. Although the study of Chinese social media is rapidly developing, it is still in its infancy and overshadowed by the Western literature. Mindful of this, we seek to understand our participants' practices and reflections in the context of how social media is governed in China, the infrastructure, platforms and affordances of Chinese social media, and, most significant, the Chinese culture of sociability, all of which are in transition. We also recognise that scholars who study digital and social media in China have reached a tipping point in recognising that the original 'hopes', from a Western perspective, that digital and social media would be part of

a process of Westernising or even democratising China were exaggerated and based on a conception of globalisation as the extension of Western liberal democracy and market capitalism to the rest of the world (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck & Grande, 2010; Meng, 2018; Yan, 2010a, 2010b).

In contrast, we take the perspective of understanding the way that China itself is changing and the role of digital and social media in that process (Yang, 2013). China is appropriating digital and social media in the context of its own politics, social life and culture, and although there are many overlaps with the West, there are significant ways in which the political, social and cultural contexts vary (Brown, 2019). Nevertheless, we recognise that key debates and concepts from the analysis of digital and social media in the West are relevant to the study of China provided we are open to discerning when cultural differences make a difference. We recognise the agenda of concepts and research agenda established by Western studies of social media including the debate about platforms and infrastructures (Gillespie, 2018; Plantin & de Seta, 2019), the logics of connectivity (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013), the analysis of the affordances of social media (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), the social spaces of digital media (boyd & Ellison, 2007), networked communities (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), online participatory culture (Jenkins, 2019), the sustaining of family and social relations at a distance (Madianou & Miller, 2012) and the maintenance of social relations through mobile communications (Ling, 2009). These sources are relevant to understanding our Chinese participants' online experiences and practices. However, we seek to engage with those agendas in the context of an awareness of the extraordinary social, economic and cultural shifts in contemporary China as exemplified by the experiences of our participants. The platform structure and communication logics of WeChat reflect the Chinese cultural context in important ways as do the ways in which individuals use social media for personal expression, establishing and maintaining social relations, information sharing and engagement in public life. We explore these themes in the context of China's path to modernisation, with its different starting point in Chinese culture and society as a contrast with, and potential qualification of, some of the findings and explanations of the relation between digital media and society exemplified by the Western canon.

A central theme of this book is the idea that the super-sticky design of WeChat (Chen, Mao, & Qiu, 2018), and its development from a platform to an infrastructure (Plantin & de Seta, 2019), reflects the alignment of online sociability with both the economic interests of Tencent and the economic development and security policies and priorities of the Chinese government. Mapping the diverse and expanding functions of WeChat illustrates the ways in which this integrated technological infrastructure maps onto the complex and overlapping cultures of sociability in China. Years of communist rule, disastrous famine and the excesses of the cultural revolution (Dikötter, 2010, 2013, 2016) have not eradicated traditional Confucian conceptions of circle culture and family obligations (Fei, 1948), or tradition conceptions of sociality as reciprocal favours in social relations (*guanxi*). At the same time, transformations in the spheres of freedom of personal expression, engagement in consumer culture, increasing opportunities for higher education and loosening of family ties reflect aspects of Western individualisation

(Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). In this book, we explore the ways in which our participants negotiate these tensions in their social media practices and reflections on change in China.

The History of Chinese Modernisation

> The two great overarching themes of Chinese history from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the present day are the country's efforts to modernise and attempts over this period by the various states, people, academics, cultural figures and others to articulate a cohesive sense of Chinese national identity (Brown, 2019, p. 28).

Introduction

Picking up the idea of the importance of different historical trajectories or paths to modernisation (Beck & Grande, 2010), a variety of moments of modernisation and individualisation in China can be identified over the past 200 years (Lu & Holbrook, 2014; Yan, 2010a, 2010b). The current compressed modernisation of China is but the latest attempt to modernise China. Lu and Holbrook (2014) outline three historical periods in which there were identifiable links between modernisation, changing relations with the outside world and individualisation in China: from the First Opium War (1839–1842) to the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949); Maoist socialism (1949–1976), and the current phase of intense market reform, global engagement and urbanisation.

Agrarian Society and Dynastic Rule

Until the late eighteenth century, China was marked by stability and the rule of tradition in an agrarian society. During this period, China's economic, social and political stability was aided by the thinking of sages or philosophers, the most well-known in the West being Confucius. Modernisation defined as changes to this stable period of dynastic rule has always been associated with external interest and interference in China. In the period from the First Opium War (1839–1842) to the end of the Qing Empire in 1919, Chinese people suffered a series of wars resulting from invasion by foreign powers and internal conflict during the first (1839–1842) and second (1850–1860) Opium Wars, the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and the civil war between the Nationalist Party and Communist Party (1945–1949). Chinese people experienced tremendous social, political and economic changes during this period, during which the modernisation of China was initially a response to the encroachment of Western imperialism (Brown, 2019; Ssu-yu & Fairbank, 1954). Chinese people refer to this period as 'humiliation history', indicating that the impetus for change came from both the need to protect China from invasion by imperial forces and the recognition that the

