

UNDERSTANDING CHINA THROUGH DIGITAL ANTHROPOLOGY

EDITED BY
DANIEL MILLER AND XINYUAN WANG



UCLPRESS

Understanding China through Digital Anthropology

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Editorial note

Note on naming conventions

In this volume we have deliberately chosen to present the names of Chinese authors according to Chinese naming conventions, placing the surname before the given name. This editorial decision reflects a growing cultural sensitivity within scholarly publishing – particularly in works authored by Chinese scholars or focused on China-related topics – and acknowledges the importance of respecting culturally specific forms of naming.

For reasons of consistency and clarity, and in line with established practices in English-language academic publishing, we have agreed to retain the Western name order (given name followed by surname: e.g. ‘Xinyuan Wang’ rather than ‘Wang Xinyuan’) on the front cover of this book and in the table of contents. We have also used this order at the beginning of each chapter. This choice accommodates the expectations of a broad English-speaking readership, especially librarians, booksellers and citation systems. We recognise that confusion might arise if names were inverted from standard indexing formats.

In all other instances throughout the volume – including narrative references to authors such as ‘Wang Xinyuan’ and in the References section – we follow the Chinese naming order for Chinese names, placing the surname first. We believe this approach achieves a thoughtful balance between cultural accuracy, scholarly coherence and the conventions of international academic readership.

Note on dates and terminology

In this volume all dates are presented according to the Gregorian calendar, which is the standard system for timekeeping in academic, professional and everyday contexts in contemporary China. Although China also maintains a traditional lunar calendar, its use is primarily limited to determining the timing of traditional cultural events and festivals (such as Chinese New Year), occasionally marking birthdays and in practices such as fortune telling. The lunar calendar is generally not employed as a timekeeping system in institutional settings or everyday communication.

When Chinese people refer to years using numerals (e.g. 2012), they are referencing the Western (Gregorian) calendar system. By contrast, the traditional Chinese calendar is expressed through a cyclical combination of two sets of Chinese characters known as the *tiangan* and *dizhi* ('Heavenly Stems' and 'Earthly Branches').

If a date based on the Chinese lunar calendar is mentioned, for example, in relation to traditional festivals, we provide the corresponding Gregorian date for clarity and consistency.

Regarding terminology, this volume primarily uses the term Chinese New Year to refer to the Spring Festival. This choice reflects the specific cultural and ethnographic focus of our work. While the term Lunar New Year is increasingly adopted in multicultural and international contexts to acknowledge analogous celebrations across East and Southeast Asia (such as Korea's *Seollal* or Vietnam's *Tết*), our use of Chinese New Year emphasises the unique historical and contemporary significance of this festival within Chinese society.

Introduction

Daniel Miller and Xinyuan Wang

What does the title of this book really mean?

The title of this book may not mean what you expect. This is because the book's intention is to prompt a rethinking of each substantive word that makes up the title. Each word carries assumptions and implications that this book seeks to unpack and challenge.

Let's begin with the word 'digital'. It may appear to be a fairly neutral, technical term, referring to a particular array of technology derived from the development of bits, assembled first into source code and then software and hardware that achieve remarkable capabilities – for example, unprecedented ease of reproduction and distribution. It is all of that, of course. Yet for the anthropologist the concept goes deeper. What do people actually think of when they hear the word 'digital'? Does it make them feel hopeful or fearful about the future? Do they immediately think that digital worlds are virtual worlds, different in some way from analogue 'real' worlds? How will the connotations of this word differ between younger and older generations, farmers in Sweden or nurses in Nigeria?

We tend to assume that our attitude to the digital conforms to what the digital objectively presents, as definitions should be universal. This book will suggest otherwise. By examining what the 'digital' means to people in China, it will excavate fundamental assumptions that follow from hearing this term. In the conclusion to the volume we will show how these differences result from a long history in which technology itself possessed a different meaning and consequence in China as compared to the West. Once we have changed what we understand by the word 'digital', we will have changed what the title of this book means.

The next word is ‘anthropology’. The usual reading of the word anthropology derives from all that anthropology has been in the past. It was originally orientated to small-scale societies, in contrast to sociology which dealt with industrial and urban society. In China there has been a version of this focused on the study of ethnic minorities (Fan 2022). In the popular imagination in China, and much of the world, the word anthropology retains its associations with the study of less developed, small-scale societies organised primarily around kinship, as well as ethnic minorities. Anthropology may also be regarded with suspicion due to its historical associations with colonialism, as well as a tradition of an ‘us’ studying a ‘them’. By contrast, this book considers how anthropology is becoming something entirely different. The aim of this book is to show how anthropology may surpass the ability of other disciplines in both examining and explaining the consequences of digital technologies. That would suggest a very different capacity and future for anthropology.

If anthropology was devoted to small-scale societies, we would expect it to be in decline. However, if anthropology is becoming the best way to understand the consequences of technologies that are only now coming into existence, then we need this discipline to grow and expand into the future. When ‘digital’ and ‘anthropology’ are combined as ‘Digital Anthropology’, it refers to the relatively young subdiscipline, tasked with observing and explaining the impact and consequences of digital technologies on people’s lives, primarily through ethnographic research (Miller and Horst 2021). In this volume the potential of digital anthropology is revealed through its application to understanding a contemporary China, where the digital is an integral part of people’s lives. There is no longer an ‘us’ and ‘them’ as all the researchers in this book (apart from Miller) are themselves Chinese.

This future anthropology is an essential response to changes in today’s world. In the past, people led more public lives, often with extended families in rural areas. Today many live more private lives in apartment blocks within nuclear families. Communication, which used to take place more often in public and face-to-face, is now increasingly conducted online through apps, not necessarily open to outside observers. As life moves behind closed doors or onto smartphones, research will need to follow into those spaces, in order that we remain knowledgeable about the realities of life in the future.

To do so will require the time and persistence to build trust and to be able to observe everyday life where it is lived, in private online and offline spaces. Because of the time it takes to build trust and access,

this requires long-term ethnographic fieldwork, not simply surveys and interviews. The method of immersing the researcher in the life of the study subject has been coined as ‘self as method’ by Chinese anthropologist Xiang Biao and has attracted increasing attention in China (Xiang and Wu 2020). Additionally, new methods may be needed to understand the evolving digital landscape, such as comprehensive analysis of online visual content.

This all leads us to a third term in the book’s title: China. It might seem tempting to reduce this book to the question of ‘How is the digital used in China?’ That phrasing presupposes that there is a place called China and a thing called the digital, and we simply examine the relationship between them. However, that question does not describe this book. The China we are studying here did not exist prior to the digital, because digital technologies have changed who these people are and how they live. By the same token, there is not a thing called the digital that is then adapted or adopted in China. The digital found in China is as genuine and as authentic a representation of what we mean by the term ‘digital’ as that found anywhere else.

Furthermore, no chapter in this book treats China as a monolithic entity. Each chapter focuses on very specific communities, with none presuming that their findings are necessarily applicable to the entire country. They may be; and in the conclusion, we will consider the different levels of generality that can be extrapolated from our chapters. Are the insights specific to a Chinese village, a Chinese province, applicable across China or relevant on a global scale? This book is about many different versions of China, ranging from the technical experts who work in IT corporations, to several chapters that focus on third or fourth tier cities – often seen as the backwaters, but also the mainstay of China. The result should then also have an impact on what we understand by the word ‘China’.

The final word that makes up the title is ‘understand’. Anthropology is uniquely appropriate for the aims connoted by the term ‘understand’, as this book is essentially an exercise in empathy. It is not about our views, opinions or politics. To understand is to share the experience and learn about the perspectives of the Chinese people who are using or being impacted by the digital. We evoke the dual meaning of the word ‘understanding’. It certainly means trying to explain, but it also conveys the ambition of being empathetic to, and appreciative of, the reasons why people have those views and perspectives on the world. In short, the title of this book is intended to convey an ambition to bring a new form of understanding: of the digital, of anthropology and of China.

Why focus upon China?

The ambition of, and hopefully the interest in, this book is by no means limited to readers particularly concerned with China. There are several reasons why understanding China through digital anthropology should be equally of interest to those seeking to understand the digital everywhere else. The first reason is that China is so exceptional, and the second reason is that it is not. They are equally important. With regard to exceptionalism, China stands out in so many ways that, from an academic perspective, it has become an invaluable source for understanding the digital worldwide. Anthropology is a comparative discipline. The sheer scale of China and its self-conscious distinction from Western societies suggests the potential contribution of China studies to social and cultural anthropology more generally (Pieke 2014). This development could usher in a ‘Chinese phase’ in anthropology, a prospect that Maurice Freedman anticipated back in 1968 (Freedman 2013 [1968]).

When it comes to digital infrastructure, apart from China, the rest of the world looks rather homogeneous; the main social media sites, the main payment systems, much of the underlying digital infrastructures and many of the media platforms would be largely the same if we were talking about India, Sweden or Brazil. We would be discussing Instagram, Mastercard and Netflix. China is the only place in the world with a distinct set of digital corporations and infrastructures. Thanks to China, we can discuss the world of WeChat or QQ instead of WhatsApp, alongside hundreds of other major differences that sustain the digital environment. As Moskowitz (2019) noted, this is equally true of digital content. How does the content of YouTube vary from internet video on Chinese platforms? Equally interesting are cases in which the same platform is found in China and elsewhere. Despite the shared ownership and similar digital architecture, Douyin and TikTok, for example, have become very different in how they are used (e.g. Kaye, Chen and Zeng 2021; Li 2024; Su 2023; Sun, Zhang, Zhang and Lou 2020). In China, Douyin – the app’s original name – is employed in a far more social and more commercial spirit than TikTok, its version outside of China. Does this suggest important underlying cultural differences or are they merely differences of this moment?

Understanding includes explanation, which usually rests on claims of causation. To what extent are we implying that the form of digital technology explains what we observe, as opposed to cultural differences and creativity in the adaptation of these technologies? This would be an extremely problematic task in the absence of any comparative

evidence for alternative technologies, which now mainly exists thanks to China. For this task similarities are just as important as differences. If we find global shifts in the way e-commerce operates, or in the rise of influencers, despite differences in platforms, it might suggest that the differences in platforms are inconsequential. But not necessarily. There are repertoires and discourses about the digital that spread globally, including to China. People might be discussing smartphone addiction or a new metric for judging the success of an algorithm because they have picked up this dialogue from Silicon Valley. The task of ascribing causation and comparison is complex and intricate, but it is one of the key goals of scholarship. In the conclusion we will try to tackle some of these questions directly.

There are also problems in comparing China with the rest of the world, since this could homogenise China itself. Fortunately, ethnographic studies, typically based on living with a few hundred people, are highly parochial. The first two digital anthropology research projects based in China and associated with our approach were conducted by Wang Xinyuan (2016) and Tom McDonald (2016) as part of the ‘Why We Post’ project (Miller et al. 2016), a global comparative study on the impact of social media. The two monographs that arose from these studies may have been set in China, but they are remarkably different from one another. The factory workers studied by Wang contrasted sharply with the rural community studied by McDonald, in respect to attitudes to education, to family size and to aspirations, as well as to the use and consequences of social media. These factory workers appeared quite exceptional to most generalisations about China, yet they represented around 250 million people who had migrated from villages to urban areas and the factory system – hardly just an ‘exception’. The differences between the groups described in these monographs within China are comparable to those between two European countries. The diversity of China presented in this book is more akin to that of Europe as a whole continent rather than a single country.

In what follows, Chapter 4 on women working at grass-roots level by Wang Haichao is bound to differ from Chapter 6 by Li Xinru, which is devoted to the executives who work for Hunan/Mango television. The population studied by Liu Chun in Chapter 3 are Tibetans, trading in matsutake mushrooms. It matters that the company being studied by Li Xiaolin in Chapter 1 is in Hangzhou because that city has a specific reputation for companies making new digital technologies. In this volume, Chapter 2 by Xiang Kunyu concerns Enshi City. The main conclusion of Xiang’s chapter is that social media is used by the people in

the town to define the values that they associate with Enshi City, partly through contrast with values they associate with major metropolitan cities on the one hand and with rural areas on the other. A fourth-tier city takes its meaning and ethos from a position somewhere between these two. China is constituted by these differences as much as by any generalities. There exists a ‘Great Firewall’, which ensures that most people in China are working within a quite different and relatively separate digital environment than the rest of the world. But then Wang Xinyuan (2016) found very little in common between the internet that was used by people in Shanghai and that used by the factory workers, who themselves lived not that far from Shanghai. And this had nothing to do with the Great Firewall.

Differences in technology adoption can also be a matter of evolution. For a while China stood out as the only region making considerable use of QR codes in lieu of cash payment, with consumers and businesses embracing them on a massive scale. This approach used to contrast sharply with other parts of the world, where QR codes were mostly viewed as niche or supplementary. However, this distinction has gradually faded, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. Now countries worldwide have increasingly adopted QR codes as a convenient, contactless tool for payments and information sharing – what de Seta (2023b) describes as an ‘infrastructural gateway’.

The relationship to the state provides a further significant reason for having a book focused specifically on China. Many countries today strive to develop digital start-ups and companies based on AI, often framing AI as an inevitable and transformative technology within narratives of national legacy and international competition (Bareis and Katzenbach 2022). China stands out in the sheer level of commitment to this strategy. With significantly more resources at its disposal, the country is actively pursuing its ambitious open goal of becoming an AI superpower by 2030 (Lee 2018; Zeng 2022). China’s AI strategy operates as much like a political manifesto as a concrete policy plan (Zeng 2022). *The Economist* describes the relationship between the Chinese state and the digital as unique (6 May 2024: 65–7). The principal aim of the current government is to promote ‘new productive forces’, aspiring to be the originator of the next digital/industrial revolution. *The Economist* also quotes Barry Naughton describing the scale of investment as ‘the greatest single commitment of government resources to an industrial policy objective in history’ (see also Naughton 2015). This massive investment has led to advancements in e-vehicles, green technology and AI, and has intensified competition around the manufacture of chips (Miller, C. 2022).

Yet simultaneously there is probably no state that has done as much to curb and control IT corporations and internet development as China (Jiang 2012). The crackdown on its most advanced tech companies in 2021 led to a significant decrease in investment by these firms. For outsiders this may seem like an inexplicable contradiction. However, in the conclusion to this volume we show how this dual policy is consistent with the historical traditions that make such a contradiction characteristically Chinese. We will examine the way a sense of ‘national humiliation’ (*guo chi*) in recent history has fostered the determination to become the world’s leading superpower, primarily through digital advancements – a process that Schneider (2018) has described as ‘digital nationalism’. Such an ambition is now bolstered by various forms of superpower rivalry with the US (Rolf and Schindler 2023; Slawotsky 2022). The way in which the state simultaneously seeks to curb its corporations, also has precedents in the actions of the Chinese state historically, as it periodically curbed the activities of commerce and traders.

Holistic contextualisation

This book is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of all digital anthropological studies in China. Apart from Chapter 8, which focuses on the work by Chinese scholars, the remaining chapters collectively present the individual contributions of a group of researchers, most of whom have worked at some stage with Daniel Miller and are primarily affiliated with the department of Anthropology at University College London (UCL). In addition to our commitment to traditional long-term anthropological fieldwork, our research methodology has three key characteristics. Firstly, we advocate (Miller et al. 2016) for a version of ethnography called ‘holistic contextualisation’. Secondly, we acknowledge the legacy of material culture studies as they were developed at the same department of Anthropology at UCL. Thirdly, we share a strong inclination to focus on populations – and often topics – not typically regarded as particularly ‘interesting’.

While internet studies or media and communication studies often focus primarily on online activities, holistic contextualisation employs not only ethnography but also history and other approaches to understand what people do online, mainly by reference to the rest of their lives. While our topics may concern online activity, most of the research reported in this volume focused on the offline, recognising that no one lives exclusively within a specific research topic or only online. To understand

the impact of the digital we may first need to examine the dynamics of their trusted social circle, their employment, kinship, hobbies, education, their personal aspirations and histories. An individual lives all our topics at once, so everything is the context of everything else they do and are. This ambition of holistic contextualisation is dependent upon long-term ethnography, which alone can provide the time it takes to build the trust required for access to this comprehensive view of people's lives. The authors of these chapters typically spent between one and two years living inside or alongside the community or institution that they studied.

Another crucial distinction of our long-term ethnography is its reduced reliance on language, necessarily the foundation of methods such as questionnaires, interviews and surveys. For example, Wang Xinyuan's (2016) study of factory workers included almost no formal interviews. Instead she worked alongside the workers and hung out with them during their off hours, learning about their lives through natural, daily interactions. It is not just that we work rather more with observation than with language. Questionnaires, surveys and interviews are all artificial encounters, constructed for the purpose of research. Our aim is to be accepted gradually into everyday life as it would in any case have unfolded, believing that this 'real-life' research provides more accurate insights.

This approach is crucial to [Chapter 7](#) by Zheng Ken, which examines a major IT corporation. Employees tend to always describe their work processes in technical terms, ignoring the considerable impact that they themselves are having on those processes by virtue of who they are, their class background or their position in the company. The way in which they represent their work is therefore very different from what she was able to observe by working in the company. Long-term fieldwork is equally important for the topic of period-tracking apps, presented here by Li Xiaolin. Most women in China remain quite reluctant to talk openly about sexual behaviour until the researcher has known them for many months. Across the globe people tend to critique social media in conversation, while simultaneously increasing their use of them in practice. We try to acknowledge, study and explain such discrepancies between what people say they do and what they can be observed to do.

At the same time, anthropology is more than ethnography. Holistic contextualisation goes beyond what can be directly observed. It includes having a sense of history and of political economy that are outside of such field observations, but are an essential part of the broader context. It also uses comparison to establish the possibilities of generality from our observations. Anthropology is a rather extreme discipline, as against

most middle-range approaches: extreme in two respects. First, in its extreme parochialism, based on living with a small population in one particular place. Second, at the other extreme, there is an ambition to offer commentary on the general nature of humanity. This book cultivates a dialogue between the individual case studies considered in each chapter and the discussions in the introduction and conclusion that explore broader contextual factors – such as the long-term effects of China’s engagement with technology or the 1,000-year-old legacy of its examination system (*keju*). Do recent iterations of the digital, such as live streaming or algorithms, bear the imprint of these wider contexts of political economy and history? Can diverse case studies, each rooted in its own specific context, ultimately piece together a larger picture of the relationship between humans and technology, as shaped by the Chinese world-view? These are among the questions we aspire to unravel throughout our exploration.

The study of material culture

Prior to the development of its programme in digital anthropology, the department of anthropology at UCL was known for its commitment to material culture studies. This resulted in an unusual response to the rise of the digital. For example, we did not share the common dualism found at that time between what was often referred to as the study of the *virtual* contrasted with the *real*. While the online world can seem less tangible than the offline, it is a mistake to overlook the inherent materiality of the digital (Dourish 2022; Kelty 2020) or to equate ‘less tangible’ with ‘less real’. This means we were less inclined to see the digital as somehow insubstantial, inauthentic or perhaps ephemeral compared to the offline. We rejected the then popular emphasis on topics where the study of the digital was used to denigrate people using the digital – such as the emphasis on the ‘selfie’ and suggestions that digital relationships are necessarily more superficial. These form part of a general negativity towards social media and the digital that is still reflected almost daily in the Western press.

