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Mobile socialites in Beijing: Young adult Chinese WeChat users' management of social relations between tradition and modernity

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Introduction

Young Chinese university students leaving home to study in Beijing present a fascinating and complex case of mobile sociality. They are mobile in three senses: geographically they have moved from rural and provincial areas of China to the capital city; they are part of the upward social mobility of the emerging aspirational middle class of China (Goodman, 2014); and they are the generation that is enthusiastically adopting mobile and digital technologies driving the development of this sector of the Chinese economy. These three forms of mobility have significant implications for sociality. Geographical mobility creates distance from family, friends and community of origin detaching young people from traditional forms of social relations based on hierarchy, patrimony and collective experience immersing themselves in the dynamic modernity of Beijing. Social mobility involves developing instrumental, post-traditional forms of social relations in both friendship and social contacts that potentially support both social and career aspirations. Digital and social media provide potential new forms of self-expression and access to a wide range of social relations based on interest and mutuality. The combination of these three forms of mobility positions our participants as experiencing key social and cultural transformations in sociality related to the meaning of family and friendship, the relation between the collective and the individual and opportunities for personal expression and new forms of friendship and association.

In this chapter we explore the mobile sociality of a sample of young adults by exploring their social media strategies and personal reflections on the mediation of their social relations in the context of dynamic social and cultural change. Beginning with an outline of the social and cultural transformation of China to provide a background to the study. We then review the potential impact of WeChat on social relations in contemporary China. This is followed by an account of our research method and a presentation of our research findings in four themes:

creating virtual co-presence with parents, friends, contacts linked to the aspirations of our participants and their online rites of sociality.

Economic Reform and modernisation

Since economic reform began in the late 1970s, China has been on a rapid path of condensed modernization that combines transformations that took place over 200 years in Europe: industrialization including rapid development of digital technologies; global trade; rapid urbanization; political transformation (Beck and Grande, 2010; Yan, 2010). Urbanisation has resulted in a sizeable floating population separating people from their families and communities of origin to seek work or higher education in the expanding cities. The floating population initially was mainly comprised of those who moved to work in the factories as cheap labour driving economic development in China. However, after several decades of economic growth China has more recently developed an emerging middle class who, in the context of highly competitive higher education and job markets aspire to social mobility through the opportunities available in Chinese cities (Goodman, 2014). They are the children of the one-child policy who have been brought up in ways that are in tension with both Confucian values related to parental, particularly the father's authority and reciprocal obligations between parents and children. They are often also both first-generation university students and the first from their families to leave their community of origin. We are interested in how they navigate the tensions between traditional social obligations, between collectivism and individualism and between the demands of modernisation and their own desires for autonomy.

The reform period has mainly been driven by economic change including increasing opportunities for private ownership of businesses and property and the relaxation of restrictions on mobility. In the Maoist period before 1978, mobility was highly restricted by a strict household registration system that differentiated between rural and urban districts and tied people to collectives. This period also witnessed a clamp down on social mobility through a state-controlled programme aimed at equalizing social class positions or declassification. This transition is not in the distant historical past but part of the shift in parent/child relations shaping understandings of the nature of family and the associated social obligations (Yan, 2010; Dikotter, 2016).

The Children of Reform

The current generation of young adults in China (Post 90s) is the first generation to grow up in the era both of economic and social reform, increasing opportunities for education and work opportunities, relative freedom of movement and as natives of the rapidly developing digital media landscape. Often the only child and torchbearer of their family, they experienced a very different childhood from previous generations. As individuals they have access to social and educational resources that were unavailable to their previous generations, but they also face an increasingly competitive education system and dynamic labour market. The government and families see this generation as critical to the future of both the state and the family. A lot is at stake and much effort goes into creating the conditions that will ensure this generation will develop in a way that serves the interests of both the nation, their families and themselves.

