Chen, S, H. and Lunt, P. (2021), 'Chinese Social Media: Face, Sociality, and Civility', co-authored with Peter Lunt, *Emerald*.

Chapter 1: China's Compressed Modernization 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 socialization 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 or the networked self (Papacharissi, 2011), but in relation to traditional concepts of reputation and social standing (*mianzi* and *lian*). They talk 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 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 Chinese modernization (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 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, 2013a).

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. Socialized 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 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

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media is part of 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 modernization 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 modernization. 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 individualization, just as 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 Westernizing or even democratizing China were exaggerated and based on a conception of globalization 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, 2010).

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, 2013a). 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 context 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, 2008), networked communities (Rainie & Wellman, 2012), online participatory culture (Jenkins, 2019), the sustaining of family and social relations at a distance (Madianou and 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 modernization, with its different starting point in Chinese culture and society as a contrast 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 et al., 2018), and its development from a platform to an infrastructure (Plantin & de Seta, 2019), reflect 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, 2013, 2010, 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 (*guan xi*). At the same time, particularly in the spheres of freedom of personal expression,

engagement in consumer culture, increasing opportunities for higher education and loosening of family ties do reflect aspects of Western individualization (Giddens, 1991; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). 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 modernization

> *"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 modernize 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 modernization (Beck & Grande, 2010), a variety of moments of modernization and individualization in China can be identified over the past two hundred years (Yan, 2010; Lu, 2014). The current compressed modernization of China is but the latest attempt to modernize China. Lu (2014) outlines 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 from 1949–1976, and the current phase of intense market reform, global engagement and urbanization.

Agrarian Society and Dynastic Rule

Until the late 18th 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

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Confucius. Modernization 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 (Ssu-yu & Fairbank, 1954; Brown, 2019). 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 modernization meant Westernization 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 modernize 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, 2014). However, in contrast to revolutions in Europe, this movement led to a transfer of power but not to social reconstruction, economic reform or modernization 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

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From the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) modernization was under the strict control of the Leninist Chinese Communist Party through the application of Communist ideology (Yan, 2010). 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, 2010). 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*) (Lu, 1934; Hu, 1944), whereas during the cultural revolution (Dikötter, 2016) wealthy and educated individuals were labelled as capitalists or accused of spreading feudal or bourgeois ideology and consequently discriminated against and oppressed (Yan, 2010). 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 (Dikötter, 2016) nevertheless, as Yan (2010) notes, Maoist socialism was a modernizing, 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, individualization 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

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current development of economic civil society, trappings of Western consumer culture, and enhanced opportunities for mobility, education and work. Lu (2014, p. 154) argues 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 individualization, 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 1 in 50 Chinese were crushed by the bloody purges of the cultural revolution (Dikötter, 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 focusing instead on reforming and opening Chinese markets to foreign investment, importing new technologies, establishing special economic zones, and encouraging people to start private businesses (Yan, 2010; Lu, 2014). This change of direction was partly because of the recognition that the periods of Mao's great famine (Dikötter, 2010) and the cultural revolution (Dikötter, 2016) were radical progressive 'peoples' movements that led to massive economic failure, starvation, oppression and millions of deaths. Dikötter (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 modernization 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. These private sector, labour market reforms and increasing mobility in China freed individuals from traditional social communities through the

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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 suburbanization 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 modernization 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,

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politics and economics and that the challenge of globalization 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 institutionalized individualization 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 have 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 modernization of contemporary China. They and their lives are shaped by the major transformations brought about by economic reform, industrialization, welfare reforms and urbanization. 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 give 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 live and we are interested in how, in a period of transition in China, our participants' social media strategies and 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 to a more complex social class structure 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 *Nian Qing* 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 ZeDong said, "young people are like the sun at eight o'clock in the morning, the world belongs to you and us, but the world will eventually be yours"[1]. Mao's words create a positive image of Chinese youth as instrumental in reform and development which Liu (2011) extends to the current generation claiming that young people's engagement with the internet is a critical and positive force for social change in China. She also notes there is no homogenous 'net generation' across the world, nor a 'universal' internet because online practices are embedded in social-biographical situations, as "their online self-presentation reflects

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[1]People.com (22nd April. 2002). "世界是属于你们的"-毛泽东对青年人的关怀影响至今 ["The World Belongs to You"-Mao Zedong's Concern for Young Peopl is still Influential Today], Retrieved from
http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/7955/7958/20020422/714354.html

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their everyday life actualities embedded in the larger 'glocal' context of their societies" (Liu, 2011, p. 181).