In books such as *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Miller 1987) and summarised in *Stuff* (Miller 2010), Miller proposed an alternative to studies that implied objects were representations of the social (e.g. Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Sahlins 1976) or how people use technology to create their world. He followed upon the work of Bourdieu (1977) in being equally concerned with how the material

world acted to create people. We live in material worlds that inculcate basic cultural values as our 'habitus'.

Miller (1987) proposed a more general theory of objectification derived from Hegel (1977 [1807]). We are created by the same process through which we create what we call culture. In its crude form this applies to a point already made about the digital. We cannot simply say 'the Chinese adopt the digital' because the meaning of the word 'Chinese' is changed by the digital – and what we think the digital is, is changed by the Chinese (Miller and Slater 2000).

What is important about the material world is how often we just do not see it. As with Goffman's (1975) 'frames', objects often serve as the 'taken for granted' background. We see the artwork rather than the frame that tells us to regard what lies within the frame as art. We do not acknowledge the way in which room decoration determines the atmosphere of encounters in that room, for example by inspecting the decorations. This behind-the-scenes impact is what makes such frames so powerful. In short, we see how we make things, but not how *things make us*. Goffman's concept of frames finds similar counterparts in Chinese terms. For example, Chen and Lunt (2021) discuss the impact of social media on the Chinese concept of 'face' (*mianzi* and *lian*), which in many contexts of social interactions serves as an equivalent to 'frame'.

In establishing the world's first programme of Digital Anthropology and the first textbook (Horst and Miller 2012), these ideas were what protected us from the dominant antithesis of virtual and real. For us, the study of visual images online is simply another version of the study of analogue photography. In our extensive work on smartphones (Miller et al. 2021), we are less concerned with discourses about 'smartphones' than with their properties, such as mobility, or the smartphones as a kind of place within which we now live. As Costa (2018) has argued, we shy away from a concept of affordances that sometimes feels like a watered-down version of technological determinism. We are certainly not the only ones making this point. Recent work such as that by Seaver (2022) on recommendation systems in music also emphasises this inseparable relationship between human and algorithm.

The influence of these material culture studies resonates throughout this volume. Li Xiaolin's work on period-tracking apps highlights the role of objects such as menstrual pads and contraceptives, as well as the physicality of blood and sex. Zheng Ken's conclusion concerns the dialectical relationship that underlies the development of digital technologies at leading IT corporations, examining how new digital technologies make the people who make the algorithms. 'Making people' is

also the focus of Wang Haichao's study of grass-roots women who are developing grass-roots WeChat entrepreneurship,¹ while Liu Chun's chapter reveals that advances in digital technologies applied to trade only make sense if we take the transformative nature of networks into account. Alongside other scholars (e.g. Qian 2018, 2021) we see our work to be always the study of *how digital technology makes the people who make the digital technology that makes the people*.

What is special about being ordinary?

Apart from holistic contextualisation and an orientation to material culture, a third characteristic of our approach concerns who and what we choose to study. Often when an anthropologist tells someone about their occupation, they are told in response that there is some fascinating or amazing people/practice that 'would surely be of interest to an anthropologist'. Our view is that if you already think this is fascinating, you really do not need us to tell you so. We tend to the opposite regard. Not in every case, but often, we are drawn to people and practices regarded as so completely ordinary that it seems very strange that anyone should want to study them. People and practices that have come to be regarded as somehow 'obvious', with no need for explanation.

If the aim is to use digital anthropology to understand contemporary China, this requires just such a focus on 'typical' normative practices and populations. This is because it is much easier to extrapolate one's conclusions from the ordinary and the typical than from the special case. It is therefore the role of the anthropologist to *uncover the extraordinary within everyday ordinariness*. For example, an anthropologist may use comparison to show how things could easily have turned out differently. This applies whether the discussion relates to women trading at grass-roots level on WeChat, the everyday social media of a fourth-tier town or the experience of care workers in a home for elderly care.

Although this book is about the digital, we also tend to avoid studying the 'latest' or more fashionable topics. You will not find discussions on cutting-edge VR or AI here. What has been helpful for studying the ordinary has been the rise of the smartphone and platforms such as WeChat; these have now become so ubiquitous that they genuinely seem to have become a suitably 'unremarkable' part of everyday life. This, to us, is exactly what makes them remarkable. Similarly, there is very little in this volume about topics such as politics,

internet addiction or pornography – topics that often dominate popular interest and have already been widely studied.

Naturally most people are particularly interested in what is unprecedented about the digital. However, the scholars working with Miller (2016) in the previous ‘Why We Post’ project emphasised the conservative nature of social media. They noted, for example, the way in which social media was employed to reinforce traditions in kinship and communication, such as bringing families who had been dispersed back into regular contact. In a similar fashion the studies of social media found in this volume sometimes focus on the way they reinforce normative values – for instance when Wang Haichao reports on the proper way young women ‘should’ look online, or the importance of modesty; or when Xiang Kunyu shows how short videos reinforce traditional normative values in Enshi City; or when Li Xinru examines the role of nostalgia in the media rather than the latest influencer trend. However, we will certainly acknowledge radical changes, as Liu Chun has done for the nature of networks in the trading of mushrooms.

There is nothing exclusive about our approach. There have been other anthropologists working on digital China who would share all three features, plus others such as de Seta who have developed highly original but different approaches to, for example, the study of digital ‘folklore’ (2015) and queried (2020) several of the assumptions and claims that lie behind the kind of digital ethnography that we practise.

Prior studies

The approach of holistic contextualisation means the basis of our ethnography will always be offline worlds that are the context for the online. It follows that the primary influences are more likely to come from traditional anthropological studies of the kind described by Bruckermann and Feuchtwang (2016) rather than internet or media studies. To pick just one of these, several of the chapters show the influence of Yan Yunxiang (e.g. 2003, 2020), in as much as his writings concern the problem of how an anthropologist can discern the impact of various new forces upon everyday life and relationships.

Consider, for example, the degree to which the rise of capitalism has led to an associated individualism. If we want to understand the impact of the digital, a clear precedent might be the way in which anthropologists (e.g. Gillette 2000) or sociologists (e.g. Davis 2000) have explored the impact of consumption in China. One can also discern the influence of

Kipnis (1997, 2006) and others (e.g. Bell 2000; Jacka 2009; Smart 1993, 1998, 2020; Sigley 2009) writing about primary Chinese concepts such as *guanxi* and *suzhi*. Meanwhile, given her focus on economic change, Liu Chun references Martin (2015) on money and Skinner (1964) on networks. The study of the digital is the latest example of many developments that previously had their own radical impact on everyday life and in the making of contemporary China.

There were issues of Chinese exceptionalism long before the digital, which account for a growing interest in the region. Pieke's review (2014) poses an important question: If the twenty-first century will be a Chinese one, what will its anthropology bring? He argued that the new realities of life in China had fundamentally reshaped the anthropology of modern China – to the extent that anthropological research on these changes will impact the discipline of anthropology as a whole, just as China's rise will change the world order. At that time the rise of the digital was nascent, with only three of the 140 studies listed there having any such association (Murphy and Fong 2013; Yang 2009; Zhou 2006). As Qiu Zeqi points out (see Chapter 8 of this volume), the impact of digital technology did not become evident among ordinary Chinese people until the proliferation of the mobile internet. Consequently, as scholars in Chapter 8 suggest, it was not until around 2012 that ethnographic studies in China conducted by Chinese scholars began to pay significantly more attention to the digital domain.

Chapter 8 provides an essential contribution from both prominent and emerging Chinese scholars who discuss their own and other research in digital anthropology and related disciplines in China. Most of the literature referenced in Chapter 8 was published in Chinese, so this chapter offers non-Chinese-speaking readers an overview of academic interests and developments within China. While that chapter focuses on contributions within China, the following section will summarise some of the scholarship that includes research from scholars outside of China. Our selection draws from a diverse array of disciplines, including media studies, internet studies, STS, cultural studies, China studies, human geography, sociology and the humanities. More extensive summaries can be found elsewhere, though the focus tends to be different from this volume. Many scholars concentrate on online behaviour, digital culture and widely discussed topics related to the rise of digital China, which often intersect with areas such as politics (see Herold and de Seta 2015; Qiu and Bu 2013; Sun and Wang 2023).

Work aligned with our aims in using digital studies to understand contemporary China received a significant boost with the introduction

of the concept of the ‘information have-less’ (Cartier, Castells and Qiu, 2005; Qiu, 2009). This term refers to individuals who remain marginalised in social, economic and political spheres, such as rural migrants, unemployed workers and the elderly – all groups with limited social resources and support, who also found themselves on the disadvantaged side of China’s digital divide. This proved to be an important incentive to later studies. A significant proportion of related monograph-length ethnographies focused on such populations. Examples include Wallis (2013), who offered detailed ethnographic insights into the everyday use of mobile phones by Chinese female migrant workers, highlighting how mobile phones facilitate diverse forms of agency and mobility among these migrant women. Tom McDonald (2016) shed ethnographic light on how social media is already deeply integrated into the everyday experience of many rural Chinese people. Wang Xinyuan (2016) coined the term ‘dual migration’ to compare rural-to-urban and offline-to-online migration among migrant workers in their use of social media. By contrast, her second monograph focused on smartphone use among older people in Shanghai. In this Wang (2023) shows how an understanding of the way in which older people responded to the smartphone revolution is hugely enhanced by appreciating the profound consequences of the earlier Communist revolution.

Wang Donglin and Sun Xinru (2023) examine social media practices of the ethnic minority Pumi villagers, revealing how they use social media to connect to their life trajectories, living conditions, cultural identities, regional characteristics and patterns of mobility. Shi Ziyuan’s (2023) ethnography concerned two types of domestic surveillance devices, smart home cameras and brain-machine-interface headbands, used by urban Chinese families in Shanghai. He described how the ethics of such surveillance within contemporary child-rearing values are filtered through the Chinese concepts of *guan* (‘to control/care’) and *zijue* (‘self-consciousness’). Ollier-Malaterre’s (2024) study on digital surveillance in China also makes a significant contribution by asserting that the true power of China’s surveillance apparatus lies not in its digital technology, but rather in its ability to align individual interests with collective imaginaries. This perspective offers a deeper understanding of how surveillance operates as a tool of governance and regulation within society.

Much of the prior anthropological work has grown in alignment with internet, media and online studies covering a diverse array of subjects. These range from digital fandom (Gong 2016; Fung, A. Y. 2019; Liao, Koo and Rojas 2022; Yin 2020) to online memorials (Denton 2005; Yarlykova 2022; Zhang 2020) to game communities (Ma, Lu and Gupta 2019; Shen

and Chen 2015; Szablewicz 2020) and learning communities (Zhou, W. et al. 2022).

Notably, Marcella Szablewicz's 2020 monograph *Mapping Digital Game Culture in China* leverages the strength of long-term ethnography. She uses games as a lens through which to investigate youth culture, everyday politics and social issues in contemporary Chinese society. Szablewicz argues that games, far from being an escape to another world, have become arenas where dominant ideas of failure, success and socio-economic mobility are actively debated and challenged.

A further important contribution has been made by numerous studies that contribute to our understanding of digital companies (e.g. Alkhawajah 2019; Shirky 2015), digital platforms (e.g. Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018; de Kloet et al. 2019; Harwit 2014, 2017; Huang, R. and Sun, X. Y. 2016; Plantin and de Seta 2019), and digital devices and technologies (e.g. Liu 2024; Shi 2023) in China. Studies of WeChat have also gained momentum, reflecting the ubiquity of that platform. Scholars describe WeChat as 'super sticky', highlighting its extensive usage (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018). Others suggest that WeChat should be regarded as infrastructure (Plantin and de Seta 2019). More generally, researchers (de Kloet et al. 2019; Yang and Wang 2021) emphasise the role of the Party-state, along with the agency of platforms and individual users, in shaping major digital platforms in China.

We are by no means the only group to highlight the materiality of digital technology. Papers in a volume of *Global Media and China*, edited by de Seta (2023a) and influenced by Larkin (2013), foreground the role of infrastructure as an integrated mix of human and technological forces. Digital infrastructure encompasses everything from physical cables beneath urban streets to the ideological implications of surveillance systems. Digital materiality is also central to the focus on visual culture and the multimodal. For example, studies on internet memes and stickers (e.g. Brautigam 2020; Fang, K. 2020; Mina 2014; Poplin 2016, 2023; Jiang, Y. and Vásquez 2020; Xian 2023). Chapter 8 of this volume discusses ethnographic studies of other new practices such as short videos and live streaming by Chu (2019), He and Dong (2021), Lan (2020), Lai (2022a, 2022b) and Lu and Lai (2020). However, the precise form and nature of content has in turn to be understood as being creatively interpreted through local cultural practices – which may, for example, be beholden to digital folklore (de Seta 2015, 2020) and folk songs (Sun and Wang 2019).

If one research field remains dominant, it is perhaps the issue of both internal and international politics. Key topics include China's

impact and image in the digital era, cybersecurity (Lindsay, Cheung and Reveron 2015), the ‘Digital Silk Roads’ (Keane and Yu 2019) and the China Model (e.g. DeLisle, Goldstein and Yang, G. 2016; Keane 2006; Keane and Chen 2017; Taylor 2022; Liu 2021). The resistance vs. control paradigm has also been prominent in studies of Digital China, including work on the following:

- Digital activism (Bi 2021; Brunner 2019; Wang, J. 2019; Xue and Rose 2022; Yang and Calhoun 2008)
- Digital democracy (Chen 2020; Zhang and Fung 2013)
- Digital surveillance and digital authoritarianism (Lilkov 2020; Strittmatter 2021; Han 2018, 2023; Mayer 2020; Xu 2021; Wang, Q. 2021; Zeng 2016)
- The geopolitics of the Chinese internet (Griffiths 2021; Qiu, Peter and Oreglia 2024; Wang, Q. 2021)
- Gender politics (Chan 2021)
- Platformisation and digital governance (de Kloet et al. 2019; Yu 2022)
- Digital capitalism with Chinese characteristics (Segal 2003; Zhao and Schiller 2001)
- Digital nationalism (Schneider 2018; Fang and Repnikova 2018; Plantin and de Seta 2019)
- The dynamics of (un)civil society (de Seta 2018; Tai 2007; DeLisle, Goldstein and Yang, G. 2016; Lam 2019; Wang, Q. 2021; Yang, G. 2012, 2018).

Yang notes how the internet and civil society in China have continued to evolve together, with both expanding and increasing their influence (Yang, G. 2003a, 2003b). The growing social impact of online activity has made this a target for new forms of political control and commercial manipulation (Yang, G. 2012, 2018). These studies suggest that the Chinese government leverages digital platforms both to control and neutralise dissent, while simultaneously fostering a ‘civilising’ process that promotes state-sanctioned expressions of nationalism and social harmony (Yang, G. 2018). One problem with this body of research, suggested by Herold and de Seta (2015), has been that internet research in China has been biased towards foreign rather than local interests – as reflected in this focus on macro-politics rather than on everyday life.

We would argue that the contributions within this volume are not so much apolitical as recognising the micro-politics of this *everyday life*, found in the various monographs described at the start of this literature

review that emphasise the digital divides of contemporary China. Our topics range from the internal workings of the major IT companies to the feminist politics of period-tracking apps and the frustrations of lowest level care workers in a care home. Together, they reveal the intricate and embedded nature of inequalities and struggle. As Hu Yong suggests (see [Chapter 8](#)), these grass-roots actors may be the real heroes of what he terms ‘the fifth marginal revolution’ taking place in China (Hu 2020). Qian Linliang (e.g. Qian, L. 2023, 2024) and Sun Xinru (e.g. Sun 2019, 2022) also demonstrate how their long-term ethnography can address both meso- and macro-level social issues.

As most of the chapters in this volume reflect a particular approach to digital anthropology, this is bound to be a partial rather than a comprehensive approach. It is also one that is complementary to other approaches. For example, Herold and Marolt’s edited volume (2011) was a major contribution to the study of online life that encouraged researchers to view the Chinese internet as a distinct ‘space’ rather than simply an extension of offline society. In so doing, it highlighted how individuals and institutions emerge and interact within this unique digital realm. In the introduction Herold (2011) argues that in addition to the plethora of studies around politics and censorship we should also recognise the impact of a largely youthful population on exploring, experimenting and creating a new form of more Carnavalesque space as a place of fun and play.

This is surely still the case, and the chapter in this volume by Li Xinru that focuses on youth is more aligned with media studies. More generally, however, this volume hasn’t tried to emulate such work, nor many of the other features of the digital or disciplinary approaches that have been mentioned in this review of the literature. We have tried to balance much of the existing literature by addressing the more mundane, often quite conservative features of the digital, with a greater emphasis on the offline world. At the same time we acknowledge the fluid and ever-evolving nature of these forces. For example, since 2011 smartphones have made the boundary between online and offline much less distinct while usage has spread to all ages, such that our own recent work has focused on the middle aged (Miller et al. 2021; Wang, X. 2023).

To put it another way, most existing studies on the digital in China emphasise what is new or noteworthy about Chinese society, and the life experiences of Chinese people, consequent on the proliferation of digital technology. In contrast, this book takes an approach more aligned with traditional ethnography: we aim to understand the holistic life experiences of people and the core aspects of Chinese society that now

happen also to be digital. This enables digital anthropology to constitute an effective lens through which to examine a range of social issues in contemporary Chinese society. We avoid isolating digital behaviour or digital culture from the broader context of people's lived experiences. This is why the book is titled *Understanding China through Digital Anthropology*, rather than something like *Understanding Digital China*.

The structure of this volume

The volume considers three main themes, into which individual chapters are grouped. The first ([Chapters 1 and 2](#)) illustrates our approach to using long-term ethnography – not only to highlight very 'ordinary' worlds, but also to explore deeper values and practices. This is very clear from the first chapter by Li Xiaolin, whose work on period-tracking apps required a deep knowledge of women's understanding and practices in relation to menstrual blood and sexual activity. It is a study of intimacy that required two years of intensive fieldwork. This is followed by Xiang Kunyu's chapter which takes a much-studied topic, social media, but focuses on the way in which this is used in a fourth-tier city, neither metropolitan nor rural. This makes it a comparatively neglected yet essential component of contemporary China. Both chapters emphasise what is perhaps the single most important topic for the discipline of anthropology: understanding normative behaviour. The normative refers to those underlying presumptions that inform all of us, all the time, as to what should be considered appropriate and inappropriate behaviour (Miller and Woodward [2012](#), 121–56).