Although they have new opportunities and choices there remain centralised controls that shape their chances. For example, *Gaokao*, the Chinese university entrance examination, plays a pivotal role in navigating the personal development path of Chinese children. In a reflection of the importance of education for social mobility, Chinese media describe *Gaokao* as the most important and fairest opportunity for people to change their lives (Sun and He, 2019). In contrast, other voices suggest that the *hukou* system and the unequal distribution of educational resources between urban and rural districts limits the fairness of the system (Burkhoff, 2014). Whereas, those born in the late 1960s and 1970s, have witnessed the benefits brought by *Gaokao*, ranging from the potential to migrate to urban centres, obtain an 'iron bowl' job that guarantees job security, and achieve upward social mobility (Sun and He, 2019). The Chinese government supports *Gaokao* as exemplifying the ideology of meritocracy during China's transition to a market economy (Liu, 2013). The idea of educational meritocracy is firmly embedded in Chinese youths' lives, from being merit students, to studying at elite universities. Education is, therefore, an important source of mobility in the attempt to overcome the unequal distribution of educational opportunities in different localities (Burkhoff, 2014).

WeChat and Online Connection

The floating population contributes to the growth of China both economically and technically, including boosting demand for mobile phones and online communication. WeChat, called

WeXin in Chinese, is a mobile-based social media platform developed by Tencent Holdings in January 2011. Through its suite of social media functions, by 2019, WeChat had 1,15 billion monthly users and more than 1.2 million applets on its platform providing services covering almost every aspect of people's lives (Tencent Tech, 2020). For example, WeChat Pay allows people to link their WeChat account with their bankcard and enjoy services like online shopping, taxi services, hospital appointments and tax payments through the WeChat platform. Also, Mini Programmes allow users to access third-party invented apps to play online games, create online name cards, and open online stores etc. Recently, WeChat launched the Channel that encourages users to create and share one-minute short videos on its platform, which is considered as a gesture to sharing the short video market of Tik-Tok. Chen et al. (2018) call WeChat a super sticky infrastructure of platforms and applications which constitutes a social space of massive dimensions capturing much of the online activities of internet users across China.

The default architecture of social media reflects networked individualism (Rainie and Wellman, 2012), in which individuals realise their social identity through the construction of personal networks based on aggregations of interconnected pairs of social contacts. In contrast, the default setting of WeChat architecture reflects traditional Chinese conceptions of 'circle culture' in which the foundation of social life is the inner circle of family, beyond which are a set of social relations determined by principles of reciprocal favouritism and beyond that the nation or collective. For example, in WeChat Moments users can only see postings between mutual contacts creating interconnections between mutual circles of sociality. As social spaces, Western media represent potentially infinite connections based on chains of association whereas WeChat represents a social space constructed of groups defined by mutual connections. In this paper, we examine how our participants use the affordances of WeChat to develop and sustain different relationships with family, friends and acquaintances, and how they balance their traditional social obligations with their desire for autonomy and engagement in the new modernity of China.

Relations with Family at a Distance

Relations with parents in traditional cultures of authority and control focus on *xiaoshun*, which emphasises the blood connection between parents and children, raising children to take care of older parents as part of reciprocal obligations over the lifecycle (Liu, 2015; Tu, 2018). With the one-child policy, family relations have shifted from obligations for mutual support in the context of parental authority to more egalitarian relations with a focus on caring and intimacy (Liu, 2015). In this context, commitment to family obligations depends upon the quality of the relationship between parents and children and potentially conflicts with children's desire for independence and autonomy. The shift from an authority to an intimate and caring relationship also leads to potential anxiety in parents that distance and independence might reduce children's commitment to family.

In addition to changing family relations, the nature of friendship and acquaintanceship is transformed by the mobility of people in China and the affordances of mobile digital and social media. In his summary of different forms of sociality in traditional Chinese Culture, Fei (1948) used the metaphor of the circle of ripples when a stone is thrown into water. The ripples are strongest in the centre, and as they expand, they reduce in energy and size until they disappear. So, it is the same for different forms of sociality with the family at the centre, characterised by proximity and close emotional ties surrounded by more distant relatives and friends and then looser associations which include both reciprocal ties (*guanxi*) and instrumental social relations. Inspired by Fei's work, Hwang (1987) suggested that different social ties sustain the relations within each social zone of proximity. Expressive ties include family and close friends, mixed ties among friends are maintained by both personal emotions and reciprocal favours, while instrumental ties are distant social relations based on short term mutual benefits.