Liu (2011) explores a potential contradiction between the tendency to romanticise Western lifestyles and the personal freedoms that young people in the West enjoy and the significant social discrepancies and inequalities caused by the Chinese *Hukou* system, which limits educational resources and welfare services. As the nation that has a tradition of valuing and prioritising education, there are key differences between rural and urban youths in China in their access to educational opportunities. For most Chinese families, especially middle and lower-class families, their children's academic achievement represent the chance for upward social mobility (Zheng, 2017). Consequently, many Chinese families spend enormous efforts supporting their children in pursuit of academic success, aiming to enable their children to stand out in an increasingly unequal and competitive society (Liu, 2011; Zou, Anderson, Tsey, 2013). The longstanding value placed on education in China combined with increasing competitive pressures have created an escalating interest in higher education both in China and abroad. The first *Gaokao* (the college entrance test, CET) took place in 1952 with 59 participants[2], after ten years of suspension during the cultural revolution (1966-1976), it restarted in 1977, when 5.7 million students took part although only twenty-seven thousand students enrolled at university[3]. In the period of economic reform after 1978 the state developed a talent reserve scheme aiming to ease employment pressure and respond to demand for university places need. This led to the launch of a university enrolment expansion program in 1999[4]. Enrolment has increasing dramatically since then, the yearly enrolment was about 1 million in 1998 and this number reached more than seven million by 2018, with 28.31 million students studying at 2,663 universities in China by 2018[5]. This desire for educational attainment is a key driver of young people migrating to urban centres of which our participants are examples.

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[2] Guoqing, China.com.cn (2012). 中国高考 历史的记忆 [Chinese University Entrance Examination The Memory of Hisotry]. Retrieved from: http://guoqing.china.com.cn/2012-06/07/content_25582802.htm
[3] Edu.Sina (2015) 1977-2014 历年全国高考人数和录取率统计[Statistics on the number of students and admission rate of national college entrance examination in the years from 1977 to 2014. Retrieved fromhttp://edu.sina.com.cn/gaokao/2015-06-18/1435473862.shtml
[4] Tang, M (2017). "高考扩招之父" 汤敏：大学扩招真的扩错了吗？["The father of the University Extrance Examination" Tang Min: Is it wrong to expand the university enrolment? Retrieved from: http://finance.sina.com.cn/zl/china/2017-06-07/zl-ifyfuzny3699971.shtml
[5] eol.cn (2019) 2019 高考调查报告 [2019 College Entrance Examination Investigation Report]. Retrieved from https://www.eol.cn/e_html/gk/report/2019/content.shtml

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It is significant in our study that the parents of our participants lived through the cultural revolution and reform as young people and that there is a marked contrast between their lives and their children's lives in contemporary China. Although it is tempting to equate the generation represented by our participants as the Chinese equivalent of Western millennials, there are some important differences. Moore (2005), for example, in his fascinating analysis of the use of the term *Ku* by Chinese youth and the meaning that 'cool' had for the emerging adolescents of 1950s America. The term *ku*, although popular, does not have the same counter cultural references as its American 'equivalent' of 'cool and, as Moore suggests, means relative freedom from constraint rather than Western individuality. This suggests that young Chinese, in comparison to their parents, feel a sense of freedom that gives meaning to their engagement with Western popular culture, their desire to get an education, and to move to Beijing, all of which were opportunities denied or limited to their parents.

The degree of displacement of people in contemporary China is high, resulting from massive numbers seeking employment in factory work as well as those moving for education and professional opportunities. Our research focuses on Beijing because young, highly educated migrants are particularly attracted to the capital. 7.94 million migrants lived in Beijing in 2017, nearly 40% of whom have a college education; of these, nearly one-fifth have a bachelor's degree and nearly 5% have a master's degree[6]. Although less well educated (middle-school level or lower) workers still make up much of the migrant population, the number of individuals with higher-education experience is increasing every year. We use this group as an example of urbanisation that is based on entrance to higher education, seeking opportunities for professional employment and aspiring to succeed and join the emerging middle class of China (Goodman, 2014).

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[6] People.cn (2018) 北京人口蓝皮书发布 2017 年全市常住人口 2170.7 万人 [The blue book on Beijing's population has been released. In 2017, the city's permanent resident population was 21.707 million]. Retrieved from
http://bj.people.com.cn/BIG5/n2/2018/1210/c82840-32390531.html

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Economic reform and cultural change

Dystopian themes are common in academic studies of the cultural impact of intense modernisation and Westernisation in China reflecting the idea that what Mao could not quite eradicate, marketization and technological innovation may now succeed in eliminating. For example, Huang (2008) expresses concern about urbanization and the consequent disappearance of rural villages which are the source and base of traditional Chinese culture resulting in changing social relations and diminishing moral values. This shift continues as the number of villages in China has fallen dramatically from 3.7 million in 2000 to 2.6 million by 2010, approximately 300 villages disappear every day in China (Johnson, 2014). Along with the resulting dislocation of peoples, Bender (1978) argues that cities break the traditional bonds of blood and social connection, generating new kinds of sociability in which individuals are bound by impersonal associations (Huang, 2008). The significant concern of this shift from rural to urban is that "Chinese culture is traditionally rural-based…once the villages are all gone, the culture is gone"[7].