stability of dynastic rule and agrarian culture had resulted in stagnation. It was also during this period that Chinese nationalism and patriotic education developed alongside engagement with the West aimed at gaining a voice in international affairs to moderate aggression from foreign powers. The Qing bureaucrats suggested that China needed to develop Western technologies to achieve these ends. From the beginning, therefore, there was a debate about whether modernisation meant Westernisation or finding a Chinese path to modernity, a debate that continues to this day. The inability of Qing dynastic rulers to ensure China's defence against foreign invasion, to overcome the constraints of dynastic governance and the traditional culture of obligations to modernise agrarian society, led to increasing unrest and dissent. Chinese intellectuals led the Revolution of 1911 and the May the Fourth Movement of 1919 that overthrew the Qing imperial dynasty, in a movement that emphasised science and democracy in the first Republic of China (Lu & Holbrook, 2014). However, in contrast to revolutions in Europe, this movement led to a transfer of power but not to social reconstruction, economic reform or modernisation of industry. However, it did lead to the end of the feudal state and a focus on social relations (*guanxi*) and paved the way for the People's Republic of China (Brown, 2019; Saich, 2015).

The People's Republic of China

From the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), modernisation was under the strict control of the Leninist Chinese Communist Party through the application of Communist ideology (Yan, 2010a, 2010b). The land reforms and the collectivisation campaigns of the 1950s ended family ownership of land and encouraged young people to oppose traditional feudal ideology, including patriarchal power. The Chinese state emphasised the role of the individual in the collective and suggested that people should act so as to the benefit collectives rather than their families, a reversal of Confucian principles (Yan, 2010a, 2010b). The planned economy, household registration system and classification of people according to their political class dramatically changed social structures and relations in China during Mao's leadership. Traditionally, people valued the wealth and education level of individuals who were recognised as having a high standing in their community (*mianzi*) (Hu, 1944; Lu, 1934), whereas during the cultural revolution (Dikotter, 2016) wealthy and educated individuals were labelled as capitalists or accused of spreading feudal or bourgeois ideology and consequently discriminated against and oppressed (Yan, 2010a, 2010b). Under the household registration system, everyone was assigned either to an agricultural or a non-agricultural *hukou* based on their mother's registration status creating two classes of citizenship (Chan, 2010). People who held rural *hukou* were peasants and were expected to stay in the countryside to provide surplus production. Those with rural *hukou* enjoyed far fewer social welfare benefits such as medical insurance, pensions and education opportunities for their children compared to those with urban *hukou* (Chan, 2010).

The cultural revolution was denigrated by subsequent Chinese leaders following Mao's death (Dikotter, 2016) nevertheless, as Yan (2010a, 2010b) notes, Maoist socialism was a modernising, de-traditionalising force that distanced individuals from social relations based on family encouraging them to become part of the party-state. Although producing little in the way of personal autonomy, the cultural revolution liberated youths and women from living in the shadow of their ancestors, fathers and husbands allowing them to challenge patriarchal authority. As Yan (2010, p. 494) suggests, individualisation was merely a discourse among intellectual elites before 1949, and it was not until the Maoist era that it was reflected in social structural changes that impacted upon the way people could live. Individualism in China, therefore, albeit in different forms, pre-existed the current development of economic civil society, trappings of Western consumer culture and enhanced opportunities for mobility, education and work. Lu and Holbrook (2014, p. 154) argue that although the cultural revolution caused great social suffering among Chinese people, it did 'free of women from patriarchal control and has given China advantages over some other developing countries, such as India and Indonesia'. Such sentiments make it possible to claim that the cultural revolution was a stage in the Chinese path to individualisation, albeit one defined in terms of commitment to the collective and the rejection of Confucian principles and values. Yet, such freedoms were overshadowed by the fact that one in 50 Chinese were crushed by the bloody purges of the cultural revolution (Dikotter, 2016).

Reform

Turning to the current period initiated by the economic reforms that began in 1978, the new party leader, Deng Xiao Ping (1904–1997), offered a reflective correction of the radical mistakes of the Maoist era, moved China away from the Maoist path to modernity focussing instead on reforming and opening Chinese markets to foreign investment, importing new technologies, establishing special economic zones and encouraging people to start private businesses (Lu, 2014; Yan, 2010a, 2010b). This change of direction was partly because of the recognition that the periods of Mao's great famine (Dikotter, 2010) and the cultural revolution (Dikotter, 2016) were radical progressive 'people's' movements that led to massive economic failure, starvation, oppression and millions of deaths. Dikotter (2016) argues that towards the end of the cultural revolution, ironically, local authorities were collaborating with individuals to reconstitute market economies and give individuals control of production to offset massive economic privation. Deng Xiao Ping's modernisation through state-controlled market reforms led to the success of private business which undermined collective institutions, especially state-owned factories. The reform of the household registration system that previously limited peasant migration to urban areas now encouraged working in foreign-owned and private factories in the cities. Private sector, labour market reforms and increasing mobility in China freed individuals from traditional social communities through the creation of work opportunities.