A potential consequence of mobility is a shift from these traditional normative assumptions concerning social relations that are tied to family and community of origin. The increasing opportunities for life in the city and access to contacts in social media potentially impact on both the meaning and the form of social relations (Yan, 2010; Chen and Lunt, 2021). There are parallels with late modernity in the West in which increasing individualization can be read either as an extension of liberalism in neoliberalism or as the emergence of forms of individuality that are embedded in extended relationships of equality and reflexivity (Giddens, 1991; Bauman, 2000). In the Chinese context, we are interested both in how traditional Chinese cultural concepts of sociality are in transition in the context of mobile sociality greater

flexibility for geographical and social mobility and the way this changes the conditions of possibility for social relations.

In the context of urbanisation and modernisation that disrupts and potentially destabilizes traditional Chinese social relations based on patriarchy, clan and community, social media attracts users both as a way of sustaining established social relations at a distance and expanding social networks with acquaintances (McDonald, 2016). In Western studies of online sociality, cyber optimists praised social media for allowing social connections regardless of gender, class, age ethnicity and geographical distance (Doyle and Smith, 2002). Mediated public life was understood as a collapsed context that raised concerns over privacy and the effectiveness of social media in managing social relations. Here we suggest that Chinese social media reflects the Chinese cultural context in which potential contradictions relate to the relation between tradition and modernity, between reciprocal social relations and instrumental ones, between hierarchical and equal social relations and between individualism as independence and as autonomous commitment to social relations.

Method

This research includes 42 university students from six universities in Beijing. Thirty-seven participants are from only child homes and 39 participants migrated to Beijing primarily for education. All participants are aged between 18-24 years of age, their parents are between their late 30s and their early 50s, with most in their mid-40s and both the parents and children embrace smart phones and social media. Twenty participants are undergraduate students and 22 are postgraduates. Based on the Chinese university category system, half of them study at a first-tier university and half of them study at a second-tier university.

After receiving ethics approval, we conducted semi-structured face to face interviews among all participants in Beijing. Inspired by the photo-elicitation research method (Lunnay et al., 2014), following each interview, we conducted a post elicitation method by asking participants to show and reflect on examples of their online posts and explain the stories behind them.

With the help of NVivo, we conducted a grounded thematic analysis of the qualitative data. Starting with open coding, discarding unimportant codes and grouping similar codes we

developed four themes related to mobile sociality; relations with family, best friends, acquaintances and new mobile sociality rituals developed through the wide use of WeChat. These four themes shed light on the changing forms of sociality resulting from geographical and social mobility and the widespread use of mobile digital and social media platforms.

Virtual Co-Presence with Parents

One of the things that people miss when they have to live apart from loved ones is the day to day practical, routine things they do together along with sharing ideas and intimacies. Madianou and Miller (2012) showed that mothers living apart from their families observed that they use a variety of digital and social media to create moments of mediated co-presence that mirror some of these routine practices of family life. Our participants discussed several forms of mediated co-presence that they adopt in order to sustain their relationship with their distant parents. Virtual co-presence helps participants to meet some of their and their parents' emotional needs for intimacy while also fulfilling aspects of their obligations towards their left behind parents.

When one of our participants (male, aged 22) gained a place at a university in Beijing, his mother obtained two smartphones, one for him, one for herself. She then asked him to install both QQ and WeChat on both phones and asked him to teach her how to use these social media applications:

> I installed WeChat and QQ for my mum, created an account for her on both sites, and taught her how to use them. She was amazed by the video chat and that is what we frequently use for daily talks. She can see what I am doing, and I can know how she is doing.

It is interesting that the mother, although with limited digital literacy, understood the potential value of a mobile phone running a social media app as a way of keeping in touch with her son while he is away at university. He was also accepting the importance of keeping in touch with his parents. There were many examples among our participants of regular, sometimes daily, social media contacts with parents to update them on what is happening and spend time hanging out together.

Participants also recognise that social media can become a vehicle for parental smothering, expressions of anxiety and attempts to control. Indeed, some of our participants relished the opportunity to leave the family home as a way of escaping 'helicopter parenting' and traditional forms of parenting based on patriarchal authority:

> I came to Beijing because I wanted to run away from my family. My family knows me as a shy little girl, and they try to arrange everything for me. However, I do not have the courage to tell them what I think. So, when there was a chance for me to leave, I took it and ran away (Participant 11, female, aged 19).