The modernisation of China and its rapid economic development in the context of relative political stability under the rule of the Communist Party of China raises many questions among Western based researchers and cultural and political commentators regarding the social and cultural impacts of change. Yan (2003), suggests that individualisation is making Chinese people 'uncivil' as they increasingly desire rights and autonomy and neglect their traditional obligations to family, community and society. However, there are counter suggestions that social media, instead of being simply part of the progress towards Western values of individualism moderates the impact of people leaving their homes and communities. For example, young people who migrate to large cities use social media to connect with and to fulfil their obligations to and comfort their parents (Zhou & Xiao, 2015). Nonetheless, Miller et al. (2016, p.9) argue that whereas people once lived in communities underpinned by social relations based on kinship, the implementation of "capitalism, industrialism, and urbanisation" has resulted in the decline of traditional culture. Huang (2017) points out that rapid modernisation and urbanisation in China and consequent widespread social mobility from rural to urban areas, has produced a large

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[7] Johnson, I. (1st Feb. 2014). In China, 'Once the Villages Are Gone, the Culture Is Gone'. *The New York Times*, Retrieved from https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/world/asia/once-the-villages-are-gone-the-culture-is-gone.html

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floating population detached from family and community and connected by loose impersonal links. Miller et al. (2016) reinforce this argument, suggesting that the decline of traditional social forces in China promotes the development of autonomy and individualism among people, but also leads to loneliness, isolation and social fragmentation. In contrast, Fang (2016) argues that rising individualism among Chinese youth increases their awareness of autonomy, but also leads to new cultures of sociality in which they connect with others of their own age who have similar academic and career interests. What will our young adult Chinese who have moved to Beijing think of such questions and how will their social media practices reflect traditional and emerging modes of sociality?

Chinese internet and social media

Innovation and rapid adoption

The scale and pace of adoption of internet services in China's compressed modernization has been astonishing. With the impact of Covid-19, the need for digital communication increased in China, and by March 2020, there were 904 million internet users, an increase of 750.8 million from 2018 with the overall internet penetration rate reaching 64.5% of the population (CNNIC, 2020). The rapid expansion in internet access was driven by mobile phone technology with 99.3% of internet users accessing via mobile phone (CNNIC, 2020). The CNNIC report also shows that instant messaging services (IMS) are the most popular internet applications used by 99.2% of internet users, of these, 890 million accessed IMS via a mobile phone (CNNIC, 2020). The multimedia functions of WeChat and QQ, the two leading IMS applications made a significant contribution to the growth of mobile internet connection (CNNIC, 2018). A key development in China was that online social networks are evolving into an infrastructure ecosystem that connects everything from timely communication, live video, gaming, news searching, and public services, within a single platform of platforms (Chen et al., 2018; Plantin & de Seta, 2019). WeChat is one of the most popular social media platforms that combines instant messaging, social networking, and multiple small applications. Social media platforms

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were an important part of the increasing mobile Internet use through platforms such as QQ, Renren, Sina Weibo and WeChat are four best known applications in the Chinese social media sector. Their emergence and popularity also represent the turning point of Chinese social media development. Among them, WeChat was the last to be developed although it rapidly established itself as the leading player. For instance, the CNNIC reports indicates that the utilization rate of '*PengYouQuan*' (friend circle) increased from 83.4% in 2018 to 85.1% with the QQ zone utilization rate decreased from 58.8% in 2018 to 47.6% in Mar. 2020 (CNNIC, 2020).

Plantin and de Seta (2019) analyse the transition from platform to infrastructure using WeChat as a paradigmatic example. Initially, as a social media site, WeChat shared many of the features identified in Western studies of platformization (Helmond, 2015). However, it developed by consolidating and integrating applications across a variety of social media 'sectors' such as social media, taxi services, location and mapping services and publications each aiming to leverage datafication, online sociability and economic activity (Gillespie, 2010; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013; Plantin & de Seta, 2019). The resulting single mega-platform effectively became an infrastructure that provides a range of services in integrated platforms and applications (Leigh & Bowker, 2006). Plantin and de Seta (2019) argue that the capacity of WeChat to expand from platform to infrastructure reflects the Chinese context of government led economic management applied to the emerging digital media industries. Drawing on Qiu's (2010) analysis of the techno-nationalist focus of media regulation in China and Hao's (2017) analysis of China's cyber-sovereignty agenda their argument is that WeChat reflects the alignment of profitability with national economic priorities and security.