The second theme ([Chapters 3 and 4](#)) is concerned not just with the new digital economy, but also with how it operates for ordinary people. Wang Haichao uses the term 'grass-roots' in [Chapter 4](#) to stand for low-income women and students from low-status colleges who hope to engage with the entrepreneurial potential of WeChat. In [Chapter 3](#) Liu Chun considers changes in the trade of matsutake mushrooms in Yunnan among both Tibetan villagers and in the town of Shangri-La, and then from these places to the rest of China. The fate of the digital is often determined by factors only evident from these wider ethnographies. The reason why in mushroom trading live streamers fail and WeChat commerce succeeds reflects their respective relationship to the growth and maintenance of networks; these can in turn develop into a powerful matrix that changes traditional structures. Wang Haichao's study shows how grass-roots WeChat entrepreneurship starts with such networks by

leveraging people's friends and family for initial sales, but then creates its own internal sociality for those working with this particular company.

The third theme (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) is concerned with the impact of the digital on institutions, platforms and corporations. In Chapter 5 Wang Xinyuan and Sun Yuling show how the claim by a home for the elderly to be at the forefront of technology through the efficiency of its data collection is contested by front-line care workers, who often resist that authority. Chapter 6 considers the relationship of the digital to IT corporations and the state. Here Li Xinru explores Mango TV, one of China's most important media companies, and its successful transition to a super-digital platform; her analysis shows that its success has come about as much through an orientation to the past as to the future. In Chapter 7 Zheng Ken analyses an equally successful IT corporation that creates the algorithms central to many digital technologies, revealing how in digital corporations even the workers fail to recognise the key role they play, as human rather than technical contributors, to the way in which algorithms are developed. In all three cases we can see the importance of the digital not as technology, but as a claim to be in the vanguard of industry and modern life.

Following these three themes comes an important addition through Chapter 8, which presents a considerable body of work carried out by Chinese scholars, primarily available only in the Chinese language. It explores the way in which Digital Anthropology has emerged in China and considers some of its likely future directions.

Critical to the wider ambition of this volume is an extensive conclusion. This begins by linking together the results of the various chapters in order to consider their wider consequences for contemporary China. We then return to our appreciation that the very meaning of the term 'digital' in China is quite distinct from that in the West. In China it is understood to enhance our humanity rather than to detract from it. This only makes sense through an appreciation of both the longer-term and shorter-term history of technology in China. It is therefore the conclusion that delivers the claims made at the start of this introduction: that this book should change our views as to the meaning of the digital and of anthropology, and so enhance our understanding of contemporary China.

Note

- 1 The term 'grass-roots' translates a common self-description widely used by this population in China to describe themselves.

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Normativity in/with period-tracking apps: the normal body and sexual morality

Xiaolin Li

In my fieldsite tracking the dates of one's periods is considered mundane and necessary labour during a woman's menstruating life. Teenagers are educated to care for their menstrual health, with tips on dos and don'ts during this 'special' time of the month. Young and bashful adults are often faced with queries and criticism from gynaecologists when they cannot remember the date of their last period. At high school several close female friends gather during break times, chatting about periods with coded metaphors and giggles. Sexually active young women find themselves in constant anxiety and worry when their period is delayed for a few days. Married women record their period with euphemisms on the calendar on their smartphones, erasing the record every month to ensure curious children do not raise embarrassing questions if they fiddle with the smartphone. All of these are commonplace scenarios in the daily life of my informants. Underlying almost all such knowledge and encounters is a constant concern to seek and establish normative self-knowledge. The main argument of this chapter is that digital technologies play a major role in this search for the normative in personal terms, navigating between individualism and universality.

Three dominant factors facilitated the long-term tracking of menstruation in my fieldsite. First, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is influential in shaping the local idea of 'healthy menstruation'. In TCM menstruation is seen as a sign of inner and underlying bodily health. Regular menstruation indicates 'easy circulation, reliable periodicity, and free flow of blood', or the unobstructed circulation of '*qi-xie*' (qi and blood) (Furth 1986, 51), essential to women's overall health. A clear example is the stress on the volume and colour of menstrual blood by my

informants; this reflected a preference for replenishing and vivifying yin blood, in line with TCM.

Second, for cisgender and heterosexual women,¹ being sexually active is another pragmatic reason for tracking their menstruation. This is particularly the case given the dominant use of less reliable contraceptive methods, for example rhythm and withdrawal methods,² instead of oral contraceptive pills as in many other countries.³ The period-tracking app is thus not only an important tool for detecting any unintended pregnancy, but also handy for determining a woman's 'safe-period' (*anquan qi*, 安全期) for 'safe' sex, adopting the same principle as the rhythm method. 'Safe period' is a local term commonly used to refer to the 'infertile days' within the menstrual cycle. The alleged safe period is usually seven days before and eight days after menstruation (*qian qi hou ba*, 前七后八); for some women it may be three days before and four days after menstruation (*qian san hou si*, 前三后四). There is no official guidance or unanimous conclusions.

Third, the proliferation of self-tracking apps on the mHealth market in China has facilitated period-tracking as a form of healthcare. Popular categories of self-tracking apps include reproduction and breast-feeding apps, period-tracking apps, exercising and diet apps – as well as online doctor service apps, widely used in China for personal healthcare and fitness.

In 2022 the period-tracking app Meiyou was the most popular in China with 5,640,000 Monthly Active Users (MAU) (Fig. 1.1). A similar period-tracking app named Dayima came narrowly second.⁴ Period-tracking apps are regarded as handy tools, replacing the manual labour of recording and reminding oneself about menstruation. These apps not only possess a 'super memory' capable of securely storing personal health data for extended periods and syncing across various devices via advanced cloud technology, but they also 'foretell the future', providing personalised predictions for future menstrual and ovulation dates, and pregnancy probabilities.

Furthermore, the apps have evolved beyond these tasks. They now offer additional in-app features such as social media platforms for discussing women-specific and intimate issues, online shopping and virtual doctor consultations. These enhancements have significantly broadened the app's applications, elevating it from a simple period-tracker device to a comprehensive 'mega' tool for female healthcare. From a profit-making perspective, these diverse functionalities play a crucial role in the app's revenue model, providing financial benefits without relying on charging users for the basic period-tracking service.

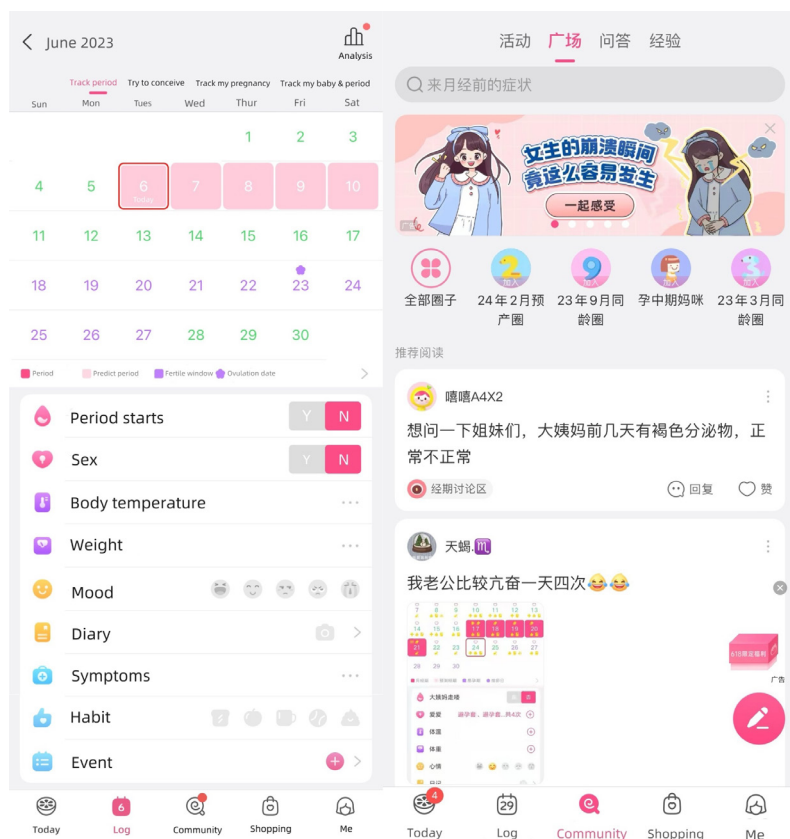


Figure 1.1 These two images display the period-tracking interface (left) and the online community interface (right) of the Meiyou app, an example of period-tracking apps in China. The original interface is in Chinese, with partial English translations provided by the author, in accordance with their overseas version MeetYou. © Meiyou App.

Most of the period-tracking apps are free to use in the Chinese market, which in turn broadens their user base.

Revolving around the consumption and production of period-tracking apps, this chapter focuses upon two functions afforded by the app and their impact on shaping the concept of normativity: the predictive function and the social platform of the app. Drawing on these functions, I discuss four types of coexisting norms enacted in different contexts: the concept of the normal menstruation frame established by big data, a woman's awareness of normal menstruation derived from self-knowledge, the evolving concepts of female sexual norms with the use of digital tools and the shaping of new norms surrounding

discourse on female sexuality through the platform's content moderation policies.

The material considered in this chapter has been gathered from two years of fieldwork in the city of Hangzhou, where I studied the consumption of period-tracking apps within the wider cultural contexts of menstruation and sexuality. Additionally, it includes research carried out at a period-tracking app company in China, specifically examining the design of various features of the app. I also intermittently engaged in online research within period-tracking app communities as well as on major Chinese social media platforms, with a primary focus on the online discourse of intimacy and female sexuality. I also sought to include gender and sexual minorities in my study, driven by my personal commitment to LGBTQI+ development in China. This involves engagement with Chinese *kua xingbie* (cross-gender) communities, undertaken in partnership with local NGOs (Li, 2026). I have encountered around 160 individuals during my fieldwork, their ages ranging from 18 to 65 years old.

The normative big data frame and its ethical complexities

The main predictive functions offered by period-tracking apps usually include first, the prediction of the future menstruation date and second, the anticipated ovulation date based on the future menstruation date. The company views the precision of its predictions as a key competitive advantage, crucial for enhancing user engagement and expanding its market share. This is not surprising, as such free-to-use apps can manifestly enhance their reputation and provide a low-threshold technological solution for a wide range of users in China. Moreover, it is this ambition of achieving the widest possible utilisation that contributes in part to the framing of the normative in the product design.

In creating predictions for an individual user, the process involves more than just analysing that user's own menstrual history. It also employs big data and machine learning to categorise users into distinct groups based on recognised patterns within a vast nationwide user base. This categorisation aligns each user with others who have similar characteristics. The system then merges these group patterns with the individual's personal records to generate more accurate predictions. This approach, blending personal data with larger datasets, is a common practice in AI-driven medical health predictions (Holmberg, Bischof and Bauer 2013).

Although this method is seen as a technical breakthrough aiming for increasing predictive accuracy, it is also an expedient. It makes up for the lack of high-quality data from users, a common issue in the realm of digital health worldwide (Hoeyer 2023). ‘High-quality data’ refers to datasets characterised by their consistency and long-term collection, encompassing various types of input. For example, a user who records their daily basal body temperature, their menstruation dates for the past five years and a detailed recording of their PMS symptoms in the app is seen as a ‘heavy user’ or ‘ideal user’, in contrast to a ‘light user’ who only tracks the start and end dates of their menstruation each month.

These ideal users can provide high-quality datasets for the company. The benefit of possessing high-quality datasets is that they enable the company to use a range of historical personal data effectively to detect patterns and forecast outcomes, leading to improved accuracy in their predictions. The regular tracking of PMS symptoms, cervical mucus and shifting of basal body temperature can help to identify imminent ovulation or menstruation, such as in the use of Fertility Awareness Method (FAM). However, in the Chinese market, high-quality data is rare. This is because the majority of self-tracking users can be categorised as ‘light users’ rather than ‘heavy users’, according to both the data analysis of the period-tracking company and my fieldwork data of users. Comparatively, the Natural Cycles app – a fertility-tracking app with growing popularity in the US and Europe that uses basal body temperature and algorithmic predictions to help users monitor their menstrual cycle for contraception or conception planning – depicts its ‘ideal user’ as someone who meticulously tracks menstrual dates, daily basal body temperature and cervical mucus. This thorough tracking enables the app to provide more accurate predictions for contraception or pregnancy planning.⁵

Given the challenge of limited data, a common practice adopted by Chinese period-tracking apps is to use predefined categories as a predictive framework, as mentioned above. This comprises two steps. First, in order to maintain the accuracy of the final results, users who experience irregular and unpredictable menstruation are filtered out during the screening and pre-processing phase of the training dataset. This step is necessary to ensure that the raw data used includes indications of relatively regular menstruation and consistent recording for a certain level of presentation. Second, for predicting an individual’s situation, data from a broader population sharing similar characteristics such as age groups, geographical locations and occupations are utilised.

The patterns identified from these categories are then incorporated back into the prediction for individual users.

The establishment of such a frame means that the target user of the prediction function is also limited to users with relatively regular and predictable menstruation, as explained by the company's product managers. Users outside this normative frame may find that the prediction function does not work for them. Such exclusion of the atypical has become a major ethical concern in considering the consequences of the increased use of artificial intelligence. Leese (2014) highlights these ethical concerns in algorithmic learning, where the training process creates structures (such as classes and ranks) that are biased by cultural norms and medical practice genres. This leads to 'preempt error', reflecting biases in big data and AI. Individuals are often categorised based on group behaviour rather than their own; this results in discrimination, including racism, and impacts upon societal governance and risk management (Lee and Larsen 2019). As such, data never neutrally represents reality, challenging the notion of 'raw' versus 'cooked' data and leading to a continuous reinvention of 'truth' (Henriksen and Bechmann 2020).

Although this exclusion of certain users is not an unenvisioned consequence for the producer, the diverse and sometimes unexpected ways in which users apply period-tracking apps to their personal situations can deviate still further from the designers' original intentions. One area of discrepancy between users and producers lies in their respective interpretation and application of the local medical concept of the 'safe period'.

This chapter began by noting the widespread use of the 'safe period' as a contraceptive method among heterosexual couples in China. Most period-tracking apps in China initially incorporated this concept in their design, recognising its relevance to local users, when first launched on the Chinese market about a decade ago. These apps usually calculate the 'safe period' using a rule that estimates seven days before and after the predicted date of menstruation provided by the app. However, my fieldwork revealed that many users rely on these predicted dates for contraception planning. They may not realise that their predictions are based on big data and past personal data, instead of real-time and personalised physiological data such as basal body temperature (BBT). As a result, the fertile and infertile dates calculated using this general knowledge can be imprecise. This can have significant consequences – particularly for unmarried women, for whom abortion is often the only viable option for unintended pregnancy due to the stigma associated with out-of-wedlock pregnancies and childbirth (Xie 2021).

More recently the responsibility of apps to provide scientifically accurate medical information to their users has intensified. This is particularly because modern sex education increasingly advocates active contraception and has raised awareness of safe sex practices. Consequently, many period-tracking apps have now removed the specific 'safe period' (*anquan qi* 安全期) expression from their interface. They have left only the colour differentiation on the calendar (see [Fig. 1.1](#) above, on the left) to demonstrate the division of menstrual phases, including ovulation periods in purple and other phases in green. However, some users have noticed and complained about its removal, stating that it has complicated and inconvenienced their sex lives. For example, some users rely on the 'safe period' method as their regular contraceptive, despite warnings from medical professionals and the app about the risk of pregnancy associated with this method. In reality, in my fieldsite, this 'safe period' method is commonly used in combination with emergency contraceptive pills. Some informants found the 'safe period' method effective rather than risky for contraception, relying on their personal understanding of their individualised bodily patterns and intimate lives. This suggests users have their own agendas for understanding and managing the body and bodily norms. These often extend beyond the established frame of big data or biomedical knowledge, demonstrating a gap between the daily practices of contraception and the biomedical and professional ideal embedded in medical advice and app design. Such a situation is further evident in women's self-knowledge of normal menstruation, as discussed below.

Normal menstruation as self-knowledge

Neff and Nafus (2016) contend that users of self-trackers always seek to rectify or improve their performances when they realise that they are not near the middle of a mathematical 'normal curve', especially in modern society where active 'self-improvement' and 'taking action' are valorised. Often this becomes an excessive burden for users. By contrast, my ethnography suggests a far more diverse pattern of response to the idea of normality among users. They seldom view themselves as obliged to adhere to the app's temporality, nor do they feel pressured to react according to such an idea of the normal. Rather, users view the app as an interesting accessory that they may or may not be impressed by. Generally individuals rely far more upon knowledge of their own bodies.

Hardly any of my informants who are recording their periods for self-knowledge or contraception (in contrast to those preparing for pregnancy or already pregnant) can be categorised as the ‘ideal user’ depicted by the company. They use period-tracking apps for limited times within a month, mostly recording only the dates of menstruation and sometimes details of their sex lives.

Wanying, in her early thirties, works as a marketing specialist for a local company in downtown Hangzhou. She interpreted her understanding of the app and her period as ‘neither of us being on time’:

I started using the Clue app because my period was all over the place and I was trying to figure out some sort of pattern. But after a few months I noticed my period’s still pretty random, and the app isn’t great at adapting – it keeps predicting the same time frame. Still, I’m sticking with it just to keep track of the dates.

Despite her long-term recording habits, Wanying’s irregular menstruation leaves little room for the app to provide accurate predictions. As mentioned earlier, users like her are often excluded from the predictive framework because of the lack of regularity in their cycles. Additionally, without the input of other data indicators such as basal body temperature (BBT) and premenstrual syndrome (PMS) symptoms, the accuracy of the app’s predictions cannot be improved.

Although the prediction function of period-tracking apps can be useless for those who have irregular periods, it can still be used as a measurement for gaining more self-knowledge. In the same vein Ming, a college student in her early twenties, complained to me about her ‘totally messy’ and ‘unpredictable’ periods. She explained how she used the app strategically:

The prediction part of the Dayima app is kinda pointless for me since my cycle is so unpredictable. But I still check it to see just how ‘off’ I am each month because the timing of my period is all over the place. Sometimes it’s only a day late, but other times it’s like 10 days. What’s cool is that the app keeps track of my cycle and gives me a heads-up about when it’s due, which is super helpful since remembering last month’s date is a no-go for someone with a wonky cycle like mine. With the app reminders and the monthly round-up of my cycle’s ups and downs, I get a sort of ‘benchmark’ to compare each month’s cycle to and figure out what’s going on with it.

Ming acknowledges that while the app does not possess the sophistication of AI, at least from her understanding of the function, it nevertheless suffices for her needs. She possesses a comprehensive understanding of the predictive limitations, as well as the extent to which they can be personalised. Her conception of a 'normal menstrual cycle' has been re-evaluated; it is now informed by a more adaptable framework that prioritises her unique circumstances over the standardised norms of average or ideal menstrual cycles as defined by the app.

In the cases of both Wanying and Ming, the prediction of the app, if diverging from their actual period date, will not cause too much pressure or burden to them. By contrast, the predictive function could still be adopted for reference and reminder purposes. Many of the users I have spoken to, much like Wanying and Ming, have not found period-tracking apps to be particularly remarkable or underwhelming. Instead, they just adapt these apps for daily use according to their individual needs.