Having to conform to the stereotype of the quiet dutiful daughter motivated Participant 11 to leave home to develop an individual identity away from both the gender role assumptions and controlling nature of her parents. This account also opens up the distance between the potential for personal growth and development as an autonomous individual that is partly about escaping family constraints but also about the opportunities of sociality and personal development in modern China. Yet, while embracing change and the new opportunities of autonomy and self-development, our participants persist in maintaining close relationships with their parents. For instance, our participants manage parents' online surveillance and retain their need for privacy and autonomy by using the online blocking and self-monitoring features on WeChat.

Blocking: either yours or mine

WeChat block settings allow users to decide who their online posts are available to and which contacts' online posts they will see. For instance, selecting "Hide his/her Moments" blocks a contact's posts from appearing in a user's WeChat Moments; and "Block" prohibits contacts from interacting with the user on WeChat either via instant messaging or by replying to moments. Participants use the 'Hide' feature so as not to see their parents' online posts which they regard as either fake news spamming or over solicitous interventions. For instance, participants are upset when parents share health-related pseudo-information online. To prevent what they regard as over solicitous interventions, they use the 'Block' feature to prevent parents from monitoring their WeChat usage.

> I blocked my mum's WeChat moments, because she always shares useless links. For instance, articles with titles like 'which kinds of food become poisonous when eaten together', 'this food can cure cancer', and parents are very interested in links that contain information regarding health...they do not justify whether the information is accurate or not, they just share it on WeChat (Participant 30, male, aged 20).

> I make my WeChat moments inaccessible to my parents, because they do not understand me and why I create certain posts online. I told them I have not opened my friends circle on WeChat as I do not want to expose my private life to others. They understand me and are quite happy. In fact, I post on WeChat quite often, which they do not know [smile]…(Participant 27, male, aged 22).

Both strategies are a compromise between keeping in touch with parents while retaining a sense of autonomy and privacy. Instead of excluding parents completely outside their online social circles, our participants selectively decide what to make available and what to leave unavailable.

Self-monitoring: limited availability

WeChat users can selectively decide who to share posts with when creating or sharing posts. For instance, they can decide to make a post available to all his/her contacts. However, if they want to keep a post private, they can select who they want to share it with from their WeChat contact list. To ease this process, WeChat users can sort their connections into different groups, then decide which group they want to share a post with. These affordances of WeChat make it possible for participants to decide which posts are available to their parents while keeping open communication with other contacts. Significantly, these strategies overcome the disadvantages of collapsed context experienced in Western social media, as discussed by Marwick and Boyd (2010). Most of these ways of presenting are available on *Facebook* as well.

A key motivation for using social media is the freedom of self-expression that is available to users. However, participants regard their parents 'following' their online posts as a constraint that affects their online self-presentation. Consequently, they are careful not to create or share posts that they think their parents might find 'problematic'. They also note that presenting an

image of positive motivation and determination helps to ease their parents' minds more effectively than deleting negative posts. For example, Participant 7 (male, aged 20) presented one of his online posts, which include an image of his handwritten essay papers, accompanied with text "After tomorrow, I am still a real man' and provided two reasons for creating this post:

> It was the end of the semester; we were all busy writing essays and preparing for the last examination of the semester. I wanted to present to my friends who are still working for the final to make them jealous… on the other hand I know my parents check my WeChat friend circle every day so when they saw my examination paper they would think 'oh, my kid is so hard working' [laugh]…

As WeChat is often the main mode of online communication with parents and some participants choose to conduct other social relations on alternative social media platforms so that their parents cannot access these posts and they are more able to manage their online impression they give to their parents.

My 'Besties', My Siblings

In contrast to the complexity of sustaining parental social relations online, participants note that relations with best friends are more open, intimate and based on a wide range of topics and shared concerns. As most participants are from one child families, they express their desire to have siblings and treat their best friends as siblings. Ling (2008) notes the 'flattening' of social relationships among Chinese experiencing modernization in which close friends replace kinship as members of their inner circle of associates.

During the interview with Participant 10 (female, aged 21), she spent most of the time talking about two of her best friends who were classmates who sat next to her in high school (*tong zhuo*):

> We are like sisters, even closer than our siblings. We lived in the same accommodation when we were in high school and applied to universities in the same city [Beijing]…We try to meet every week when we are free and text each other every day on WeChat. Whenever one of us feels upset the other two will comfort them by text, voice message, or video chat. If something serious happens we will see each other immediately.