These are the reasons we chose to study WeChat users in our study as it represents the development of an infrastructure service which meets the needs of ease and breadth of mobile access, links multiple platforms and applications and has been widely adopted by Chinese internet users. The links between this accessibility, convenience of use and government agendas of economic development complementing social harmony and security make WeChat a paradigmatic feature of China's compressed modernity in which our young people are enthusiastic participants.

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WeChat

Tencent Holdings, the developers of WeChat, started its spectacular path of development with the messaging service QQ, which rapidly became the most widely used instant messaging service in China. WeChat as a social media platform was initially built through QQ friend connections and QQ email contacts to develop a platform oriented to 'acquaintance communication'. WeChat then added online stranger searching and connection features allowing users to enlarge their number of contacts and to post videos and images, enabling the visualisation of social activities and practices. These developments led to massively increased user numbers and providing the basis for the commercial exploitation of online social connections (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Additionally, cooperation with third party programmers of external Apps enabled WeChat to change from a platform for social connection to a multi-functional platform intertwining social and commercial features to attract and shape users' social practices both online and offline. WeChat is widely available on a range of operating systems including Apple IOS, Android, Windows Phone, Symbian S60V3, Symbian S60V5, Blackberry, Blackberry 10, and Series 40 (WeChat Web, Jan. 2016). The differences between these versions are minor and the general mediated instant messaging (MIM) and social networking services (SNS) are the same and updated over time (Chen et al., 2018).

WeChat, called *WeXin* in Chinese, is a mobile-based social media platform developed by Tencent Holdings in January 2011. Tencent, founded in 1998, is in the booming city of Shenzhen located in the southern part of China. By 2017, Tencent had become one of the top 10 largest companies in the world by market value, the only Chinese company to have achieved this rank (Yang, 2017). WeChat is one of Tencent's flagship platforms which, according to the 2019 WeChat Statistical Report published by Tencent, had 1151 million monthly users[8] and more than 1.2 million applets on its platform to provide services

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[8] Tech.qq.com (2020). 微信发布数据报告：截止到去年三季度，微信 yue huo 账户数为 11.51 亿 [Data report released by WeChat: by the third quarter of last year, the number of WeChat yue huo accounts was 1.151 billion]. Retrieved from https://tech.qq.com/a/20200109/051470.htm

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ranging from transportation and online consumption to small tools and IT technology[9]. As McLauchlin (2017) argues "WeChat has found ways to infiltrate corners of Chinese society on an unparalleled scale"[10] and goes beyond replicating Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for the Chinese market through both the range of services it offers on one platform and the control it gives users to handle multiple activities and connections to different social and friendship groups, commercial interests, civil society bodies and the government. The 2017 WeChat User and Ecological Research Report indicated that there were 889 million monthly active users on WeChat, 34.6% of them spend more than four hours a day online and 45% of them have more than 200 connections[11]. The report also notes that connections on WeChat are based on strong social ties among family and friends supplemented by weaker social ties with strangers and colleagues. Professional connections have become an essential part of the WeChat ecosystem and 74.3% of new WeChat connections are colleagues or counterparts within their industry. More than 60% WeChat users consider a *peng you quan* (friend circle) as their private public space in which they get updates on daily issues and express personal opinions. In addition to individuals' online information creating and sharing, there are also 3.5 million active public accounts on WeChat that generate content for the platform.

WeChat functions

We chose to focus WeChat because of the ubiquity of its use among our participants and because of the rapid, massive take up of WeChat across China. We were also interested in the idea that WeChat has features that reflect the traditional Chinese culture of obligation and reciprocity in social relations and that the multifunctional design of WeChat as an infrastructure hosting a wide range of platforms for social media, messaging, payment systems, contacting strangers, public accounts held by companies and a range of Apps.

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[9] Iresearch.cn (2019). 小程序 2 周年行业报告：用户规模预计将达 9 亿，总量或超 500 万 [Applets 2nd anniversary industry report: user scale is expected to reach 900 million, total or more than 5 million]. Retrieved from http://news.iresearch.cn/content/2019/01/281767.shtml

[10] McLauchlin, H. (2017) We (Chat) The People: Technology and Social Control in China, Retrieved from http://harvardpolitics.com/world/wechat-the-people-technology-and-social-control-in-china/

[11] Tech.qq (2017) 从社交迁徙到商业变革《2017 微信用户&生态研究报告》[From social migration to business change "2017 WeChat user & ecological research report"]. Retrieved from https://tech.qq.com/a/20170424/004233.htm#p=1

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Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM)

MIM is a fundamental service of WeChat as it provides "real-time one-to-one and group text messaging with multimedia functions" (Lin & Li, 2014, p. 3), These multiple features enable users to manage online interpersonal communication and include text messaging (visual image and verbal text), video and audio messaging, geo-location sharing, name card sharing, money transfers, document sharing and collecting.