The other two groups of informants I have encountered, however, represent the two extremes of the spectrum. Miao is an 18-year-old student at the local high school. She used period-tracking apps for a while and then gave up on them entirely:

I got them on my phone once. Used them for a few months, then trashed them. My periods are always not on time, so whenever I tried to get ready early because of the app's guess, my period would stand me up. Then my period would just hit me out of nowhere when I least expected it. Super annoying, so I figured those apps were just no good.

This also happened to Maggie, who worked as a shopkeeper at a small clothing store in my fieldsite. She told me about her 'tragic' experience of relying on the app for arranging her schedule for Chinese New Year family gatherings to avoid menstrual pain; the app in fact 'failed her trust' and ruined her holiday because its prediction was a week out (her period came early).

Both Miao and Maggie may be regarded as having less education or being younger in age. This group tends to put the blame completely on the app as being inaccurate and useless without dwelling much on the underlying reasons, in contrast to Wanying and Ming. While the latter do not expect the app to provide a perfect technical solution, Miao and Maggie often feel let down when the app does not deliver as promised.

On the other end of the spectrum, some informants marvel at how accurately these apps could predict their periods, often describing them

as ‘magical’. Their admiration stems from the apps’ seemingly intuitive understanding of their bodies, like precisely forecasting menstruation dates. I found that such accuracy is often correlated with users who have relatively regular menstrual cycles, which is in line with the discussion in the previous section of how prediction ‘works’. This reliability leads them to trust the apps and use them as a convenient tool to manage their menstruation, effectively outsourcing this aspect of their daily personal care. Despite this magic outcome, they would not regard the app as experiencing the body and replacing their own senses, sometimes leading to negative consequences, as in the cases discussed by Berson (2015, xi) and Lupton (2016, 81).

Despite their varied experiences with the period-tracking app’s prediction feature, these three user groups have autonomy and agency in shaping their personal bodily awareness in relation to their actual use, or in deciding not to use these apps. The app’s forecasts may hold value at times, yet the users’ unique personal insights remain paramount. Their understanding and acceptance of their normative and personalised menstrual cycle is closely tied to viewing irregular menstruation as a form of self-knowledge rather than a source of anxiety. While they may aspire to a more regular and predictable cycle, they embrace the natural fluctuations in their menstrual timing. For those negatively influenced by predictive apps, the unique characteristics of their own bodies hold greater importance than the app’s predictions. This is also related to an understanding of the commonness of abnormal or irregular menstruation in local medical and TCM terms (such as in the expression of ‘*yuejing butiao*’, 月经不调, meaning menstrual irregularity) and of how it can be nurtured with good habits and TCM. For instance, some informants believe that reduced menstruation is linked to a lack of exercise or increased stress, while painful menstruation may be attributed to exposure to cold before menstruation, such as drinking iced water or eating ice cream. These factors are thought to block the flow of *qi-xie*, leading to abnormal menstruation. This temporary issue can be addressed with healthier lifestyle practices, such as drinking more hot water or ginger tea, soaking feet in warm water or consuming decocted TCM, rather than viewing it as a sign of illness.

In my fieldsite, menstruation is always a relatively ‘safe’ topic among women, even for less familiar acquaintances; it can be raised without causing much embarrassment and discomfort. Conversations about abnormal menstruation treatment are regarded as sympathetic and essential within local medical contexts. In contrast, the subject of sex remains taboo, awkward and private among my female informants.

Digital tools and shifting female sexuality

A notable observation from my fieldwork in urban China is the significant challenge female participants face in exploring sexuality. In the meanwhile, this is the same society where there is a strong expectation for every adult to embrace parenthood, often leading older people, openly and in public, to urge young couples to produce babies. Moreover, romantic relationships, love and marriage are seen as indispensable in urban life. Yet sex is a topic unanimously avoided, even in the most casual and relaxing occasion of ‘girlfriend gossiping’. In this context, the method of long-term ethnography has proved itself particularly valuable as perhaps the only way to investigate intimate topics such as contraception and sex. Building trust and genuine friendships over an extended period forms the cornerstone of successful ethnographic research. Most of the materials about sexuality were gathered in the last few months of my fieldwork, by which time informants trusted me with their thoughts and experiences as close friends. Even then, in most cases, my female informants showed more comfort in discussing sexuality in a scientific or medical context, detached from sharing personal experiences or subjective feelings. For example, they may prefer to talk about medical issues such as vaginal dryness during menopause and its treatments, or the side effects of IUDs, instead of delving into personal topics like their feelings about sex or intimate relationships with their husband.

In Chinese traditions and historical narratives, the concept of gender normativity has always been associated with the discipline of female sexuality and gender roles. Classical Chinese texts on medicine and ‘bedchamber arts’ trace the origins of essentialist views on sexual difference, portraying males as ‘yang’ (active, straightforward) and females as ‘yin’ (passive, complex) to illustrate a complementary, harmonious heterosexual dynamic. This yin-yang framework, emphasising an active/passive sexual role dichotomy, informed ancient sexual practices and theories (Farquhar 2002, 255–61). Confucianism established gender roles within rigid hierarchical family structures, highlighting the complexities of gender constructs in China (Furth 1988; Yu, Luo and Xie 2022). This traditional framework advocates for a moral society grounded in sexual propriety and filial duty, dictated by binary gender roles and the imperative of progeny for familial succession (Furth 1988; Fan 2007).

Such traditions of gender-based distinctions continued in the Maoist era. Since 1949 these intrinsic distinctions between females and males have been prominently featured in both public and official Chinese

discussions on sexuality. In the public discourse from the 1950s onwards, male sexual autonomy was emphasised, rendering female sexuality reliant on males, whereas female sexual independence, including desires and pleasure, was often viewed as dangerous or abnormal. The concept suggested that female orgasm depended significantly on male effort and the context of a heterosexual relationship, tying women's sexual pleasure to marital and family stability (Evans 1997, 45–9; Yu, Luo and Xie 2022). This era associated female sexual passivity with the stereotype of the 'innocent victim', portraying women as seduced into 'deviant' behaviours like extramarital and premarital sex by men, yet paradoxically blaming them for their victimhood – particularly if they were deemed 'impure' or 'unchaste' (e.g., not virgins at marriage) (Evans 1997).

In the reform era (from 1978 to the present), guided by an essentialist tradition, the scientific framing of sexuality established a strict normative and moral code distinguishing 'righteous' sexual and gender behaviour from what was considered 'abnormal' or 'wrong', incorporating both scientific and socio-moral concerns. This code aimed to conform sexual and gender diversity to a state-supported model of monogamous heterosexual marriage (Evans 1997, 33–4). Li (1998) also noted this strong moral concern in relation to sexuality in her ethnographic study of Chinese women. Despite the enforcement of these norms by the state, society began to adapt, revealing a newfound openness to varying sexual moralities. This period marked a tension between 'traditional' and 'modern' perspectives, particularly around the rise of premarital sexual practices as well as increasing expressions of female sexual desire and sexual pleasure (Farrer 2002; Liu 2017; Pei 2007; Zarafonitis 2017). These contemporary attitudes represent a shift from historical views that prized virginity and chastity as hallmarks of female virtue during the late imperial and Maoist periods in China (Steinmüller and Tan 2015), highlighting an evolving yet complex landscape of sexual normativity.

These new changes have also become visible in the digital age. Social media platforms and discussion forums have significantly expanded the intimate discursive space for Chinese women, especially with its anonymous feature. Pei and Ho (2008) found that Chinese women use cyberspace to discuss marital sex issues with female friends, previously a topic typically avoided offline. These online friendships often extend offline, alleviating their anxiety regarding their problems and fostering a culture celebrating women's choices, knowledge-sharing and sisterhood. An additional focus of the existing scholarship centres on the role of social media in facilitating Chinese feminist discourses

and movements (Xue and Rose 2022). The effect of social media is also evident in terms of the generational difference among my informants in discussing intimate topics: younger individuals, especially those born after the 1990s, tend to be much more open and liberal. This is closely related to the rise of the internet and social media, which has allowed them to access more information about sexuality and to discuss their intimate concerns more openly and anonymously with online acquaintances. Additionally, the use of digital tools, such as period-tracking apps and digital sex-tracking functions, plays a role in shaping and negotiating new norms and moral frameworks around intimacy and female sexuality.

Sex-tracking is a function provided by the period-tracking tool. Besides tracking the dates of their menstrual cycle, users can also log their sexual behaviours, including the time of intercourse and contraceptive use. The purpose of this varies. For users trying to get pregnant, this is handy to visualise their efforts made in this process. Users currently avoiding pregnancy, on the other hand, noted down details of their sex life as a reference point for contraception, memory or entertainment.

Yang, one of my key informants, is an undergraduate college student in her early twenties. She did not start using the app Dayima until she became sexually active with her first boyfriend. Sex is the main reason that she has become more aware of her menstruation dates, due to worries about accidental pregnancy. She recorded sex and contraceptive methods used with the 'simplified mode' on. This is a confidential feature provided by the app, replacing individual icons representing the recordings of 'sex', 'condom' and 'pill' with several red dots, which would otherwise be visible on the app's interface. This adjustment of privacy settings has largely alleviated Yang's concern over accidental information leakage:

See, I keep a 'secret version' of this because I don't want folks snooping around and figuring out what I was up to that day or how often I have sex. Imagine if someone was messing with my phone and just stumbled upon it? Talk about a major blush-fest!

Although Yang strikes me as a liberal, confident and modern young woman, she was still slightly hesitant and embarrassed when she showed me her sex records and termed this as 'exposing my privacy', an expression never associated with the tracking records of menstruation. However, visualising and materialising sex on an app might pose a significant challenge for other users, particularly for individuals from a slightly older generation.

Feiyu, who is in her early thirties, has a seven-year-long record of period-tracking data. That makes her one of the early adopters of period-tracking apps, right from when they first hit the market. Feiyu recounted her experience of her initial period-tracking in college in the early 2010s, right after her first sexual experience. Interestingly, however, despite this usage being associated with intimacy, she had very few records of her previous sexual experiences. The presence of shame and fear associated with documenting sexual encounters explained this deliberate omission.

As a young adult who came of age in a cultural environment steeped in the stigmatisation and vilification of sex (particularly through the dramatic portrayal of moral decay and health risks associated with unintended pregnancies in premarital sexual relations, coupled with limited sex education), Feiyu's response to sex was representative of informants in her age group. Today on Chinese social media platforms it is easy to find euphemisms such as 'doing bad things' (*gan huaishi* 干坏事) in colloquial language to refer to sex, especially premarital sex. In my fieldsite, although premarital sex has become more common among the younger generation, there are still 'traditional' moral burdens attached to it (as also noted by Farrer 2002 and Zarafonitis 2017). Besides concerns about the risk of pregnancy, these relate to the local understanding of virginity as being an important possession for a young woman. Traditionally a woman's good reputation was linked to her abstinence, instead of outspoken sexual desires or messy sexual relations.

Over the course of the past seven years, Feiyu's increasingly frequent tracking of her sexual activities using this digital tool has largely helped her to de-mystify and de-stigmatise sex as she has grown older. As she reflects, this has been an empowering change. In addition, it has assisted her in monitoring health-related concerns such as irregular menstruation and gynaecological conditions. Even though the tracking appears as a passive personal archive, it wields influence and agency in shaping the recorder's mindset and future life.

While premarital sex has been somewhat negatively linked to female morality, sex for a noble cause is otherwise more acceptable and justifiable. This typically implies having sex with the aim of becoming pregnant, undertaken by married heterosexual couples. In WeChat chat groups, various social media platforms and online forums and communities integrated with period-tracking apps, there are extensive discussions about ovulation timing, sexual frequency, the best positions for conception and techniques for natural fertilisation. Through the social media function of the period-tracking app, married women are enthusiastic about sharing the screenshots of the interface of their

period-tracking app with lines of red hearts (representing sex) on the calendars – not only to exchange experiences with others in the same life stage online but also, more importantly, to show off their husbands' sexual capabilities. Often such pictures are commented on with self-ridicule and banter: 'Seriously! I'm so jealous. My husband? He only does the deed when I am ovulating, like twice a month!' Yixiao, who was five months pregnant when we first met, confided to me slightly bashfully that she sometimes looked at her past sex records before her pregnancy in retrospect, just to speculate the specific date of her conception. This is always a joyful process, as it fondly reminds her of the fun she had with her husband while preparing for pregnancy.

While Yixiao viewed her sex records with ease and pleasure, Feiyu once struggled even to record her sexual experiences. Feiyu's and Yixiao's contrasting attitudes towards recording sex partially mirror and internalise societal morals regarding female sexuality, highlighting the distinction between perceived 'shameful sex' and 'virtuous sex'. Furthermore, the discourse on sexual pleasure, as illustrated by Yixiao and other informants born after the 1990s, stands in stark contrast to that of the earlier generation, who seldom discussed sexual pleasure or desire, or who deemed sex to be an unpleasant experience. This newer discourse is now also reflected in period-tracking apps, where implicit discussions of sexuality and sexual pleasure, such as sex-tracking and pregnancy-preparing, have become more visible. Sex-tracking has therefore effectively facilitated the expression of sex culture and the expansion of 'sexual scripts' – culturally familiar references or norms that guide sexual behaviour, sexual negotiations between individuals and the way in which sex is discussed (Jackson and Scott 2007).

In particular, the anonymous posting feature, unique to the social media platform embedded within period-tracking apps, is highly appreciated by users. This feature allows them to discuss sensitive and intimate topics freely with online strangers without fear of damaging their reputations. A prevalent genre of online posts revolves around inquiries about contraception, where users typically share details of their sexual experiences and seek advice regarding the likelihood of pregnancy or ask for second opinions from fellow users. Another frequently discussed topic concerns sexual norms during pregnancy, as couples grapple with new challenges. In this context, online strangers play a vital role in offering assistance and emotional support; they also foster a sense of sisterhood, which may be difficult to find in the offline world. This aligns with the existing studies on Chinese online stranger-ship. For instance, Wang (2013) found that Chinese youth born in the

1980s and 1990s have developed an 'elastic self' through interacting with strangers online. Chan (2021) observed that in Southern China dating apps empower heterosexual women by providing a separate space for anonymous sharing and connecting with like-minded individuals beyond their existing networks. Similarly McDonald (2019) highlights the fluid nature of interaction with online strangers across different times and spaces, leading to continual redefinitions of kinship and friendship relations.

As one informant has noted, the social media function of the period-tracking app has facilitated an alternative social connection separated from her offline sociality:

I would use the platform to ask something I could not really ask family or friends anonymously. Firstly, some questions are very embarrassing to ask, and I would feel ashamed to ask straight out. Second, if my questions are private, I would worry that they would gossip to others and reveal my secrets, even without ill intentions – as the Chinese saying goes: 'One should never forget to guard against possible harm done by others' (*fangren zhixin buke wu*, 防人之心不可无).

This section explored two key functions of period-tracking apps: the sex-tracking feature and the social media platform. Together these functions reshape sexual scripts, discourse and knowledge, challenging traditional norms by expanding discussions on sexual pleasure and legitimising sex through digital records. However, established moral views of sexuality, such as those surrounding pregnancy, still persist. Despite the apparent openness of these platforms, they are heavily monitored and censored, especially under China's strict internet regulations, limiting the freedom to discuss intimacy online.

Censoring and making the intimate space

Following the Arab Spring, the Chinese government enhanced cyber censorship to safeguard against similar threats (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018, 79). This led to updated cybersecurity laws and technologies, requiring platform operators to comply. Google exited the Chinese search engine market, while domestic platforms such as Sina Weibo and WeChat were obliged to comply with these terms (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018). Today in mainland China internet censorship is an administrative

practice that operates under a framework of various laws and regulations (Fu, Chan and Chau 2013; Roberts 2018; Yang 2009); all platform operators have to comply with the governmental supervision for survival and normal operation (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018). To encourage users to comply with content moderation guidelines, Douyin's content moderation team has established a Douyin account to share guidelines for creating suitable online content, seeking to reduce friction between users and the platform while safeguarding the platform's interests (He and Tian 2023). Online discussions on sensitive subjects such as sex, body and blood have therefore been subject to strict content moderation to maintain what the state regards as a 'healthy internet environment'; this is also consistent with China's long-standing censorship of pornography (Liang and Lu 2012; Jacobs 2012). One example of this in practice may be seen in the app Momo's efforts to eliminate low and vulgar (*disu*) content. Starting in 2015 Momo, a dating app, responded to regulatory penalties by initiating efforts to create a 'clean' online environment. This involves removing social groups within the app that promote sexual promiscuity (Liu 2016).

Although existing scholarship on the censorship of erotic content typically focuses on platforms that actively comply with government regulations, the role of content moderators in this process is often overlooked. This study aims to address this gap. While state regulations set the overarching framework, content moderation is often left to the discretion of producers, who apply these guidelines and their moral judgements in their nuanced, day-to-day work. In Chapter 8 of this book, Hu and others demonstrate a similar perspective that the government regulation often acts retrospectively, while the needs of grass-roots and self-reliant e-merchants often dominate the platform's operation mode. Furthermore, in the studies of global content moderation work, a 'conflicting' theme is evident; this addresses the conflict of interests and values between content moderators and the platform, as well as between content moderators and the platform users themselves (Ahmad and Krzywdzinski 2022; Jereza 2024; Roberts 2019; Spence et al. 2023). This conflicting theme, however, can be replaced with an alternative perspective demonstrated by this study.

My fieldwork within the social platform and content moderation department of a period-tracking company suggests that the company not only follows the guidelines clarifying the directions for content moderation issued by the Chinese government, but also plays an important part in adjusting and updating its content moderation process to its own needs and development – especially following their general product positioning. Moreover, content moderators sometimes show

agency in showing empathy and care for clients; they balance their roles as strict censors and morality advocates, with those of empathetic caretakers. This also introduces an additional dimension to the shaping of the normativity of female sexuality and intimacy, imperceptibly influencing users' perceptions of the discursive space.

In line with the company's content moderation policies, explicit sexual content such as pornography, prostitution and other illegal or immoral activities is strictly prohibited and easily filtered by AI. Such content is usually specifically listed in the governmental policy guidelines. Beyond this clear-cut regulation, the company employs a more nuanced approach to manage content that falls into 'the grey area'. This includes content in which the degree of eroticism is not immediately evident, requiring a manual review to assess its suitability. This type of content, while having cleared the basic 'security screening threshold' (that is, governmental regulations), is still not considered appropriate for widespread dissemination within the online community. This decision is based on the potential impact of its 'vulgarity' on the community's overall atmosphere.

In this grey area there are two distinct categories defined by the company. One involves content related to sexual and reproductive health or medicine; the other includes content that focuses on sexual pleasure and explicit sexual details. The key factor in distinguishing between these two types lies in the intent behind the posts and their contexts. Some users posted out of a lack of relevant knowledge or the need for urgent help from other users, while others desired to share explicit details of their sex lives or intentionally pornographic materials. In such scenarios, only essential descriptions related to sexual health are permissible. In contrast, content that is primarily about sexual pleasure is considered erotic and is subject to censorship. This then commands the normative expression of sexual behaviour as being that which issues a strong moral proscription against women's explicitly revealing sexual desires or describing intimacy openly.