Nevertheless, these changes did not shift Chinese society totally and irrevocably towards Western liberal democracy and market capitalism. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010) suggest, sound welfare services and democracy are the basis of individualisation and modernisation in European countries whereas in China this is not the case. The new individuals of modern China need to take full responsibility to ensure their livelihood. Significantly, also, although an economic civil society has developed this was not as a free market economy but a state-managed economy. Similarly, although the state moved away significantly from governing and regulating the way that people live and the way the consumer market functions within the confines of economic policy and state sovereignty, there is a persistent emphasis on individual obligation toward the party-state. So, the intensive modernisation of contemporary China has not been accompanied by equivalent freedoms in the political sphere. In the West, we fondly think that our history tells a universal story of the inevitable link between economic and political development. Social commentators and sociologists got excited about the possibility that what had happened in Berlin in 1989 might happen in China, but the CCP has maintained an unassailable position of political power. China's response to its own challenge in Tiananmen Square (Brown, 2019) has been robust. The freedoms enjoyed by our participants resulting from the development of economic civil society, geographical mobility and access to university education are significant social changes. However, these cultural and social transformations are not yet harbingers of the kind of life political movements that followed the rise of youth culture and suburbanisation in 1950s America (Gitlin, 2013).

The Chinese Path to a Second Modernity

As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010, p. xv) suggest, Europeans often see themselves as the centre of innovation regarding political systems, liberal governance and individual rights and regard the European path to modernisation as a universal path. Having initially argued that cosmopolitanism might replace the liberal state as a global political system, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2010) and Beck and Grande (2010) recognise that different regions are on paths with different settlements on the relation between culture, society, politics and economics and that the challenge of globalisation is for these regions to find ways to interconnect, cooperate and communicate (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2010, p. xv). Nations have different political and institutional forms, different historical trajectories, markedly different cultures, face different contradictions and conflicts and are embedded in different regions that exemplify different paths to modernisation. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2010, compare nations from three perspectives: economic production and reproduction; the nature of political authority; and sociocultural integration. Applying these criteria to different regions across the globe, they suggest four types of modernity: European, US American, Chinese and Middle Eastern. They define Chinese modernity as 'state-regulated capitalism; post-traditional authoritarian government; truncated institutionalised individualisation and plural-religious society" (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2010, p. xvi,

see also Beck and Grande, 2014 for a variation on the same scheme). Working within this framework, Yan (2003, 2010) argues that the Chinese government's role in economic development and social transformation is best understood as a form of social communism.

Youth, Economic Reform and Cultural Change in Urban China

Introduction

The participants in our research are young adults who moved to Beijing from regional cities and rural areas across China to study, with the hope of remaining in the city to find work and to be part of the condensed modernisation of contemporary China. They and their lives are shaped by the major transformations brought about by economic reform, industrialisation, welfare reforms and urbanisation. They also grew up as the generation shaped by the one-child policy, by the increasing commitment to higher education in China and by the rapid and massive development of mobile digital technologies. The personal evidence provided in their accounts of their social media practices gives us an insight into the opportunities and tensions that shape their sense of identity, their relationships with their parents at a distance, their friendships and broader social relations, and their understanding of their civic duty. What do they make of the transformations in selfhood, the meaning of social relations with family, classmates, friends and associates? Are they drawn to the increasing possibilities for self-expression and autonomy or do they still exemplify traditional Chinese conceptions of face and commitments to collectivism and the nation? Do they retain connections with people from their home community and schoolmates or are they developing new forms of friendship and association in the city and online? How do they see the relation between the increasing individualisation in China and the guidance, directives and policies of the national government? These questions reflect tensions and different sources of influence on our participants lives and we are interested in how, in a period of transition in China, our participants' social media strategies address these tensions and their views about living and growing up in contemporary China. The new opportunities and challenges of urban life in contemporary China reflect major social changes which are leading to increasing personal wealth alongside increasing economic inequality and rapidly changing social class positions in China. From a duality of elite and party members a more complex social class structure is emerging including a large floating population of workers and new forms of middle class including our participants who aim to be part of the aspirational middle class of these aiming for social mobility through education and professional life (Goodman, 2014).

Youth

Youth or young people are called *QingNian* or *NianQing Ren* in Chinese, which literally means 'green' reflecting a view of young adults as brimming with youthful vigour and hope for the future (Liu, 2011). As the first Chinese president, Mao Ze