WeChat MIM services share similarities with WhatsApp especially in multi-media communication and group creation features, such as sending texts, video and snapped audio messages, sharing locations, sending documents and sharing contact information, and having one to one or group video and audio online conversation. Meanwhile, WeChat also allows users to create or subscribe to Public Accounts to create or receive news articles, videos and advertisements. There is a surge of commercialisation of Public Account that charge by creating online advertisement for their customers.

Other notable features of WeChat include online money transfer, audio input, collect and name card. For online transfers, users can link their WeChat account with their bank card to make online bank transfers. As this feature is part of the instant messaging service, WeChat users can conduct online bank transfers while chatting with each other enabling WeChat to be used as a platform for both online and offline purchases. Recent research data indicates that mobile trade in China was 12.2 trillion RMB in 2015 and had increased to 98.7 trillion by 2017. There were about 0.5 billion mobile payment users in China in 2017, 69.4% of Chinese mobile phone users (Li and Deng, 2017). Audio input helps users to translate audio messages into text messages, the collect function allows users to collect information they have come across on WeChat, and the name card feature acts as an intermediary to build connections within WeChat contact lists. WeChat, in other words provides a platform for both social relations of many kinds and a variety of commercial transactions. The range of functions and apps within the WeChat platform is more extensive than equivalent Western platforms. This mix of functions and applications including group chat, snippet audio, and video messaging make WeChat appeal to the massive number of users of WeChat as a one stop digital media environment (Chen et al., 2018).

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To join in a conversation in the WeChat group, individuals need to either set up a WeChat group by inviting his/her WeChat connections, receive an invitation from a group chat member, or scan the QR code of the group and wait for the approval of the chat group admin. Within the group, members do not need to be WeChat friends and can decide whether other members can access their online posts or not. WeChat group members who want to connect with others privately can send friend invites to each other to start their private conversation. By receiving friend invites from others on WeChat, users can set their connections in two ways. One is to allow others to check their online posts, WeChat sports status and activate the chat function. The other is to only active the chat function between them. Users can also decide whether to allow others to see their online posts or to see others' posts. By these means, WeChat connections can be either based on online messaging or in-depth interaction via online post sharing.

Except for money transfer, WeChat group members can use all the multimedia functions available to them in one to one chat. WeChat also includes *QunGongJu* (Group Tool) and *JieLong* (Group Note) to encourage group discussion. *QunGongJu* allows admin member to select the third-party programs for their group member, which can be online video and audio recording, online broadcasting, event management, questionnaire, book reading task etc. *JieLong* allows members to respond to activities nominated by another member. For instance, *Dinner out Friday Night, leave you name*. Group members who want to join can enter their name, their geo-location information, phone number and date. Combined with third party programmes to strengthen users' online experience WeChat constitutes what Chen et al. (2018) call a super sticky infrastructure of platforms and applications which constitutes a social space of massive dimensions capturing much of the online activities of mobile internet users across China. This has implications both for security, for the sense of being part of a collective enterprise in connecting the different aspects of people's lives. It is also symptomatic of Chinese rush to modernization under government guidance so that connection means more than the opportunity to create personal networks but also means belonging to the emerging culture of modernity.

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Social Networking Services (SNSs)

WeChat provides SNSs through the Moments platform or *PengYouQuan* (friends circle). Moments shares many features with Facebook, enabling users to create posts and to share images, videos, and online links. WeChat users can interact by clicking 'like' or commenting on each other's posts. WeChat users can decide who to share their posts with, with options such as public, specific friends, groups, or oneself.

As with our comparisons with Western SMS services, although the features of Moments overlap with Facebook there are some interesting contrasts. Most significant, online comments and likes on WeChat are not open to all who have access to an individual's online posts. WeChat users cannot forward others' online posts and can only share others' links in Moments. WeChat provides a desktop version, but WeChat Moments is only available to mobile phone users. WeChat encourages its users to create posts which include at least one picture or video, although some users have found ways to create verbal only texts. WeChat also allows users to block others posts from appearing on his/her WeChat Moments or make their WeChat Moments unavailable to chosen WeChat connections. Finally, in contrast to other SNSs like Facebook, the friends contact list on WeChat is only available to the individual and is not accessible to other users or WeChat connections. This combination of features means that users have control over who they connect with and what levels of online interaction they want to have with other users on the fly as part of posting or message construction. Another interesting contrast is that posts to third parties are only visible to mutual contacts. The focus on mutual visibility of online interaction encourages relatively small virtual groups of connections rather than expanded networks of connection. Most of these features can be reproduced in Facebook, by using groups, for example. However, the default setting on WeChat reflect the notion of cultural circles rather than individuals embedded in networks. It is as though the default settings of Facebook combine two kinds of social space: personal networks through groups (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and a collapsed space of interaction through the newsfeed (boyd & Ellison, 2008). In contrast, the default mode of WeChat reflects Chinese culture of sociability as a series of circles of mutual connection with differing levels of commitment and obligation because at the centre only mutual friends can see posts to each other's contacts. This and the flexibility of sending posts to different

contacts and groups enables a *space of groups* to be constructed rather than an extended network of contacts.