Despite including some details about sex life, other descriptions of sexual activity are neither erotic nor literary, but rather straightforward and often conservative in tone. Content moderators have explained that these posts are acceptable due to their sincere nature of 'seeking help'. This can also enhance interactions among users who are willing to provide advice or to share similar experiences, which can be advantageous for the platform by boosting user retention. Posts in this category that garner high page views may even be manually promoted to the app's homepage (such as the 'Today' tab in [Figure 1.1](#)). Posts categorised as

showing sexual pleasure or eroticism, on the other hand, will be limited in their wider dissemination online.

One example that further illustrates the complex interplay between users and developers is the utilisation and regulation of sex euphemisms when discussing intimacy, in accordance with socially accepted sexual norms and moralities. The use of indirect language for sexual topics has a notable history in China. For instance, Evans (1997) observed that in 1980s publications sexual relationships were often described using phrases like ‘gone beyond ordinary friendship’ (*chaoguole pengyou guanxi*, 超过了朋友关系) or ‘liked him’ (*gen ta haoguo*, 跟他好过), particularly in the context of morally questionable relationships such as extramarital affairs. While in the 1980s the editors of these publications, representing the literal elites, carefully chose literal and tasteful expressions to avoid vulgarity, in the digital age grass-roots neologisms on the internet have altered the previous ‘top-down’ approach to lexical innovations initiated by elites and authorities through mass education and political propaganda (Zhuo and Hsieh 2019, 518). From the users’ point of view, the utilisation of euphemisms can be a complex phenomenon. It may arise from the desire to circumvent censorship, the adherence to online norms of expression, feelings of shame and embarrassment, the aim to maintain a sense of refinement and avoid vulgarity, or simply from the wish to demonstrate personal creativity and ability to entertain.

The platform, on the other hand, adheres to a generally conservative stance on intimate topics. This approach is not only to align with government policies and avoid potential penalties but also to uphold a specific image in line with their product positioning. For example, in most popular period-tracking apps ‘*ai ai*’ (literally ‘love love’ 爱爱) is used as a softer, more feminine term for ‘*zuo ai*’ (‘making love’ 做爱) in the sex-tracking sections of these apps. This choice of words, with its repetitive and endearing sound, aligns with the youthful, cute and pink-themed interface design of these apps, reflecting a culturally appropriate and gendered approach to discussing sexuality. However, this does not imply that the platform’s role is solely to police and censor users’ online expressions, leading to a somewhat adversarial relationship between the two parties. This may indeed hold true to some extent, especially when the platform embodies a particularly conservative ethos. Yet more often the female content moderators with whom I worked exhibited a strong sense of empathy for users’ desires to discuss intimacy; they also shared the values of the clients who prefer culturally appropriate ways, such as the use of sex euphemisms in discussing intimacy and sexuality.

Being well aware of the presence of these euphemisms on the platform, content moderators continually update the system's 'sensitive word vocabularies' to alert the system to new euphemisms. In this way they actively contributed to the development and fine-tuning of the company's guidelines, thus exerting an influence on the platform's standards of expression. In fact, employing euphemisms serves as an additional criterion for indirectly gauging the mindset of posters, which can help to avoid censorship. Content moderators determined that using euphemisms to replace formal expressions of sexuality is more acceptable in general. Accordingly, content moderation standards encourage secretive expressions using coded languages such as 'pinyin' or English words, rather than their legitimate Chinese counterparts. A clear example is that while posts containing 'gaochao' (高潮, literally translated as 'orgasm' in English) are predominantly blocked, the euphemistic abbreviation 'gc', derived from the term's pronunciation, remains accessible on the platform. Similarly, while 'ziwei' (自慰, literally translated as 'masturbation' in English) cannot be displayed, the expression 'DIY', a metaphorical expression for masturbation, is allowed.

Furthermore, content moderators and developers are well aware that if they were to adopt an adversarial stance by excessively censoring online content, this could potentially reduce user engagement. To maintain some balance and retain their profitability, personalised algorithms are employed to address this concern. They enable the precise identification of intimate content and recommend it to users who are likely to be interested, while simultaneously avoiding recommendations to those who may not appreciate such content. This approach can thus enhance user experience even as it demonstrates compliance with government policies. Moderators and developers thereby display empathy for users' desires, needs and emotions; they utilise new digital technology such as social media and algorithms to navigate the intricate dynamics between the user, the platform and the government regarding the expression of female sexuality.

In this sense, normativity works both ways. A sense of what users regard as acceptable certainly influences what content moderators regard as acceptable. In [Chapter 8](#) of this book, the review of the ethnographic studies of algorithms highlights a similar viewpoint, emphasising that the practical application and adjustment of algorithmic rules frequently shape the results of personalised recommendation systems.

The normativity of online sexual discourse is thus reshaped through interactions between producers, who establish and enforce expressive standards, and users, who demonstrate the desire to share their intimate

lives within socially acceptable moral frameworks. This dynamic not only challenges the conflicting themes in content moderation studies, but also highlights the agency of content moderators. Additionally, users' preferences and existing cultural norms play a crucial role in defining online norms.

Conclusions

This chapter has discussed four types of norms related to the female body that are generated and facilitated by period-tracking apps. In the first section I delved into the design of the predictive algorithms employed to forecast individual users' future menstrual cycles. I pointed out that the app's predictive feature is rooted in both the historical and contemporary norms of individual users, as well as the norm of the broader population at a national level, categorised using fixed factors. A big data normative framework is crucial for product design, as it enhances universality and predictive accuracy. However, this approach comes at the expense of excluding data outliers – and consequently results in less accurate predictions for individuals with irregular and unpredictable menstrual cycles. This lack of personalisation in prediction can lead to ethical issues, particularly when using the app for digital contraception based on the local medical concept of a 'safe period'. This scenario has also challenged the entrenched myth within the AI industry that technology alone can serve as a silver bullet for enhancing predictive accuracy (Holmberg, Bischof and Bauer 2013), bringing to the fore the critical role of user participation and user data inputs in the system's operational dynamics, significantly influenced in turn by local digital practices (Hoeyer 2023). Despite the push to elevate technological sophistication to improve prediction precision, such efforts inherently rely on the exploitation of vast data patterns and universal frameworks (Henriksen and Bechmann 2020; Leese 2014). This deviates from the aspirational concept of ideal individualism, an illusion intricately woven into the product's design. The product therefore presents an inherent paradox, with its design ambitions caught between the poles of individualism and universalism.

This underlying discrepancy between user and producer is further highlighted in the second section, in which I discussed the negotiation and construction of the concept of normal menstruation in the usage of period-tracking apps. Users exercise considerable autonomy in defining their own body norms, rather than being swayed or constrained by the predictions. Instead of fully relying on the app's predictive results, they

use them as supplementary tools to monitor their cyclical bodily changes, or alternatively choose to stop using the app to avoid interference with their natural bodily rhythms. These practices also highlight how the concept of the ‘normal body’ in Chinese culture is rooted in the principles of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), notably the critical balance of yin and yang for health. This viewpoint normalises bodily variations, spotlighting the importance of self-regulation, self-control and bodily autonomy. It introduces a tradition of viewing the body through a lens of ‘dynamic’ normality and self-governance – a perspective evident in the discussed instances of individuals exerting agency over their definitions of a normal body. This tradition profoundly shapes users’ perceptions of, and engagement with, period-tracking devices.

However, for those who do not intend to depend on personal insights for self-awareness, the normative framework provided by the apps can lead to adverse effects, as illustrated by the challenging experiences of Miao and Maggie. This underscores the importance of a knowledge foundation in navigating the relationship between individualism and universalism during the usage of technology. For those who comprehend AI’s mechanisms, this technology can be tailored to their advantage, yielding more personalised outcomes. Conversely, for others a broadly applied technology may seem restrictive.

The third section has examined how social and cultural attitudes toward female sexuality are influenced and reshaped by period-tracking apps. Within the socio-cultural milieu of China, marked by normative views on sexuality, the practices of sex-tracking and the anonymous exchange and discovery of new information on sexuality carry local significance. These practices can facilitate greater understanding and control over one’s body or help to reduce the stigma and taboos associated with sex and intimacy. They can also empower women by facilitating more open conversations on premarital sex, sexual pleasure and desire – a finding parallel with the studies of period-tracking app use in the West (see e.g. Grenfell et al. 2021; Karlsson 2019). Meanwhile there is a moral distinction between premarital sex and sex within heterosexual marriage for reproduction, in line with the traditional tying of women’s sexual pleasure to marital and family stability (Evans 1997, 45–9), and upholding the importance of heterosexual marriage in official discourse and mainstream societal norms.

The last section has shown that content moderation work reveals and shapes diverse societal moral views on sexuality, renegotiating the new norms of intimate discourse. Both the content moderation policies and user posts demonstrate a moral apprehension and

conservatism towards expressing female sexuality. This reflects the historical perspective in China on female sexual passivity, abstinence and conservatism (Evans 1997; Li 1998). On the other hand, the adoption of euphemisms, supported by the corresponding policy inclination towards less direct forms of expression, establishes a new normative paradigm of communication among users. Diverging from this universalised pattern, personalised algorithms have helped to facilitate an individualised normativity which adheres to individual interests and preferences.

In conclusion, through these four aspects, this chapter has discussed how the concept of normativity is negotiated and produced with the use of digital technologies, through the lens of the interplay between universality and individuality. More specifically, it has shown the simultaneous coexistence and rise of these two aspects. The digital has given rise to individuality, as evidenced by the affordance of personal online spaces, the personalised understanding of one's menstruation cycle, the long-term storage capabilities for personal data and recommendation systems finely tuned to individual preferences and tastes. Yet universality is clearly demonstrated in the importance of big data patterns, the 'new norm' of expressing intimacy through digital means and the enduring influence of traditional moral values on digital interactions and expressions.

This dynamic and dialectical relationship between individuality and universality mirrors the broader principles of digital anthropology concerning the evolving dynamics of openness and closure (Miller and Horst 2021, 33). Moreover, this discussion diverges from existing theoretical frameworks regarding individualism and personhood in China – as outlined by scholars such as Fei (1992), Yan (2009) and Morris (1994), who mainly discuss the rise of individualism in relation to shifts in kinship, sociality, family dynamics and the situated self in various social contexts – by offering an alternative examination of these concepts at the intimate micro-scale of body and sexuality.

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Notes

- 1 Although this chapter primarily focuses on cisgender women, it is important to acknowledge that other individuals – such as non-binary people and trans men – also track their menstruation. While the term ‘women’ and ‘she/her’ pronouns are used here in line with the language of my cisgender interlocutors, period-tracking apps are used by a broader range of people beyond this category in my fieldsite.
- 2 According to a large-scale survey by Mao et al. on contraceptive use in China, consisting of over 2,500 women aged 14 to 44 years, over half (53.1 per cent) reported their methods as ‘nothing used’ or ‘rhythm or withdrawal’. This was followed by condoms (40.1 per cent), ‘morning-after’ contraception pills (3.09 per cent) and IUD (2.8 per cent). In stark contrast, only 0.67 per cent of respondents reported using oral contraception. Almost half of the participants in Mao et al.’s research reported having had at least one abortion. This prevalence of abortion is in line with the findings of my fieldwork.
- 3 My informants’ concerns about oral contraceptives include a reluctance towards the general use of hormones, including sex hormones, stemming from Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) beliefs; fears about weight gain and mood changes; and worries about drug dependency associated with daily consumption. This observation is consistent with Lai’s (2023) research, which suggests that the underutilisation of oral contraceptives (OCs) is driven by rumours about their side effects, a lack of adequate knowledge about OCs and discouragement from male partners, who often hold greater influence over contraceptive decisions. Other institutional reasons for the unpopularity of oral contraceptives also include their high cost and the lack of coverage by medical insurance in China.
- 4 This data comes from iiMedia.cn: <https://www.iimedia.cn/c880/91725.html>.
- 5 See the user manual at: <https://help.naturalcycles.com/hc/en-us/articles/360003302953-Instructions-for-use-Natural-Cycles>.

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Normativity through social media: an exploration of Enshiness in posts

Kunyu Xiang

Introduction

This chapter endeavours to present an ethnographic investigation elucidating how individuals engage with and negotiate normativity through their digital practices. In contrast to studies that focus on disruptive or transformative features of social media, this research emphasises that social media can be used to consolidate and revitalise traditional values in the digital era. Here we explore how this is achieved through visual representations of the ideals associated with Enshi, a fourth-tier city whose older residents are linked to a life philosophy of contentment and ordinariness, now also reflected in their creation of short videos. The ethos of Enshi inhabitants is further reinforced and idealised through collective narratives depicting civil servant life on Douyin.

In addition, individuals' social media practices are shaped by a philosophy of stability and balance, particularly evident in their online interactions with others. When confronted with conflicting value systems, this balance is often challenged or even disrupted. The traditional values/ethos of 'Enshi' are further secured when social media practices diverging from it are criticised. Based on these insights, this chapter contends that within individuals' digital practices social media serves not only as a reflection of values, but also as a mechanism for upholding normativity – particularly through its emphasis on visual representation.

Social media research, normativity and locality

Research on social media has generally focused upon examining the changes they have on people's daily lives. As mentioned in the presentation of current research by Chinese scholars in [Chapter 8](#) there are two primary positions: viewing digitalisation as a force either of improvement or of disruption. More specifically, the following topics have received particular attention:

- new communication methods and relationships (Baym [2015](#); Madianou and Miller [2012](#))
- media empowerment (Liu and Wang [2024](#); Zhou [2020](#))
- e-commerce (Wei, Lin and Zhang [2019](#); Qian [2020](#))
- micro-celebrities (Dong and Ye [2021](#); Dunn and Falkof [2021](#))
- hate speech and online bullying (Pohjonen and Udupa [2017](#))
- addiction (Akhtar and Islam [2025](#))
- information filters or cocoons (Zhang et al. [2023](#))

This suggests that research on the impact of social media largely focuses on the dimension of 'change', with limited attention given to 'continuity'.

With the popularisation of social media alongside the rise of mobile internet, particularly in anthropology, studies have increasingly focused on examining social media practices as integral components of people's everyday online and offline lives – although this approach is still limited. Social media has been employed as both the 'place' and tools for ethnography (e.g. Boellstorff [2008](#); Postill and Pink [2012](#)). For instance, in contrast to conventional social media studies that focus primarily on users' platform-related behaviours, the 'Why We Post' project focused on obtaining a comprehensive view of social media as part of daily routines (Miller et al. [2016](#)). A three-year ethnography explored how young individuals engage with, and acquire knowledge through, new media platforms across diverse environments (Ito et al. [2019](#)). Through a long-term mobile ethnography, Wallis ([2025](#)) illustrates how digital platform usage mediates the affect, ethics and aspirations of ordinary people in China in the context of socio-economic shifts. Chinese scholars presented the day-to-day social media practices of villagers in ethnic minority regions, especially the function of social media within the family context (e.g. Peng and Luo [2019](#); Sun [2016](#); Sun and Wang [2021](#)). Li and Tu ([2022](#)) and Wang ([2016](#)) focused on the everyday impact of social media on migrants. These studies focus on the co-construction

of humans and technology in specific socio-cultural contexts, forming a new paradigm for understanding everyday life in the digital age.

In exploring the influence of digital media on everyday life, I focus particularly on how normative use sustains or reconfigures ethical and moral norms. While relatively limited, existing research has begun to examine this point, such as McDonald's (2016) exploration of how the use of WeChat by rural residents in China shapes and reflects their moral values and social norms. Studies by Costa (2016) and Haynes (2016) similarly describe how social norms and moral frameworks in Turkey and Chile respectively were reflected and reinforced in Facebook and WhatsApp practices. These works collectively address aspects such as social surveillance and self-disclosure, reciprocity and social responsibility, and public moral performance. Building on these, this chapter further emphasises the visualisation of normativity through digital media, especially on short video platforms.

Another feature of this chapter is that it underscores approaching normativity through its association with locality. Although internet technology is often seen as a force that dissolves locality (Cairncross 1997; Wang 2021), studies also have shown that social media not only helps to maintain traditional forms of place attachment – such as emotional connections between migrant communities and their homelands – but also gives rise to new forms of place-based identity (Gomes 2018; Greschke 2012). One of the fundamental principles behind digital anthropology research is that the use of social media is the result of the encounter between technology and specific societies, cultures and histories (Miller 2013). Much of earlier research on the relationship between locality and the normative has focused on more generic cultural norms, frequently at the national level. Hjorth (2009) explained the particular success of Cyworld in South Korea, probably one of the earliest social media platforms, is closely tied to the platform's alignment with the traditional South Korean kinship system in categorising online friendships. Analogously, the widespread popularity of WeChat in China can be attributed to its features that align with the values of Chinese society, which prioritises personal connections and acquaintances (Fang 2020; Fei 1992). Furthermore, the possibility of conducting business among contacts in WeChat Moments underscores the Chinese emphasis on *guanxi*, or the individual's network of social connections that prioritises reciprocal benefits (Yang 1994). In contrast to such research, this chapter will focus on one specific, county-level city and consider how social media reinforces values associated with being a resident there.

Theories of normativity and Enshiness

Normativity is fundamental to human behaviour across all social contexts. It not only tells people what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, but also denotes the capacity to act in accordance with those appraisals (Frega 2015). The theoretical foundation for this chapter builds upon the work of Bourdieu (1990), who highlights the role of material culture in reproducing the normative. He contended that individuals become socially typical – even in the absence of formal education – because they are socialised through the habits and orientations embedded in their material environments. These environments teach people how to sit properly, which spaces are off-limits, how to eat and how to show respect. Bourdieu emphasises that individuals reflect and express social and cultural norms through the use and interaction of objects which are organised according to foundational structural principles (1990). Digital anthropology, however, adds another dimension to this framework because the focus is upon online and primarily visual media that people have developed creatively, rather than upon the material worlds into which we are born.

In this chapter, normativity takes the form of ‘Enshiness’, meaning the behaviours, values, ethics and morals that inhabitants of Enshi associate with the city. Enshiness encompasses both ethics and morals. It is defined by the widely accepted societal norms in Enshi, representing the ethical dimension. Simultaneously, it is embedded in individuals’ personal sense of right and wrong, shaped in turn by cultural values, which align more with the moral aspect (Stafford 2013). Enshiness is thus both descriptive and prescriptive: on the one hand it describes what is most common in Enshi society, while on the other it prescribes what is acceptable and should be done within Enshi society (Brauer and Chaurand 2010; Cialdini et al. 1990). Enshiness is not mandated by laws and regulations. Instead, it is widely internalised among Enshi people, subtly influencing value judgements and the behaviours of individuals and becoming the ideology of self-management. At its core is a concern with stability and modesty that brings contentment.