Friends who remained in their home community help by meeting parental obligations on behalf of the person who has gone to university. Participant 19 (male, aged 24) quit his job as a governmental officer to do a master's degree in Beijing. Close friends in his hometown support him by carrying out his obligations toward his parents:

> I have several good *ge men* (brothers) at home. We have made an agreement that we should support each other in the future to take care of our parents, because all of us are the only child at home. It would be too much pressure for each [of] us if our parents or grandparents get sick in the future. Therefore, when I left for studying in Beijing, my close friends told me not to worry about my parents as they would be there for them. I talk to my close friends almost every day on WeChat, they also help to celebrate my parents' birthday when I am not at home.

It is a Chinese custom to refer to close friends as brothers or sisters as it encourages a sense of commitment including responding to each other's emotional needs. To sustain these relationships, friends develop online rituals for special friends such as replying immediately to posts. This form of mobile sociality is interesting because it recreates traditional circle culture in an online context by treating friends as siblings. It is as though the traditional notion of a close emotional bond with strong obligations is extended to close friendships as a form of kinship.

Social mobility and aspiration

A final form of mobile sociality that we observed among our participants is their broader social relations in the city and online. McDonald (2016) observes that Chinese teenagers often try out "messy adding" out of the curiosity to meet online strangers. Our participants also discuss having gone through a period of exploring random connections online, however, they admit that they often terminate such online connections as they consider them as not worth sustaining. Participants note they prefer connecting with individuals who they consider 'belong to the same circle', 'are helpful' or 'know things better':

> I added some of my previous primary school classmates as my WeChat friends on a trip back home. Then I deleted or blocked them because they create posts about their kids, share fake news, and posts like 'you will get bad luck if you do not share this'. I just feel we do not belong to the same circle; our interests, field or vision are different. I do not think we have things in common to talk to each other, nor do I think we have further positive interaction (participant 3, female, 23).

The capacity to connect to large numbers of potential 'friends' is one feature of social media that appears to liberate friendship from the constraints of the offline world. Although our participants start by making large number of contacts, they eventually move away from that to focus on the quality of their connections. Participant 3's account reflects the idea of online connection as maximising the benefits of receiving useful information and effective social relations rather than friendship. Compared with either traditional friendship that emphasises shared memories or experience and inner circle relations based on obligations or reciprocity, many online connections are more pragmatic and instrumentally oriented.

Nevertheless, our participants had interesting ideas about these apparently ephemeral and permissive forms of sociality referring to the cultural tradition of *guan xi* or reciprocal social relations, which are sustained by a sense of shared feeling (*renqing*). Hwang (1987) suggested that *renqing* is like granting a favour which people expect to get back in the future, like the payment of a debt.

Guanxi principles are applied in the context of social aspiration as participants review and let go of their old classmates and friends from their community of origin. They are inhabitants of a dynamic, competitive world and are increasingly aware of emerging social class differentials

in contemporary China (Goodwin, 2014). Mobility creates both geographical and social distance between themselves and their old classmates who represent the past and the location of their childhoods. Therefore, migrant youths may feel nostalgia for old classmates, while their aspiration for life and career trajectory motivates them to be pragmatic. This creates a context in which their social media use has an urgency and a form that differs from the way they sustain their relations with family and close friends. As Pahl and Spencer (2006) note, accompanying the loosening of the bonds of family as a social institution is the rise of flexible and supportive personal relations in which fragile and fractured social bonds are frequently found.

Online Interaction Ritual

The way our participants talk about social relations both offline and online reflect Hwang's (1987) concept of mixed ties that meet both emotional and instrumental needs, and which are sustained through reciprocal favours. These forms of sociality reflect neither tradition nor collectivism but the increasing interdependence of people on social relations that are valued in their own right rather than being structured by family, tradition, community or government sponsored forms of collectivism. By constructing relationships and developing rites within them, people develop mutual knowledge and recognition of each other through social exchanges, such as gifts and words. Which, in the online environment can start from an online 'like'.