WeChat also prevents others, especially strangers, from checking an individual's online posts, contacts and how individual interact with others. The Search others' WeChat account function, the ability to scan others' QR codes, and the capacity to add friends' name card recommendations, serve as the main ways in which WeChat users can connect with new online friends. These features result from the development of WeChat from MIM, to platform, to infrastructure in contrast to the Western context in which different platforms have more focused clusters of features. For example, although Facebook owns WhatsApp and Instagram these are retained as relatively autonomous platforms whereas in the case of WeChat the equivalent platforms have been conglomerated not just at the level of ownership but as an integrated digital infrastructure. The accumulations of platforms by Facebook form part of the attempt to broaden ownership of changing trends and fashions in social media to avoid the fate of earlier generations of social media that failed to adapt to changing uses and the emergence of new platforms (Kantrowitz, 2020). Albeit in different forms conglomeration of alternative and emerging forms of social media is characteristic of both WeChat and Facebook.

Shake, People Nearby and Floating Bottle

Complementing MIM and Moments, WeChat has a range of features that allow users to communicate with strangers: *YaoYiYao (Shake)*, *FuJindeRen (People Nearby)*, and *PiaoLiuPing* (*Floating Bottle).* In *YaoYiYao* shaking one's phone connects with and displays the information of another person who happens to be shaking their phone at the same time. The connection, or pairing is somewhat arbitrary as, for example, the participants can be hundreds or even thousands of miles away from each other. In contrast to the Shake feature, *FuJindeRen (People Nearby)* is like Tinder, as it displays a list of WeChat contacts who are geographically close to the user and information about the contacts (Licoppe, 2020). People Nearby displays nearby users' WeChat images, personal notes and the distance they are from the user between 100 metres and ten kilometres. The, *PiaoLiuPing* (*Floating Bottle)* feature mimics the idea of putting a written

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messaging in a bottle and throwing it into a river or the sea with either no anticipation of a response or a plea for help or contact. This feature was launched in QQ email (the email service of Tencent) in 2010, with the idea of building connections between its users by sharing their secrets, questions, wishes and emotions. However, with the massive surge in numbers of users, WeChat received increasing reports for people misusing this feature for illegal practices, such as releasing pornographic content or for sexual recruitment, and then QQ and WeChat removed this service in 2019. These WeChat stranger connection Apps are an expression of the traditional term *Yuanfen* (meant to be). For example, YaoYiYao (Shake) mimics normative forms of greetings between strangers. FuJindeRen (People Nearby) use geographical closeness and the convenience of meeting in person based being part of the same community. The traditional meaning of PiaoLiuPing (Floating bottle) is not that of randomness but of fate as the connection was 'meant to be'.

WeChat's scan feature *SaoYiSao* was initially designed to ease the process of adding friends. Each WeChat user is allocated a QR code and by scanning another's code, users can establish a WeChat connection. Users can also use this feature to read other QR codes and get an English to Chinese translation by scanning objects. The search feature on WeChat (*SouYiSou*) enables users to search for information on others' WeChat databases. By entering a keyword in the built-in search engine, individuals can search relevant information in their own and their connections' online posts including WeChat news, public accounts, third party programs, music, and emoji. WeChat periodically provides suggestions for this kind of search.

WeChat includes a Small Program section, which provides a list of programs that users have made available through the WeChat platform. Users can search this list of third-party programs in concert with geospatial tracking to provide local information when travelling. For example, if you want to search for a house renting app, entering 'house renting' provides a list of information about relevant and local App developers and Public Account creators, online articles, online video, and online advertising. Finally, as a response to the surging online short video market typified by TikTok, WeChat designed *ShiPinHao* (Channels), which allows WeChat users to create short video account and

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make short video (3-60s) via WeChat platform. In *ShiPinHao*, users can access others' video through their personal subscription, videos liked or commented by WeChat connects, popular videos on WeChat, and then videos created by people nearby. Among all these options, WeChat prioritises short videos that have been liked by one's WeChat contacts.