The colloquial Chinese term ‘*an fen*’ captures a mindset of being content with one’s assigned rights and responsibilities, reflecting an internalised acceptance of social hierarchy (Wang 2016). Understanding this concept requires an awareness of China’s specific socio-cultural context. China’s spatial administrative hierarchy, as shown in the tier system of cities, is deeply rooted in the nation’s traditional vision of hierarchical order (Cartier 2004). Ideas of hierarchy and harmony

have remained remarkably stable over time and are still prevalent in contemporary Chinese-speaking societies (Chen 2023; Roth 2023). This enduring influence is rooted in classical thought. To promote harmony and maintain a stable society, Confucius advocated a structured system of behavioural rules based on a hierarchical framework; each individual understands their position in the social hierarchy and is expected to act accordingly (Zhang and Ryden 2002).

The essence of Confucianism, the most important school of ancient Chinese philosophy, revolves around normativity such as *ren* (benevolence), *li* (manner), *yi* (righteousness), *zhi* (wisdom) and *xin* (credit). By institutionalising moral principles within social relations, a comprehensive system of behavioural norms was established (Lai 1995). 'Li' emphasises that in different contexts and social relationships human behaviour needs to follow specific norms; only under the guidance of *li* can *ren*, the ultimate moral achievement of individuals, be achieved (1995). The Confucian normative system embodies both ethical and political dimensions. As a moral code for personal cultivation, it emphasises self-discipline based on social order; as a political apparatus upholding hierarchical order, it provides the moral foundation and institutional framework for the social structure and state governance of ancient China (Jiang 2018). Ethical norms imposed on ordinary people were an important aspect of the authority exercised by rulers. The ideology's emphasis on balance, moderation and stability shaped both the development and operation of the Chinese political system (2018). Such deep integration of normativity and political authority gave rise to a distinctive tradition of Chinese-style governance.

However, the status of Confucian thought has not remained constant. From 1949 to the beginning of the reform and opening-up period in 1978, the Chinese state actively sought to undermine the Confucian ethical system. This was particularly the case during the Cultural Revolution, when traditional moral values were subjected to extensive criticism. Nevertheless, everyday ethics such as familial affection and filial piety have continued to persist (Stafford 2013). The emphasis on secular normativity has been revitalised through the ideology of the Communist Party of China (CPC), notably by advocating values such as patriotism and diligence (2013). In recent discourse by President Xi Jinping, particular attention has been given to the inheritance and promotion of traditional Chinese culture as part of constructing socialist core values, highlighting the role of personal moral cultivation in strengthening state governance (Zhao, Li and Feng 2020).

In this chapter I shift the focus from China's broader normative features to the specific locality of Enshi. To understand these norms, we must consider Enshi's place within China itself. Although I coined the term 'Enshiness' specifically to describe the normativity present in Enshi, similar forms of normativity are likely to exist in other lower-tier cities – and even among certain groups in first- and second-tier cities across China. This potentially highlights the chapter's significance, as findings derived from observations in Enshi, a fourth-tier city, can be extended and applied to other regions in China. This chapter's aim is not to showcase the uniqueness of normativity in a county-level city, but rather to illustrate how it interacts with digital practices in a particular locale.

Basic facts of Enshi: a comfortable county-level city gradually opening up from isolation

Enshi is situated in the southwestern part of Hubei Province, within the Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture. Covering an area of 24,000 square kilometres, Enshi Prefecture is administratively divided into six counties and two county-level cities: Enshi City and Lichuan City. Enshi City serves as the capital of the Enshi Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture. As of the end of 2022,¹ the permanent population of Enshi City is approximately 540,000 (urban population) and 350,000 (rural population). Enshi is home to diverse ethnic minority groups, including the Tujia, Miao and Dong.

Currently, the most commonly referred to urban classification system in China is the tier system. This system classifies cities based on a combination of socio-economic indicators and adjusts its criteria dynamically in response to urban development (Qian 2024). Not just an urban classification, the tier system provides a hierarchy that is well established. As a tier-four city, Enshi is entrusted by higher-level governments with less authority and resources, and is not prioritised for economic and political support in the national development plan (2024). The differences in economic level, infrastructure, cost of living and demand for talent between lower tier cities and first- and second-tier cities directly impact the living of their residents.

In major cities, life is fast-paced, interpersonal relationships are less connected, competition is fierce and anxiety is widespread (Zhao 2023). Fourth-tier cities lie between urban and rural cultures and they tend to be less affluent, characterised by close-knit communities and a relatively homogeneous culture (2023). As also a cultural symbol, fourth-tier cities

embody the class attributes, spiritual temperament, aesthetic tastes and emotional traits associated with their position in the urban ranking (Lv 2023). The emphasis on modest accomplishment in Enshi normative values is thus closely related to its labelling as a fourth-tier city.

Enshi has long been viewed – both by local residents and outsiders – as a relatively isolated, underdeveloped and self-sufficient society. Located in a mountainous area, for a long time it possessed limited transportation to the wider world, preventing external interactions and delaying modernisation. At a time when reform and opening up created unprecedented development opportunities for Chinese people, especially those living in coastal areas, and facilitated integration with the global economy, residents in the Enshi area were still walking over the mountains with baskets on their shoulders and goods on their backs.

Since 2000 a series of infrastructural developments, transport improvements and initiatives to alleviate poverty, notably supported by the China Western Development project,² have progressively facilitated Enshi's engagement with external markets. The city has also been promoted to the outside world as a tourist destination, which in turn drives the development of the service industry.³ Over the past decade the quality of life for the people of Enshi has experienced significant improvement. The city's residents currently enjoy convenient access to daily necessities. There is also a pleasant climate, a beautiful natural environment and low house prices – averaging 5,000 RMB⁴ (£500) per square metre. All this combines to make Enshi a comfortable place to live, with lower levels of stress.

Methods, positionality and social media landscape in China and field

My family is from the Enshi region and I lived in Enshi City for more than a decade before leaving for university. Home ethnography inevitably results in an insider perspective and a risk of threatening objectivity (Anderson 2021), and I realised the possibility of taking certain culturally specific phenomena for granted. Fortunately, my research focus, digital media, can both make local values visible and open them up for discussion, while also serving as a tool to challenge established perceptions – thereby giving rise to multifaceted cases that make phenomena less taken for granted. I also followed suggestions for self-reflective adaptation to changing identities in different situations and becoming open to new relationships between myself, the research site (my hometown) and the

research object (2021). For example, because Enshi is an acquaintance society, I usually employed my local identity and social connections during my fieldwork. However, I would combine this with the identity of a researcher, made clear through following established ethical consent procedures.

The field research was conducted over 16 months between August 2022 and January 2024. The primary research method was participatory observation. I attended a one-year posture training course, went regularly to the gym, tutored postgraduate students in English, supported elderly people with mobile phone use, volunteered at local museums, learned latte art in a café and attended social activities organised by young people to build organic and sustainable relationships with as many locals as possible, which contributed to the holistic contextualisation of ethnography. In addition to offline interactions, I communicated with my research participants through WeChat, Douyin and Xiaohongshu, the popular social media platforms among Enshi people. Next, I give a brief summary of the social media ecosystem in China and at my fieldsite.

According to Statista (2025),⁵ WeChat is China's largest social media platform. It extends far beyond instant messaging by integrating features such as payments, social networking and lifestyle services, embedding itself deeply into various aspects of Chinese society and keeping users engaged through a wide range of functionalities. Since 2018 Douyin has become the second most popular platform for short videos. Kuaishou, another short video app, has also gained significant popularity in rural areas. QQ, which predates WeChat, remains widely used among students. Xiaohongshu, which started as a beauty and international shopping platform, has expanded into a comprehensive space for sharing experiences. Weibo, similar to X (Twitter), is used primarily for public affairs information and commentary. In my fieldsite WeChat, Douyin, Xiaohongshu and Kuaishou are the most widely used platforms, with Bilibili – a long-form video-sharing site similar to YouTube – proving particularly popular among users under 35.

Although most research participants use multiple social media platforms, and their media activity is mediated by relationships and moral demands in the context of polymedia (Madianou and Miller 2013), the discussion of each interlocutor focuses on one or two media usages. This is because the platform(s) included in each case cover their primary usage; other platforms that are less used provide insufficient materials for analysis. I did focus on individuals' cross-platform digital activities to account for any noticeable disparities. However, these variations are not especially prominent within the theme of this chapter.

The contented mindset in social media

Post as the ordinary and post ordinariness

On a warm afternoon Feng finished her cleaning work at a museum in Enshi's oldest neighbourhood, Liujiaoting. Stepping out of the office building and seeing the courtyard bathed in bright sunlight, she took out her phone to record a video and posted it on Douyin (Fig. 2.1). In the accompanying caption she wrote: 'Off work'. The video was posted at 4:51 p.m., a time when most office workers in Enshi were still at work. Feng chose a soothing background music for this video and the lyrics were sung as follows: 'When the wind blows, I heard a warm song.' The image of the clip was simple, with the camera panning slowly to show the sunlit courtyard, with no special filming techniques or post-editing. It received 66 'likes' and someone commented in the section: 'Happy to be off work, right?'

Feng, an amiable woman in her fifties, is a cleaner at the museum, as noted above; she also works as an independent domestic cleaner to private households. Her husband Jiafu works as a security guard at the same museum, with a schedule of one day on and one day off.

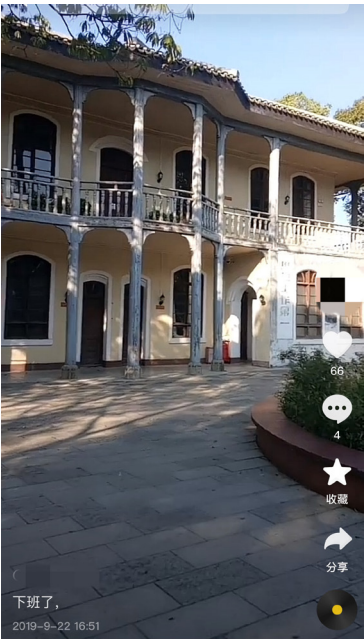


Figure 2.1 A screenshot of Feng's video showing the garden outside the museum where she works.

Feng's museum job pays about 3,000 RMB each month and her domestic cleaning work pays another 2,000 RMB each month. Jiafu makes more than 3,500 RMB per month by taking on night shifts. In Enshi their combined monthly income is regarded as not high but sufficient. Jiafu's mother, now in her nineties, lives with the couple. Although this requires considerable care from the couple, they regard having a long-lived mother as a kind of luck. This is because contemporary Chinese cosmology prioritises secular life above any idea of an afterlife; it regards longevity a valuable virtue since values, meanings and aspirations can only be realised in the present (Chan 2021).

Such an orientation has led Chinese people to advocate for the centrality of life itself, making protecting and prolonging life a solemn task (Yü 2016). Chinese culture believes that longevity is brought about by good morals, so a long-lived elder person is worthy of respect and a blessing for the family; this also means that younger generations usually need to spend more time and energy taking care of the elderly (Wang 2023). However, Feng's children do not yet face the duty – and pressure – of caring for the elderly. Both live in Zhejiang Province; the eldest daughter is married and has a child, while the youngest son is working in a factory. 'Our life is definitely not perfect, but as ordinary people, not bad! What more can I ask for?' Feng commented on her current life.

Before the Spring Festival of 2023 a friend asked me if I knew any reliable domestic cleaners. I remembered Jiafu mentioning they needed more money for redecorating, so I recommended Feng. However, this friend later told me that Feng declined his cleaning request. The next time I saw Feng she expressed her gratitude to me for proposing her. She explained that during that time many of her current employers wanted a thorough cleaning and her workload was already exhausting:

I'm an ordinary person, and I know I cannot earn a lot of money, so there's no need to make myself too tired ... As for the renovation, we use how much we have now and earn more gradually.

This identification with being 'ordinary' is based not just on the couple's employment but also on their background. Both Feng and Jiafu were born in rural areas and only attended primary school. Although the middle school teachers tried to persuade Feng's parents to let her continue studying, they wanted her to stay at home to help out. Jiafu also mentioned that there were few jobs he could do because he 'does not know much'. In Enshi people in labouring jobs are unlikely either to achieve a high income or experience social mobility. The acceptance of

being ordinary is thus often associated with a contented mindset. More recently Feng had refused her daughter's invitation to move to Zhejiang with Jiafu:

I have things to do in Enshi, and my relatives are all here ... My living here is comfortable, but I'm not sure about that in Zhejiang.

After 20 years working as a cleaner, Feng has accumulated a stable and self-sustaining network of clients. In her view going to Zhejiang means opportunity but also unknown risk; the couple may not be able to find stable jobs, and Feng is unwilling to sacrifice her health and leisure to earn more money.

Feng and Jiafu began to use Douyin in 2019 to document their lives and keep pace with the times; they have since released 49 and 85 Douyin posts respectively. Ordinary life is a consistent theme. There are moments of the couple cooking breakfast, taking exercise with family members at home during the Covid-19 pandemic, trying funny Douyin effects and doing a square dance (Figs 2.2 and 2.3). Feng and Jiafu's home is simple and not meticulously organised, but full of a lived-in, everyday charm. When appearing on camera, this couple dressed casually, as did their relatives and friends. Most did not wear make-up. Their filming techniques are unrefined, often featuring shaky footage and unskilled angles. Although the subjects of their videos appear ordinary, the background music, captions and their facial expressions present these snippets as joyful moments. For example, Jiafu recorded himself making plain noodles instead of elaborate dishes while working in the kitchen on Chinese New Year's Eve. In the captions he reminded himself to do his job well and wished everyone a happy new year (Fig. 2.4).

Douyin is the most frequently used social media platform by Feng and Jiafu, aside from WeChat. They are not very active on WeChat Moments, but their updates share similar themes to the videos that they post on Douyin. Among the ten or so updates Feng posted within a year, most are images and videos documenting snippets of everyday life.

Douyin encourages users to be perpetual opportunists (Miller et al. 2021, 103–32) of their lives by providing convenient, user-friendly video shooting and editing tools. What matters then is the choices around what to shoot and post. Many of the research participants publish videos on Douyin similar to those of Feng and Jiafu's ordinary life (see Figs 2.5, 2.6 and 2.7): views from the car window during a road trip, selfies, homemade pancakes, regular chatting with a friend, etc. Scenes, objects and moments that are trivial and of little artistry are captured.



Figure 2.2 A screenshot of Jiafu's video showing him preparing breakfast.

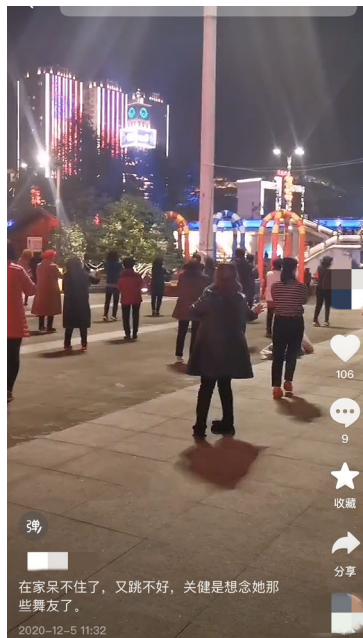


Figure 2.3 A screenshot of Jiafu's video that captures Feng performing a square dance in a dance group.

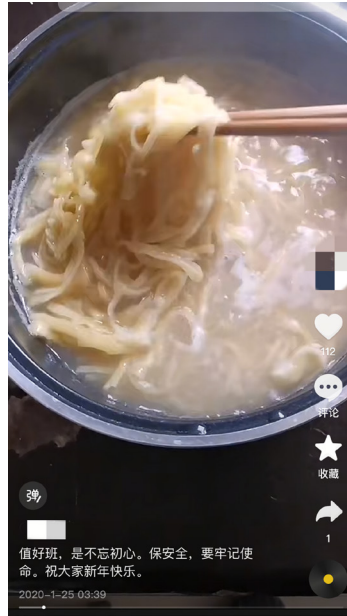


Figure 2.4 A screenshot of Jiafu's video showing his dinner for Chinese New Year's Eve.

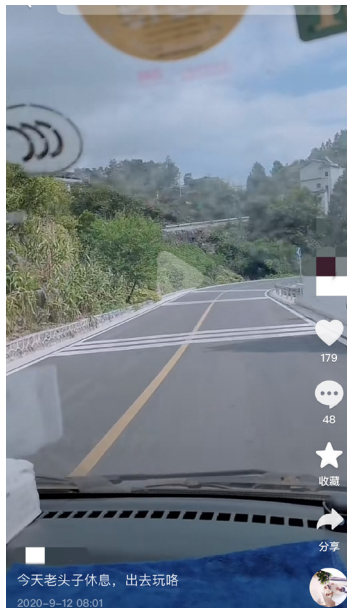


Figure 2.5 A screenshot of a research participant's video showing the view from the car window during a road trip.

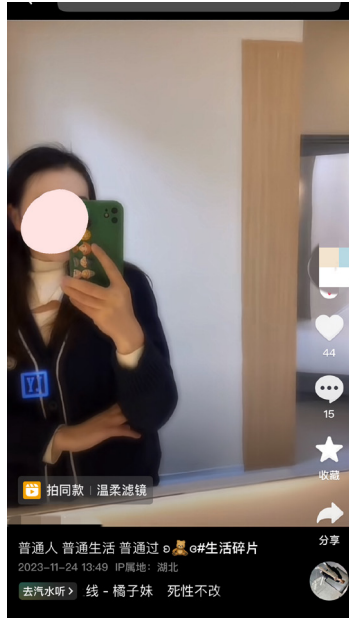


Figure 2.6 A screenshot of a research participant's video showing her selfie.

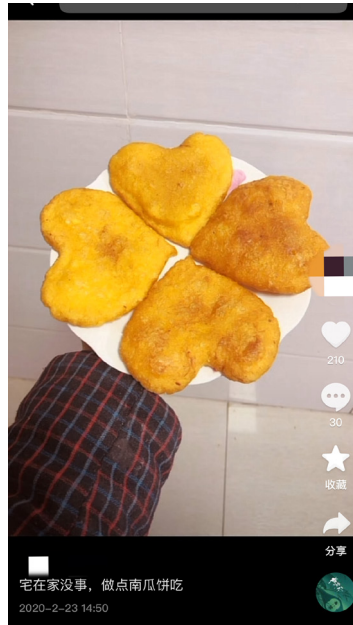


Figure 2.7 A screenshot of a research participant's video of handmade pancakes.

The motivations for filming and sharing could be that the occasion is worth remembering or that the creative process itself is interesting, for example experimenting with Douyin's funny filters.

Some of my research participants also state that their attempts at content creation are not driven by special motivations; rather, they are merely documenting daily life or passing the time. Such postings are particularly prevalent among middle-aged and elderly Douyin users, who acknowledge that what they post corresponds to their appreciation of everyday life. This tendency resonates with the broader Enshi mindset of contentment and a preference for stability.

The recording habits of middle-aged and older users generally contrast with those of the younger generation. The group of 18- to 35-year-olds have longer exposure to the internet and more experience of regional mobility, thereby exposing themselves to a wide range of influences beyond traditional values. Young people are not content with merely showcasing ordinary or mundane lives. They are more selective about what they post, often viewing Douyin as a stage for artistic expression rather than merely a casual album for documenting everyday moments. Their declining contentment with the 'ordinary' is evident in their approach to content creation, in which more emphasis is placed on crafting a polished personal image and visually appealing settings.