From a pat on shoulder to let's have a chat

Our participants' online rituals reflect Goffman's (1967) notes that routine everyday social relations start from small gestures such as smiles or glances. For instance, an online 'like' is a greeting that is similar to a pat on the shoulder given to a friend (Lim and Basnyat, 2016). Based on the closeness between people, online 'likes' are simple gestures that can have a diversity of meanings and are easy ways to strengthen the familiarity between people. Participants use online 'likes' as a ritual expression of personal empathy and that they expect to be reciprocated:

> I try to like everyone's online posts. Because when I post something, I would expect others' feedback…[so] I know they are interested in what I post online. I think others have the same feeling so when they post something, I also give them a 'like'. The implicit rule on WeChat is you like my posts, I like yours, so both of us feel happy (Participant 16, female, aged 21).

Participants call this kind of relationship *dian zan zhi jiao* (online likes friendship) which they contrast with likes given to people they do not want to develop a relationship with as a form of a ritual politeness without empathy. Participant 4 (female, aged 23) explains:

> Sometimes I post selfies online just to receive online 'likes' and feel good about it. If people comment 'what a beautiful girl' or 'the beauty goddess', I will feel embarrassed and will not know how to reply, because I know that I am not that beautiful, and they are just complimenting me.

Commenting is inappropriate in ritual polite forms of sociality but welcome in the context of ritual empathy. In the case of people who participants would like to interact with comments provide an interactional opportunity, but for people who they are not interested in developing an online conversation with online comments are experienced as social pressure or as a breakdown in civil inattention (Goffman, 1966). For instance, Participant 15 (female, aged 23) explains how she develops social relations with her master supervisor through liking and commenting on his WeChat posts:

> When I was preparing for my postgraduate entrance examination, I tried to connect with students at my university. Luckily, my friend's brother had a friend who was a postgraduate here. I got that person's WeChat account and she helped me find a professor's WeChat account, so I connect with the professor on WeChat and told him I wanted to be his student. I clicked like and commented on almost every post that professor created or shared on his WeChat moments. When I took the interview process, the professor recognized me and said, 'You are the student who often clicks "like" on my WeChat, right?' I said yes and he was quite happy, my interview went very well. Even now, I think it is my online 'likes' and 'comments' that secured me a place.

Similarly, Participant 24 (female, aged 21) describes using WeChat to enhance her relationship with her employers:

> I have been an intern in a company for almost a year now. My postgraduate supervisor introduced me to work there and people in the company were nice to me. We all connected on WeChat to organize activities and I paid attention to employers and senior colleagues' online posts as I need to show my respect as well as to *la guan xi* (strengthen social ties) between us.

Social mobility encourages participants to develop instrumental social connections to help them gain a foothold in the dynamic modernity of Beijing. In this context, WeChat provides the opportunity to connect online, while with whom this relationship should be developed further is largely depend on the social resources that one hold and their willingness to offer. To strengthen these social ties, individuals develop interactional rites to distinguish close friends from online acquaintances and to develop and sustain effective reciprocal relations.

Immediate Replies

To compensate for the effects of social distance, participants try to make contacts feel special by providing timely responses to online requests, text messages and online posts:

> Some of my good friends are not in Beijing; we cannot always make phone calls due to time and fee issues. Therefore, when a friend wants to share some information with me, she will send me an instant message, then we will video or voice chat on WeChat… we only pay attention to close friends' online posts, so when she posts and I see it I will click 'like' or comment on her post to signify that I have seen it. If I realize that she is expressing negative feelings, then I might message her or call her as soon as possible, so we can talk, which makes her feel better. (Participant 15, female, aged 23).

These examples reflect an alternative form of mobile sociality that reflects Goffman's (1966; 1967) work on *Behaviour in Public Places* and *Interaction Ritual* in which people expect to both give and receive ritual compliments for recognition of their humanity and individuality.

Such public social recognition follows several interaction rituals regulating proximity, ritual forms of acknowledgement and recognition in the form of gestures.

Personalised online gesture

Another mode of mobile sociality that is reflected in our participants' social media practices is the use of mutual knowledge shared with close friends and romantic partners. By embedding mutual knowledge in posts people in intimate and close relationships both signal their relationship and maintain its secrecy. Participant 17 (male, aged 24) explains that he rarely creates posts on WeChat, except when he wants to 'express thanks' or has something 'special' to share with friends:

> Sometimes, I post something to some special friends, either to say thanks or to share something interesting with them. Sometimes I mention their name in the posts to express thanks. My friends will understand what I want to say in my posts, and even though posts are available to all my WeChat connections, it is not for them, and I do not expect their feedback.