The appropriation of cultural tradition: Red Envelopes

The extent to which WeChat has rapidly become integrated with established social rituals is illustrated by the example of sending red envelope through WeChat. *Hong bao* (red envelop) is a Chinese tradition in which money is put in red envelopes and given to family members and friends during the Chinese Lunar New Year or on special occasions such as weddings. Chinese people believe a red envelope brings luck and fortune to its recipient and is an appropriate way to express care and love for others. WeChat launched its red envelope feature in January 2014, and achieved success in 2015 when, as part of the Chinese Spring Festival Gala, on the evening of the Lunar Chinese New Year's Eve, one billion red envelopes were sent via WeChat message[12]. Significantly, the use of red card gifts via WeChat MIM has had the effect of transforming a ritual for special occasions into a more general symbol of kindness and care in everyday social interactions. For example, WeChat users send digital red envelopes as birthday gifts, to wish people good luck, or receive them as a treat for clicking on an advertising link. The popularity of red envelopes on WeChat reflects the readiness with which traditional Chinese values and practices have been adapted to the online environment. However, *Hong Bao* is transformed by being extracted from the traditional context of gift giving. Holmes et al. (2019) argue that the evolution of the red envelope indicates a trend in Chinese social media development towards the appropriation of traditional Chinese values rather than towards Western-style democracy. However, perhaps it might be better to say that the traditional cultural practice is sustained, expanded and transformed by its setting in a social media platform as part of the commercialization of what used to be an everyday ritual practice.

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The Development of the Research and Research Methods

Introduction

Due to the complexity of the media and social environment in Chinese context, this research went through four stages. First, we conducted two exploratory focus group studies in China during April. 2014. One group was with people with an average age of 23 and the other group with people around the age of 50. There were two reasons for this exploratory study, one, to test the applicability of the research questions, and two, to check whether a focus group was an effective data collection method for exploring ideas about face and social ties. As a result, we decided that the focus group was not a good way of exploring such topics, as participants feel shy to express their opinions about *mianzi* in a group of people, meanwhile, the older group were not very engaged with social media back in 2014. Followed, in September 2014, we conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese students studying at the University of Leicester, England. From this study, we identified that interview is an effective method for exploring ideas about face and social ties in the online environment, and we could use the open-ended nature of face-to-face interview to probe and follow up thoughts. The participants also appeared more comfortable discussing these ideas in the context of a face-to-face interview than in the quasi-public setting of the focus group. Third, between September and October 2015, we carried out 42 in-depth face-to-face interviews with students who were studying at universities in Beijing, China. Fourth, among them 20 agreed to connect with us on our research WeChat account and allow us to keep in touch with them and follow up their WeChat posts until January 2016. Finally, we conducted follow up computer-mediated interviews with 10 of the 20 participants with whom we had connected on WeChat. Theis phase of the research enabled us to discuss the themes emerging in my analysis and to gain a degree of validation for my interpretations. In total, and with their permission, we collected around 500 hours of recorded interview data and 120 images of participants' online activities during the third and fourth stages of the research.

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Main study: Embedded Interviews with University Students in China

During the data collection process, we make full use of our personal contacts in China and the online platforms. Therefore, through informal networks (3 participants), snowball sampling (23 participants) and online call for participants strategies (16 participants); we managed to recruit 42 university students from six universities located in Beijing, whose ages ranged from 18 to 24, and 38 of them migrant to Beijing for their university education.

In the participants' recruitment process, we ensured all participants are intensive WeChat users with at least ten posts on their WeChat Moments. Then we adopted a variety of methods in this process, which include one-to-one face-to-face in-depth interviews, post-elicitation interviewing, computer-mediated interviews, participant observation through connecting on WeChat, and post-interview validation. Twenty participants agreed to connect with us on WeChat and to allow us to follow their WeChat updates.

Face-to-face interview and post-elicitation interview

For the students' convenience, all interviews took place at café or the quiet area in participants' university campus according to their preference. Following our pilot study experience, we decided to follow Fontana and Frey's (2000) suggestion to be 'active listeners' who aim to have a 'detailed and comprehensive talk' with interviewees to understand their language and culture. Therefore, we adopted semi-structured interview method, and make the in-depth interview as 'a special kind of knowledge producing conversation' between interviewer and interviewee (Hess-Biber and Leavy, 2011). For instance, other than asking the questions that we have designed, we are more motivated to reflect on participants' answers and encourage them to talk more about their use of WeChat and face related issues in both online and offline environment. This conversational interview not only help young participants to relax and lower their defensive bar to a stranger they just met and asked about their life and their use of social media. Most importantly, participants are also felt free to ask interviewers the questions they are interested to know. For instance, some of our participants who have the international study plans, asked questions about the study, university application and living life in the UK and other European countries. By this

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time, the interview is more than researcher try to dig the private and inner side of the interviewee, instead, it is an equal communication that both parties are happy to join and willing to provide the information to the other party. As a result, participants are also willing to show us their WeChat Moments, and then agree to connect with us on WeChat to take part in follow up research.