The research participant Hui posted only 11 videos from 2018 to 2024. These featured studio portraits, concert attendance, international travel and beauty filter videos. Hui explained that these Douyin posts represented the ideal moments and highlights of her life; the beauty filter, for example, makes her 'particularly good-looking'. She also captures everyday moments with her smartphone, but does not share them on Douyin. Hui's use of WeChat Moments reflects a similar selectivity. Her WeChat Moments are only visible for the most recent three days and, aside from some work-related updates, her content is limited to meticulously beautified photos. Younger content creators are also influenced by others through sharing and comparison. A hotel staff member who loves dancing once uploaded a few street dance videos on Douyin. He eventually deleted them because, after watching videos from internet celebrities, he felt that his own were 'lacking in various aspects'.

Ideals: stability and 'chicken soup for the soul'

The values of contentment and stability are sometimes made explicit in the captions or subtitles added to videos. 'Simple', 'ordinary', 'stable' and 'happy' are the keywords that frequently appear in the video creations

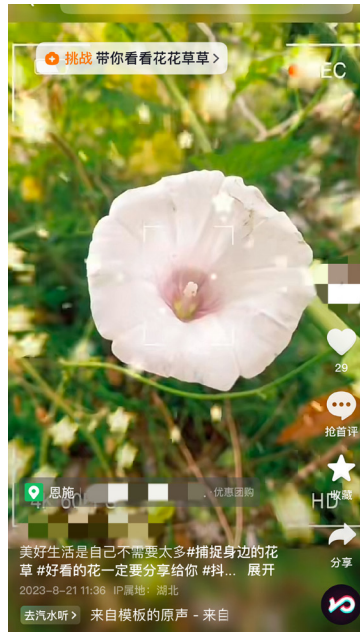


Figure 2.8 A screenshot of an Enshi resident's Douyin video that captures a morning glory flower. The caption says: 'A good life doesn't need too much.'

of Enshi residents (Figs 2.8 and 2.9). These texts depict the kind of life cherished by the locals, serving as important markers of their self-identity.

The captions conveying values sometimes appear unrelated to the video images. Lucky, a woman in her twenties, explained her tendency to post selfies accompanied by 'chicken soup for the soul' quotes, noting that these captions help to divert the audience's attention from the potential narcissism implied in sharing photos with beauty filters. Some research participants begin with a specific textual message in mind before selecting a suitable video image. For example, to express her views on life through captions, retired pharmacist Tang began by uploading a half-body portrait, as Douyin requires users to upload a video or image before adding captions. Some users even post text-only videos specifically to express their longing for peace and stability in life.

Idealised stability: collective writing of 'Enshiness' on social media and the life of a civil servant

Normativity is expressed not only through the social media content individuals create,, but also through the choices they make about what

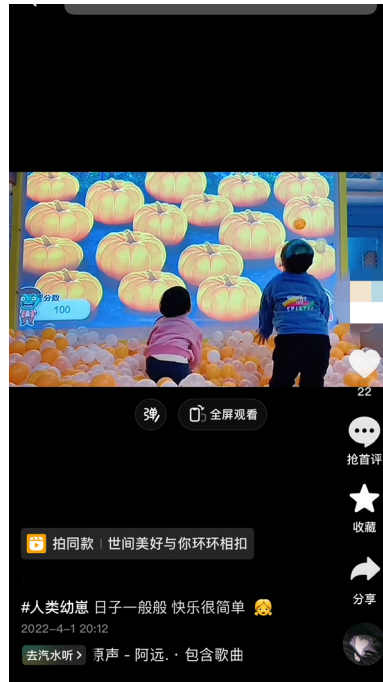


Figure 2.9 A screenshot of an Enshi resident's Douyin video that shows two children playing a computer game projected on a screen in a shopping mall. The caption says: 'Days are ordinary, being happy is simple.'

to engage with. People tend to interact with posts that confirm the values and ideals they associate with Enshi. This selective interaction reinforces their cultural identification with being 'Enshi people', giving rise to a form of digital community practice grounded in shared values.

One day my friend Peng, a 30-year-old civil servant, sent me a video by Douyin direct message, along with the comment 'You have to check this out, absolutely right!' The video shows a photo – a group of girls wearing professional attire taking selfies in front of a mirror. A paragraph has been added to this photo:

When the time comes, you come to Enshi, take the civil service exam and I hope for a teaching position. We shall drive a Passat, live in a government-provided flat, cook dinner together after work and then go for a walk. On weekends, we'll cuddle up and enjoy the sunshine. We will have a child and encourage him or her to continue pursuing the profession as a civil servant. That's all we need for happiness.

I understand why Peng was moved by this video. His parents are both civil servants and Peng was inspired to become one as well. He became more determined after witnessing some of his classmates working in Wuhan enterprises lose their jobs or have their salaries reduced during the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022 he successfully secured a position at the Archives Bureau of Enshi. After having ‘gone ashore’, which refers to the situation when candidates are admitted after taking the civil service exam, both his parents and he had a sense of fulfilment: all uncertainties had been resolved. In the first half of 2023 Peng’s parents purchased a flat for him in Enshi and began to introduce him regularly to blind dates.

The background music of the video shared by Peng is titled ‘That’s all we need for happiness’. It has been used over 175,000 times. The homepage of ‘That’s all we need for happiness’ exhibits videos created by users across China. All the videos are in similar formats: a video or a few photographs coupled by a phrase defining the ideal life. Significantly, ideal life in different regions is depicted with regional characteristics. For instance, video authors from northeast China mention the traditional heated brick bed (*kang*), while those from Henan include the regional speciality *hulatang* (a kind of spicy soup) as part of their vision of a good life.

Becoming a civil servant is more than just a stereotype. The number of people from Enshi who take civil service exams, along with the success rate in Enshi City, is among the highest in Hubei Province.⁶ With limited local industry and enterprises, people have few alternative options for stable, well-paying careers. The keywords in the video forwarded by Peng highlight the benefits of becoming a civil servant: a decent income (purchasing a Passat), good welfare (work-unit housing) and adequate leisure time (time for cooking and evening walks). These material advantages not only reflect the value orientation of Enshi residents, but also construct a more idealised lifestyle compared to grass-roots workers such as Feng and Jiafu.

The collective construction of normativity is reinforced by the algorithms that underlie the platforms. Under the personalised recommendation mechanism, videos about Enshi are likely to appear in the feeds of users who have indicated their location and interest through browsing history, likes or IP address. This particular video received 1,226 likes and 457 comments. Many approving comments came from users in Enshi; some were even written in the local dialect. In this way the normative values of Enshi are consolidated and reproduced through the interplay between users, as well as between users and the platform.

The reproduction of normativity is far from an isolated cultural phenomenon. Lifestyles and mindsets are the result of changes in social structures. Urban-rural integration has provided more development opportunities for people from county-level cities. As competition and pressure in larger cities intensify, discourses of contentment and stability in lower-tier cities are increasingly emphasised, becoming an important psychological basis for people to return to or remain in their hometowns. This is vividly reflected, and reinforced, in the digital practices of Enshi residents.

Balanced stability: modest expression of diligence and economic situation on social media

A key aspect of Enshi's values is the pursuit of stability and balance. One important manifestation of this is the balance between displays of work and leisure. Although Douyin is primarily an entertainment platform, used extensively for leisure, themes of professional life and labour are also integral to content creation among Enshi residents. This reflects their philosophy of contentment and a portrayal of a comfortable life, which they accept must be carefully maintained within appropriate limits. Normativity derives from considerations of social relationships and order, rather than just the inner moral choices of an individual (Stafford 2013). In the backdrop of social media being deeply embedded in personal life, excessive displays of leisure often invite negative judgements from others – particularly from older generations as followers. People therefore also showcase work scenarios on Douyin, along with their feelings and thoughts about work (Fig. 2.10). The work featured in the videos includes both paid employment and unpaid caregiving and domestic responsibilities – for instance, cooking, tending to the elderly and children, cleaning and fixing appliances.

This portrayal of dutiful caregiving is especially prevalent among female Douyin users.

Displaying diligence on social media platforms is crucial to avoid being criticised for idleness. One of the most common criticisms is that directed at others for 'not doing anything serious' if their social media content focuses solely on leisure. Such negative remarks rarely surface directly on social media; they are instead expressed in gossip when the person in question is not present. Significantly, normativity is constructed not only through displays of appropriate behaviour, but also (perhaps more powerfully) through the critique of behaviours deemed inappropriate. This is illustrated further by cases in the eighth section.

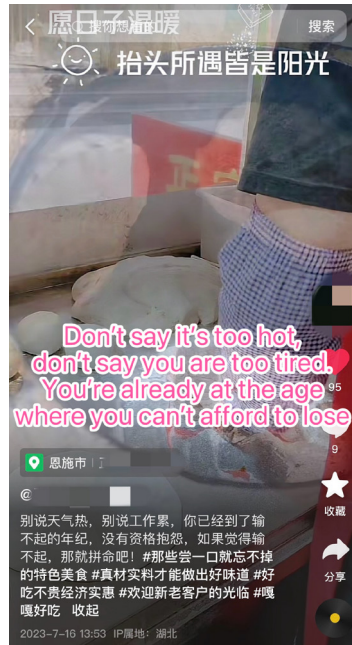


Figure 2.10 A screenshot from a Douyin video posted by an Enshi resident shows a scene of rolling dough at a street-side shop.

When diligence and economic status combine to form a narrative, one must exercise caution. Enshi people need to demonstrate their commitment to hard work, but not in a way that conveys overt material ambition. They usually emphasise that their hard work is to avoid relying on others and to enable them to care for their children and parents. The ultimate aim is a stable life rather than one of great wealth. Any overt display of ambition for money or showing off is considered inappropriate. The emphasis on modesty, especially regarding money, is illustrated in the subtle techniques used by two research participants, Mindy and Zhu.

Mindy is a beautician. After accumulating some funds from previous work, she opened a beauty salon as the main investor, supported by several other friends. She shared the progress of the salon's decoration in a Douyin video, showcasing her dedication to her new career. A friend of hers left the comment: 'Almost done.' Mindy replied: 'Yes, the labourer⁷ [herself] is about to work'. Another commentator, apparently unaware of what Mindy is doing, asks for an explanation. 'What's going on?' Mindy responded by posting as follows: (Figs 2.11 and 2.12):



Figure 2.11 A screenshot of the comment section of a video posted by Mindy. The commentators were discussing her new beauty salon.

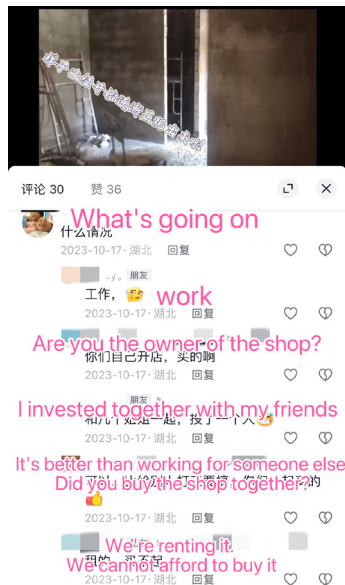


Figure 2.12 Another screenshot of the comment section of a video posted by Mindy. The commentators were again talking about her new beauty salon.

By using expressions like ‘the labourer’ and ‘We cannot afford to buy it’, Mindy deliberately softens her identity as a boss, as well as the possibility of being perceived as wealthy associated with that identity. She added two sweaty emojis at the end of her reply. In Chinese social media sweating emojis are frequently used in embarrassing situations; these therefore help Mindy to keep things low-key and further reduce the likelihood that her narration would be perceived as showing off. In the captions of a video she filmed while working in her salon, she also tried to convey modesty: ‘I’m an ordinary person living an ordinary life.’

Another research participant, Zhu, is a skilled foot therapist in Enshi. He occasionally posts content that motivates himself to work hard and also enjoys creating humorous videos. Around New Year’s Day 2024 he posted two lip-sync videos with similar themes as follows:

I am busy working every day, but haven’t made any money. I hope that relatives and friends who come back from big cities during the Chinese New Year don’t ask how much money I made last year.

I have been working hard for a whole year but stayed poor, and I think I will continue to be poor in 2024.

Zhu uses these lip-syncing videos as a form of self-deprecation, ensuring that he embodies the Enshi ethos of humility. However, he admitted to me that he actually has a decent income; as the most experienced therapist, he earns a higher salary than his colleagues do. Although one of Zhu’s acquaintances used sarcastic emojis to tease him, overall the ‘likes’ on the video and the ‘thumbs up’ reactions in the comments indicate that people accept this form of self-deprecation at face value. Mindy and Zhu vividly illustrate how people strive to strike a balance between showing diligent hard work and modesty. As the famous Chinese proverb ‘*qiang da chu tou niao*’ (the shot hits the bird that pokes its head out) goes, being high-profile and prominent can bring hazards, which will jeopardise stability.

In using multimedia content to showcase labour and diligence, two Enshi coffee shop owners with different life experiences make an interesting comparison in how they express values through social media engagement. As the coffee market in first- and second-tier cities becomes saturated, coffee shops have successfully expanded into lower-tier cities, to the extent that they can be included within the normative (Yang and Sun 2024).

Ms Jiang, aged 56 and the owner of Jiang Café, has lived in Enshi since birth. She used to work for a hospital and retired when she turned 50. Then she opened a café in the southern part of Enshi. Jiang serves coffee, desserts and small meals, assisted by a waitress of a similar age. She strives to keep her operation within a manageable workload, deliberately choosing not to register on any food delivery platform to avoid being overwhelmed by online orders. When ingredients for a certain dish run out, she does not replenish them, but instead informs customers that the dish is sold out. Jiang has a stable guest base, mainly of people living nearby, so she seldom advertises to attract new guests. After all, her primary purpose in opening the coffee shop is not to make big money, but to develop her interests.

Jiang takes a relaxed approach to managing her coffee shop. It usually opens at 10 a.m. and closes at 8 p.m., but it may close earlier if there are few customers. She often takes a break from the shop every Tuesday, bringing homemade snacks to the outskirts of Enshi with family or friends. Whenever I visit her café I always find Jiang seated at the table in front of the counter, reading books, watching TV shows on her iPad or doing handicrafts – another one of her hobbies. She has decorated her shop with her own DIY crafts, some of which take more than one month to complete. Jiang only gets up to prepare coffee and meals when customers arrive.

She typically updates her WeChat Moments two to three times per day. She usually updates around 10 a.m. each day about the café's operations, such as 'Open for business' or 'Closed today'. She also uploads photos of coffee and light meals, her handicrafts, and scenic views from her outings, presenting a lifestyle that balances work and leisure (Figs 2.13 and 2.14). Jiang does not use Douyin because she feels she cannot 'control' what she will see. Instead, she occasionally uses another platform, Xiaohongshu, to learn cooking and coffee-making skills.

Maggie is another coffee shop owner, aged around 40. She manages three shops, the largest of which sells coffee, bakery items and Western-style meals. Despite having a team comprising baristas and bakers, Maggie is always hands-on. From 6 a.m. she supervises the baking process, then posts an update on her WeChat Moments to signify the beginning of the day's work. Her posts mainly consist of product promotions and information; sometimes she publishes ten posts or more a day, intended as effective advertising (Fig. 2.15). Maggie often receives inquiries from customers via WeChat regarding specific bread or beverages featured in her posts. She even developed a WeChat mini-programme to enable customers to make self-service purchases, turning her WeChat Moments

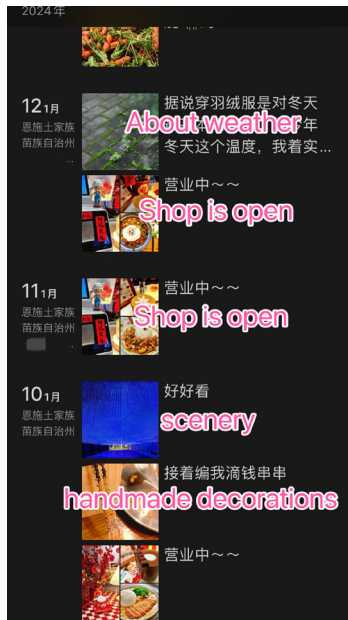


Figure 2.13 A screenshot of Jiang's WeChat Moments.



Figure 2.14 A handmade decoration crafted by Jiang and placed in her coffee shop. Source: the author.



Figure 2.15 A screenshot of Maggie’s WeChat Moments.

into an e-commerce platform. She also occasionally posts something from her personal life, for example her desire to travel. Due to her workload, Maggie rarely uses social media for entertainment. Instead, she browses Xiaohongshu for inspiration on dessert styles and baking techniques, but she does not post content herself. In contrast her husband, Ma, occasionally uses Xiaohongshu for advertising.

Unlike Jiang who has always lived in Enshi, Maggie has experience of living for an extended period in a major city. Although born and raised in Enshi, her success in the *gaokao* exams earned her a spot at a prestigious university in Shanghai, where she studied for a degree in a computer-related field. Following her graduation, Maggie worked for a well-known international company in Shanghai for three years, during which time she was deeply influenced by the fast-paced urban lifestyle and an entrepreneurial spirit that emphasised hard work and ambition. She returned to Enshi due to the high cost of living in Shanghai, but struggled to adapt to the small city’s atmosphere of contentment with the status quo. Yet the entrepreneurial seed planted during her time in Shanghai eventually took root – Maggie decided to build her own business in Enshi.

Maggie has ambitious plans for her business; she aims to establish it as a leading coffee and bakery brand in Enshi. Almost every two weeks

she and Ma visit coffee shops in nearby major cities such as Chongqing and Wuhan to observe and learn advanced business practices. Her detachment from traditional Enshi is also evident in her preference for shopping in Wuhan and Chongqing, believing that the clothing available in Enshi's malls is not fashionable enough. Travelling to larger cities allows Maggie to 'breathe the air of more developed areas and escape the rustic atmosphere'. When customers criticise the food in her shop for being too expensive, she and her team dismiss such comments, feeling that these individuals simply do not understand 'what good food is'.

Maggie has come to realise that her attitudes often clash with the dominant values of Enshi, something that she finds limiting. Most of the Enshi people who can afford and appreciate her coffee and bread are already customers, making further expansion difficult. Currently Maggie is planning to open a coffee shop in a higher-tier city in a nearby province. 'Enshi is still my main base for now, but my coffee might find greater success elsewhere,' she observes.

Positioning of Enshiness in gossip: criticism of posts that are not 'Enshi' enough

The workings of normativity are often most evident not through the expression of values, but through the criticisms that arise when individuals fail to conform to the dominant ethos. For this reason, it is helpful to consider other forms of evidence, as criticisms are often made in more intimate settings, such as gossip. Content publicly shared on platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu and WeChat Moments is often assessed and discussed in more private conversation, showing that the establishment of social norms emerges through the interplay between public display and private evaluation.

With the growth of internet technology, the younger generation in Enshi is increasingly exposed to diverse values through social media. Combined with their experiences in larger cities, younger social media users often question or challenge traditional Enshi values in their digital practices. The upholders of Enshi norms, particularly those who are middle-aged or elderly, often criticise social media posts that they perceive to deviate from local values.