Goffman (1971) claims that such ritual social interaction involves shared momentary moods or feelings and mutual engagement and reinforces participants' sense of worth. Similarly, Ling (2008) notes the importance of mundane ritual in interpersonal interactions that help to develop an individual's sense of pride and honour. Virtual co-presence is becoming so common that people are constructing special online interaction rituals to express and sustain intimacy.

Conclusion

Focusing on the social media practices and reflections of a group of young adults who moved to Beijing for education we explored three types of mediated mobile sociality. Mobile sociality includes creating keeping up with and virtual co-presence with left-behind parents to carry out social obligations, keeping in touch with best friends for social and emotional needs and the establishment of reciprocal social relations with acquaintances to establish a path to social mobility in the city.

These social media practices provide solutions to tensions in the lives of young people who have left their families and communities of origin to join in the condensed modernisation of contemporary China. Their move to the city for education creates opportunities for upward social mobility and serves as an opportunity for them to develop autonomy through independence, personal expression and the freedom to choose their social contacts. Social media provides ways of sustaining their relationships with parents at home and fulfilling their obligations to them. Virtual co-presence with parents helps them to sustain intimacy and keep in touch and they develop strategies to limit parents' interventions in their life in the modern city. Social media also provides opportunities for forms of friendship that sustain them in their studies and through periods of difficulty. What seems to be new for them are the opportunities for more pragmatic social relations that also provide a means of connecting with people in order to achieve their social and professional aspirations. This idea shares similarities with Tönnies and Webbs' work on community and society, in which they mention the different social rules that exist in traditional community and modern society (Bond, 2012). However, what we notice in our research is the complex combination of community that exists in modern China. Once our participants form a pragmatic network, they treat it as a community. Mobile sociality along with education provides a route to social mobility.

A particularly interesting feature of the online sociality we have analysed in this chapter is that participants are experimenting with modes of mobile sociality by connecting to a world defined by mutual reciprocity and the exchange of favours (*guanxi and renqing*). What emerges is a picture of both the enthusiasm and nuance of mobile sociality as this generation faces the daunting challenges of managing flexible social relations in the context of rapidly expanding opportunities and the challenges of contemporary China. WeChat is used to connect to individuals who have the potential to provide cultural and social resources, to establish networks to meet their instrumental needs through reciprocal social connections in contrast to their connections with family and friends

Two kinds of mobile sociality we have discussed are sustained through *guanxi*. The expressive ties with close friends, and the mixed ties with acquaintances with potential for reciprocity (Hwang, 1987). With best friends, who are frequently their old schoolmates, shared collectivist socialisation and school education is in tension with an increasing sense of themselves as individuals seeking to develop their independence while needing the emotional support from

peers. However, as Ling (2008) suggests, mobile sociality allows young adults to develop their social network, and the aspiration for a better future drives them to develop a functional social circle, which is sustained by *guanxi* and *renqing*.

We found parallels with the role of facework (Goffman, 1967) in sustaining social interactions in the online environment with online rituals of mobile sociality. We identified three online rites that young adults develop while creating effective social connections. Offering to connect on the WeChat platform is a way of offering friendship and swift responses are politeness gestures to underline the attention given to the other creating a feeling of being special among their contacts is another way to create shared memories or experiences in the online environment.

Migrating to large urban cities and developing mobile sociality through social media platforms like WeChat is a widespread phenomenon among Chinese youth. In this process, although we notice the increasing need for developing pragmatic social connections for their city lives this does not replace family-oriented collectivism. Embedded norms of filial piety continue to define responsibilities between parents and children. These traditions are reinforced by law, in which each migrant youth is expected to visit their parents a few times a year to provide emotional and financial support to their ageing parents. This traditional model of obligation is reflected at the level of the state and the nation in China as the term 'family' is used to describe Chinese citizens' relationship with the country through notions like motherland, daughters and sons of China suggesting that individuals have social responsibilities to contribute to the nation modelled on their obligations to their family. Complementing this, our participants carefully select what to make available online to their parents and friends practising self-censorship as a response to the government's call for creating a clean and clear online environment.

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