Inspired by the photo-elicitation research method (Lunnay, et al., 2014), we designed post-elicitation research method. Instead of selecting pictures to show to participants. We invited participants to show their WeChat Moments, ask them to choose three posts that are meaningful to them, and explain why. Meanwhile, we also ask them to show us some of the posts that their friends' posts and explain why kind of posts they like and what kinds of posts they do not like. This interactive research methods not only help us to develop good conversations with the participants but also allow us to understand what kinds of posts are much more favourable to participants than the other. Meanwhile, this research also allows us to explore what youths are concerns about and what factors that youths would take into consideration while creating online posts.

Online Data Collection

To valid the research data, we created a WeChat account to connect with 20 participants for follow up research. By keeping in touch with participants, we aim to develop a view of the combined practices of their online and social lives through three months of online observation. During the observation, we checked and interacted with participants on WeChat frequently. For instance, we followed up participants' online posts, clicked 'Likes', and commented on their posts as their friends. Through prolonged online interaction, we developed a better relationship with participants, knowing the new changes in their lives and understanding their online practices better. Thereby we gained a sense of what they were experiencing in the social realm, and how they presented their experiences on the platform (WeChat). This interaction process mirrors the online social interactions that the participants experience with their friends.

Between October 2015 and December 2015, we conducted ten computer (mobile) mediated interviews with 10 of the original 42 participants to validate some of my interpretations of

the data and to check information. Serafinelli (2015) believes computer-mediated interviewing responds to the full spread of familiarity that individuals have with media technologies, creates a comfortable distance between interviewers and interviewees, and makes the respondent interpret the interview as part of their everyday online communication rather than as an interrogation. Moreover, participants can overcome time and space barriers to participation through computer-mediated interviewing, especially as, in asynchronous online communication, they can take their time to check research questions and edit their answers (Heisler and Crabill, 2006).

All online interviews took place in a casual way, with the researcher chatting with participants on WeChat. During the computer-mediated interview, we asked participants to talk about how they had been doing since the face-to-face interview, their reflection on the interview, if they had any new thoughts on the topic, and their use of WeChat. We managed to conduct eight interviews via the video chat service on WeChat, and two mediated interviews via Skype. The most significant contribution of computer mediated interviewing is that they helped us to develop reflections on the data from new perspectives, helped us to check and validate data coding and interpretation.

Date Analysis: Grounded Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10) state that "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set". The theme does not need a certain proportion of data to prove its existence, nor does it need to rely on quantifiable measures. Instead, the theme should capture essential as well as prevalent elements of the data that relate to the researchers' overall research questions. Namey et al. (2008, p. 138) also argue that thematic analysis moves beyond counting words and phrases and "focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas". Thematic researchers can link concepts and opinions with data, and interpret them in many possible ways (Ibrahim, 2012)

Inductive "bottom up" (Frith and Gleeson, 2004) and deductive "top down" (Hayes, 1997) are other ways of discussing this distinction in approaches to thematic analysis. In the inductive approach, themes are closely linked to data, even when data are collected in an unstructured or open-ended way. Also, researchers' theoretical interests should not affect

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the identification of themes, thus "inductive analysis is, therefore, a process of coding the data without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame, or the teacher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.12). In contrast, deductive or theoretical analysis is more analyst-driven, by either the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.12). In this research, we combined these approaches, conducting the research and analysis with two major themes in mind, face and social ties, although for each of these we remained open about the sub-themes emerging from the analysis. Also, we have been open to other major themes that may arise from the study.

There are three steps in the analysis process, which are interview transcription, code raw data under designed themes and allow the emergence of new themes, and then develop sub-themes under the main themes. For instance, with the help of NVivo, we identified several sub-themes for the two designed themes (face and social ties), while we also allow the emergence of new theme (positive energy) throughout the coding. To ensure all themes are "predominant and important", we discard nodes that did not have enough data to support them or were too divergent from the research topic (Fielden, Sillence, and Little, 2011). We then reflected on the links between remaining sub-themes, by giving each sub-theme a title or name to reflect the essence of the data. With this analysis of sub-themes in place, we interpreted the overall story that data revealed about the concept of face, social ties and positive energy.

The Main Themes of the Book

This book focuses on the social media practices of young Chinese adult users of WeChat based both on our qualitative research and our reading of the developing literature on Chinese social media. We explore participants' online practices and their reflections on social media including their questions, ambivalence and confusions as they adapt to self-expression and identity through social media, try to balance traditional and contemporary social values in their social media contacts with distant family members and friends back home, peers and friends in the city and respond to both the emerging freedoms of social media and the broader social and governmental concerns about the potential risks of more open public communication.