Qin is a portrait photographer approaching his forties. Last summer a young woman working in Shenzhen visited his shop for portraits while she was back in Enshi for a holiday. She later added Qin on WeChat, since when he has been seeing her daily Moments updates filled with selfies.

He described her selfies as always featuring ‘dramatic make-up, heavy filters, revealing clothing and sensual poses’. Though Qin tried to convey his thoughts in a humorous tone, his negative judgement was evident:

It would be okay if she posted occasionally ... but posting every day seems narcissistic. I don’t understand her style. It’s not suitable for Moments.

As a photographer, Qin believes his aesthetic sense to be superior to others. He also linked her behaviour to her time in Shenzhen, suggesting ‘maybe it’s something she picked up there’.

The girl’s make-up was somewhat heavy, but her attire – mainly tank tops and crop tops – is quite typical in major cities. Her posing style resembled the sensual, Western-inspired Instagram photos popular among young women in major cities. However, such styles are not yet common among young women in Enshi, who generally dress more conservatively, opting for T-shirts and dresses in the summer and wearing subtle make-up. This is especially true in downtown areas where many local natives reside. In contrast, areas with a high concentration of college students feature bolder and more diverse fashion choices among young women. Qin mentioned that when he comes across young people dressed in revealing outfits on Douyin’s Nearby feed, which shows content posted close to users’ locations, he often wonders if they really dress like that in their daily lives. ‘In Enshi City I rarely see people dressed that way,’ he observed.

A second example comes from Jiang, the café owner mentioned earlier. I once told her that I had seen several videos promoting a newly opened Western cuisine restaurant in Enshi on Douyin. Jiang responded with a disdainful expression: ‘Those are all paid advertisements. The owner loves doing those short video promotions.’ The person Jiang referred to is Xiashu, one of the investors behind three internet-famous restaurants in Enshi and a micro-celebrity with around 20,000 followers on Douyin. Xiashu is enthusiastic about sponsoring local food influencers to create restaurant-hopping videos for promotional purposes. Jiang remarked:

Marketing is fine as long as you offer good food and service. But do you know? The Wellington beef steak in that restaurant is made from ready-to-cook food! They just heat it up and dare to charge over 300 RMB (about £30)! ... I had customers who tried it and said they felt deceived.

Xiashu's Douyin profile is filled with portrait photos, travels and outdoor entertainment activities. Jiang and Xiashu are contacts on WeChat and, according to Jiang, Xiashu's WeChat Moments are similarly dominated by posts about fun and entertainment; they rarely mention his work related to the restaurants. For Jiang, this seemed to explain her earlier comment, indicating that 'I don't think he puts effort into improving the quality of the food'.

According to feedback from some friends who have dined at Xiashu's restaurant, the food tastes average, but the décor is exquisite. Another friend who knows Xiashu personally commented that he is good at promoting his business through new media but lacks real expertise in restaurant management. 'Just look at his Douyin; he's out having fun every day ... He hopes to attract customers to the restaurant through his online influence.'

Xiashu deviated from Enshiness in several ways that undermined the sense of stability expected in a fourth-tier city, where close-knit social ties mean that any deviation may invite critical gossip. His status as an internet celebrity has made him a focal point of public attention, with gossip about his business and private life circulating both within and beyond the catering industry. Unlike Jiang and Maggie, Xiashu presents neither diligence nor humility in his social media persona. Although social media marketing does involve effort and hard work, this labour is diluted by the entertainment-oriented nature of short videos. His restaurant-hopping content has proven effective in attracting younger customers. However, middle-aged customers tend to dismiss these marketing efforts, focusing instead upon the quality of the dishes as the primary measure of a restaurant's success. When the food fails to meet expectations, people are likely to attribute this to the lifestyle Xiashu portrayed online, reinforcing the belief that his priorities lie in performance rather than substance.

Social media marketing here is viewed less as a business asset than as a deviation from diligence. By defining what is accepted and what should be rejected, criticism plays a major role in shaping the image of what an Enshi resident should be. Each act of criticism or approval reinforces the boundaries of local norms. The public scrutiny reveals how social media functions as a site of normative negotiation. Through seemingly fragmented and everyday posts, comments and gossips, local culture is continually invoked and reproduced. In what follows, I return to the questions raised at the beginning to summarise and reflect on the interplay between digital media practices and the ethos of Enshi.

Conclusion

This chapter differs from many conventional social media studies, which often focus on the disruptive and transformative effects of social media. Instead, it leverages the potential of long-term ethnography to explore what social media, embedded in people's daily lives, continues to maintain while introducing changes. This chapter also demonstrates the advantages of anthropology in explaining the specifics of practice within the particular context of our study location. All of these aims have been realised through a continued inquiry into the nature of the normativity.

In many ways the chapter has followed core anthropological theorising of the normative, especially Bourdieu's exploration of the relationship between 'embodiment', 'habitus' and 'normativity' as mediated through material culture. Individuals express their social and cultural background through their daily routines, behaviours and relationships with objects. In this process of embodiment, they participate in and sustain societal norms and values, which are inscribed in the habitus as durable dispositions (Bourdieu 1990, 53–65). The findings of this chapter confirm the importance of material culture in individual lives and social interactions. The materiality of social media enables people to use it as a tool to engage in, reflect and reinforce the social and cultural norms of Enshi.

As expected of a fourth-tier town in China, the normativity of Enshi revolves around stability. People in Enshi value hard work and reject indolence – but labour needs to be balanced by a modest ambition that maintains low-profile and harmony. The emphasis on stability also means that an ordinary life is regarded as one of happiness and comfort. These values are defined in contrast to those of metropolitan cities, where ambition and drive are praised, but are assumed to come at the expense of comfort and happiness.

What has changed with digital technology is the rise of short video social media as highly visible, multimedia public platforms that offer unprecedented ease of dissemination. Both intentional and unintentional uses of these platforms have increased the visibility of normative norms, making it easier for residents and researchers to observe how 'Enshiness' is enacted in daily practice; they also demonstrate people's conformity to local value systems. This chapter has shown that Enshi residents are actively leveraging these digital media to engage with local norms through everyday content creation. At the same time it becomes apparent when individuals fail to conform to these values, something that is increasingly common among younger people. Posts that deviate from traditional norms elicit gossip and criticism – mechanisms through

which people attempt to maintain social norms. Although this chapter focuses on a single fourth-tier city, the normative impact of social media likely extends beyond this specific context. The ethnographic findings offer a complementary perspective to existing social media research by highlighting how digital practices mediate cultural continuity – a dimension that has been relatively neglected.

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Notes

- 1 <https://www.hongheiku.com/hunan/chenzhou/8430.html>.
- 2 Implemented since 2001, China's Western Development project aims to narrow the economic development gap between the eastern and western regions through policy tilt and fiscal investment, and to enhance the comprehensive economic strength of the central and western regions.
- 3 In 2022 the industrial structure of Enshi was 18.0:26.5:55. The figures refer to the proportion of Enshi's primary, secondary and tertiary industries in 2022. Agriculture accounts for a sizeable percentage, while industry accounts for a far smaller portion. http://www.enshi.gov.cn/sj/sjjd/202307/t20230725_1466936.shtml.
- 4 The average housing prices in Beijing and Shanghai are over 50,000 RMB per square metre. Even compared to other fourth-tier cities in China, such as Rizhao in Shandong (¥8,000/m²) and Erdos in Inner Mongolia (¥8,000/m²), the housing price in Enshi is relatively low. https://www.sohu.com/a/639816764_121304879.
- 5 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/250546/leading-social-network-sites-in-china/>.
- 6 Enshi's civil service examination has ranked second in the province in terms of average competition ratio in the past two years. <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/162016637>. This statistic is produced by dividing the number of applicants who passed the qualification review by the number of positions available.

- 7 Labourer (打工人) is a piece of Chinese internet slang commonly used by workers to mock themselves for their hard work but meagre salaries. <https://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%89%93%E5%B7%A5%E4%BA%BA>.

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Networks that transform structure: the impact of digital technologies on the matsutake trade of the Shangri-La region of southwest China

Chun Liu

Although the substance of this chapter concerns the impact of a digital technology – WeChat – on trade in matsutake mushrooms, the aim is to use this case study to reconsider the fundamental relationships between individuals, networks and structure, as these become altered through the new capacities that emerge with such technologies. The material derives from long-term ethnography and detailed analysis of individuals in villages and town markets. It reveals critical problems with one of the most influential theories developed by Manuel Castells (Castells 2002, 2004, 2010 [1996]) relating to how the digital has resulted in a global transition in the nature of structure and networks. In addition, these problems in his arguments are shown by returning to key anthropological contributions concerning the socially embedded nature of economic life – in this case specifically in China.

Castells (2002, 2004, 2010) argued that we now live in a network society, and furthermore that networks and individuals progress in ‘opposite trends’ throughout the world (2010, 22). Networks such as the flows of information and finance, enabled by new digital technology, expand and reconfigure endlessly. At the same time individuals are increasingly excluded by these networks and construct their meanings not through the network but in the specific ‘space of places’. Networks such as enhanced finance capitalism and global trades in information transcend individuals and run the society where individuals live. Castells argues that above and beyond people as capitalists there now exists a faceless and collective form of capitalism ‘made up of financial flows operated by electronic devices’ (2010, 505) – the networks enabled by

digital technologies. In Castells's writing these networks become a black box, a floating enigma that controls society in our digital age (2010). One consequence has been to exacerbate the divide between the top and the bottom of the social ladder.

In this chapter, however, I will suggest quite the opposite. The networks facilitated by new digital technologies are indeed of huge importance, but that is because firstly they are networks of *people* rather than networks that exclude people. It is also these same networks that have the increasing ability actually to change those basic structures, with people continuing to play a significant role in this process.

A crucial term in this chapter will be that of 'network'. Knox et al. (2006) provide a clear review that reveals the inconsistent way in which the term 'network' has been used in anthropology, and in social science more generally. As they point out, 'networks proliferate to an astonishing extent today' and have very different underpinnings. In this chapter a 'network' is not a method of mapping structure (Wellman 1988), nor a metaphor of complex relationality (Castells 2010 [1996], 2000; Hannerz 1992). It is not a model of narratives derived from Actor-Network Theory (Latour 1990, 1993, 2005), nor a replacement of the group by the links of the individual (Rainie and Wellman 2012). The term 'network' in this chapter refers to a specific social form as revealed through ethnography (Strathern 1996; Green 2002; Knox 2003; Green et al. 2005). For example, ethnographies of socialist China are often concerned with '*guanxi*', showing how the larger one's *guanxi* network, the stronger one's manoeuvrability with officialdom in attempting to obtain resources (Yang 1994, 123; Yan 1996; Wang 2023, 103–15). While there has been considerable anthropological work on traditional networks such as *guanxi*, this chapter is concerned with the new capacities and consequences of networks as they have been facilitated by digital technologies.

In the detailed analysis that follows I will describe a matrix which explains the capacities and consequences of networks in my ethnography. This matrix has three components. The first is the ability of WeChat to make transitory relations durable and accumulative (for example, hotel owners turning visitors into commercial networks), as well as to develop networks that transcend time and space. The second component, as will be shown by the failure of live streamers as compared to WeChat traders, is the way some traders manage to develop those relations that align with Chinese economic characteristics – namely the tradition of the socially embedded nature of trade. The third aspect of this matrix is the way in which WeChat allows the multiplication of networks – that is, a network of social networks.

Behind this argument lies a core anthropological contribution which maintains that, despite the rise of digital technologies, the kinds of global generalisation developed by Castells need to be challenged by the continued insistence upon underlying cultural differences. In this case, the changes in economic practice will be shown to retain the influence of a long-standing contrast. In the West there tends to be an assumption of an intrinsic opposition between society and the economy, as in gift and commodity (Gregory 1982; Carrier 1995), substantivism and formalism (Polanyi 1957; Hann and Hart 2011), and the suppression of humanity by the abstract nature of money (Simmel 2011 [1900]; Marx 1990 [1867]). In China, however, work by Skinner, who saw circuits of trade as an extension of social structure (1964, 1965a and b), or Martin, who discusses the use of cash in social bonding (2015), suggests a rather different bonding between economy and society. In the subsequent discussion this will also emerge as an important component in explaining the failure of Castells's expectations when applied to this context.

Basics of the field

My main fieldsites are a village area close to Shangri-La and the matsutake mushroom (*song rong*) market in Shangri-La town. The dominant population in both my fieldsites is Tibetan. In the village area I spent the major part of 18 months working in two Tibetan villages called River Village and Mountain Village. River Village has been a busy place of trade for centuries, while Mountain Village yields the largest amount of matsutake in the area. Travel between River Village and Mountain Village takes 20 minutes by car. In the village area there are Nakhi people as well as Tibetans, and also other ethnicities including Han Chinese. However, this chapter's focus is on the Tibetan community. It takes around 1.5 hours to drive from these villages to Shangri-La town, the largely Tibetan town that holds the biggest matsutake market in China. Many people believe Shangri-La matsutake to be the most scented and delicious variety.

Matsutake mushroom is a core element in the livelihood of local people. It occurs seasonally, from June to September in Shangri-La and extending into October for villages at the right altitude. In Mountain Village, according to government workers, matsutake contributes around 40 per cent of the total yearly income of the whole village. Across Shangri-La County, cash from matsutake comprises on average between 50 and 80 per cent of household income (Yang et al. 2008).

The scale of the matsutake trade is global. In the 1990s Japan started to purchase matsutake around the world, with the US and China providing the main sources. In her examination of the matsutake trade between Japan and the US, Anna Tsing's book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* notes:

This is the history of encounters between Japan and the United States that shaped the global economy. (Tsing 2015, 100)

During the same period of time, the matsutake trade between China and Japan was also taking place on a large scale – matsutake from China consisted of 34 per cent of the total amount imported by Japan in 1995, and the percentage kept rising to 64 per cent in 2001 (Gong and Wang 2004). Southwest China (Yunnan Province and Sichuan Province) accounts for 80 per cent of the Chinese total, while Diqing Prefecture, to which my fieldsites administratively belong, contributes 47 per cent of Yunnan's matsutake exports (Yang et al. 2008).

The trade in matsutake is particularly risky because of the material quality of matsutake. The mushroom is famous and its scent an inspiration for poetry (Tsing 2015), but its quality diminishes rapidly each day after picking, as the mushroom then starts to decay. Within one day of having been picked, the price of a matsutake mushroom will halve. To maintain its freshness it must be kept away from human hands and not exposed too much to the open air. Instead, it is covered under a cloth.

The chapter will now present the ethnographic details behind the structurally transformative power of the network people have built with digital technology – a key aspect of matsutake trading in the Shangri-La region of southwest China. I will present two parts in parallel. In the first part I will present an ethnographic case taken from the area around the villages. The economic field of the matsutake trade in this region has been long established as a stable, socio-economic complex, with power distributed as a hierarchy among traders. This structure has now been significantly disturbed by an alternative distribution of power, arising from a network of networks that an individual developed via WeChat.

In the second part, I show a parallel case in Shangri-La town. Like the villages, the economic field of the matsutake trade in Shangri-La town is also a socio-economic complex, with power in equilibrium. Once again the structure is currently facing imminent transformation as a result of a supply chain company creating a rather different network of networks. In the second case, key components of that network are

identified. These form the matrix described in the introduction that generates transformative power, calling for a rethinking of the relationships between network, structure and individuals.

Part I: The village area

The villages belong to a porous region where various ethnicities overlap through time and space; they possess a well-documented history of conflict, trade and banditry. The last has resulted in a general fear of outsiders. Villagers commonly use the term 'outside'. I was referred to as someone from 'the outside' and the cities to which products are sold are also described in this way. Businessmen refer to their reluctance to deal with people 'from the outside'. A successful middle-aged businessman typically started a conversation with me by explaining:

We people here are afraid of strangers. It's natural I don't believe you and it's not possible for you to believe me.

At the beginning of fieldwork, every time I tried to talk to a trader waiting, relaxing and doing nothing, they would look nervous and be eager to return to their cars and drive away. In daily conversation, the concept of 'outsider' is synonymous with that of 'stranger'.

This is unusual since in most regions successful businessmen and traders expect to work with strangers; as Simmel (2011 [1900] famously argued, they are often themselves categorised as strangers. In this region, however, local business has for decades been mostly a matter of internal circulation, especially regarding matsutake. Trades are embedded in local social relationships of family and wider kin, and of childhood friends who went to the same schools. Reinforced by this fear of externality, the communities, as well as the traders, are well integrated and closely connected internally. A similar tendency has been described and discussed by Yang Tingshuo (1995) for many other ethnic minority groups in China.

A description of how this internal network operates will provide the context for appraising one particular trader, Nongbu. He does not fear strangers and does plenty of business with outsiders via WeChat. Nongbu has in fact developed a network of socio-economic relationships directly with customers, removing the middlemen from this traditional socio-economic complex.

The socio-economic complex in the villages

The matsutake trade is founded in a basic diurnal rhythm. First, and earliest, are the pickers. During the matsutake season, starting between 4 and 5 a.m., experienced pickers from almost every household go deep into the pine forests in the mountains belonging to their own village. They return home with mushrooms at noon. In the afternoon the village-level traders, often local to the village and colloquially called ‘small boss’, sit at a customary spot and wait for pickers to sell them matsutake. There are typically two or three small bosses in each village. Mountain Village, which owns the best forests with the highest amount of mushrooms, has eight of them. Where there are multiple bosses, pickers choose who to approach on the basis of social connections such as kinship, close friendship or indebted relationship rather than economic factors, as they usually offer the same price.

In Mountain Village all eight traders have extensive kinships and friendships. The two who stand out from the rest possess extra indebted relationships accumulated from their occupation. One is a monk who helps people with spirituality and is greeted with deep reverence. The other is the only village doctor, who waits for pickers at the village hospital where he gives medical treatment. Many villagers, grateful to receive his medical treatment, sell matsutake to the doctor every day. So successful is he at collecting large amounts of matsutake that I heard rumours outside Mountain Village that he obtains matsutake by threatening to refuse medical treatment to people who supply others. The rumour is not true, but it effectively illustrates how the pickers’ choice of traders is embedded in the local context of relationships.

In the afternoon, between around 5 to 7 p.m., the ‘third boss’ drives out to villages to buy mushrooms collected by the small bosses. This third boss usually goes to at least three or four villages. He gathers the matsutake, then drives to the ‘second boss’, who sits at a fixed place in a village every day, waiting for these deliveries. The second boss then packs large boxes of mushrooms and delivers them to the ‘big bosses’: some in Shangri-La, some in Kunming (the capital city of Yunnan Province) and perhaps beyond to Chengdu or even Japan (Fig. 3.1). Boxes contain around 30–40 kg. A second boss reported taking up to 180 kg to Kunming every day during the 2022 matsutake season.

Having observed the trade over several weeks, it became clear how much traders value stability. An illuminating moment occurred on 3 October 2022, at the end of the matsutake season for that year. When

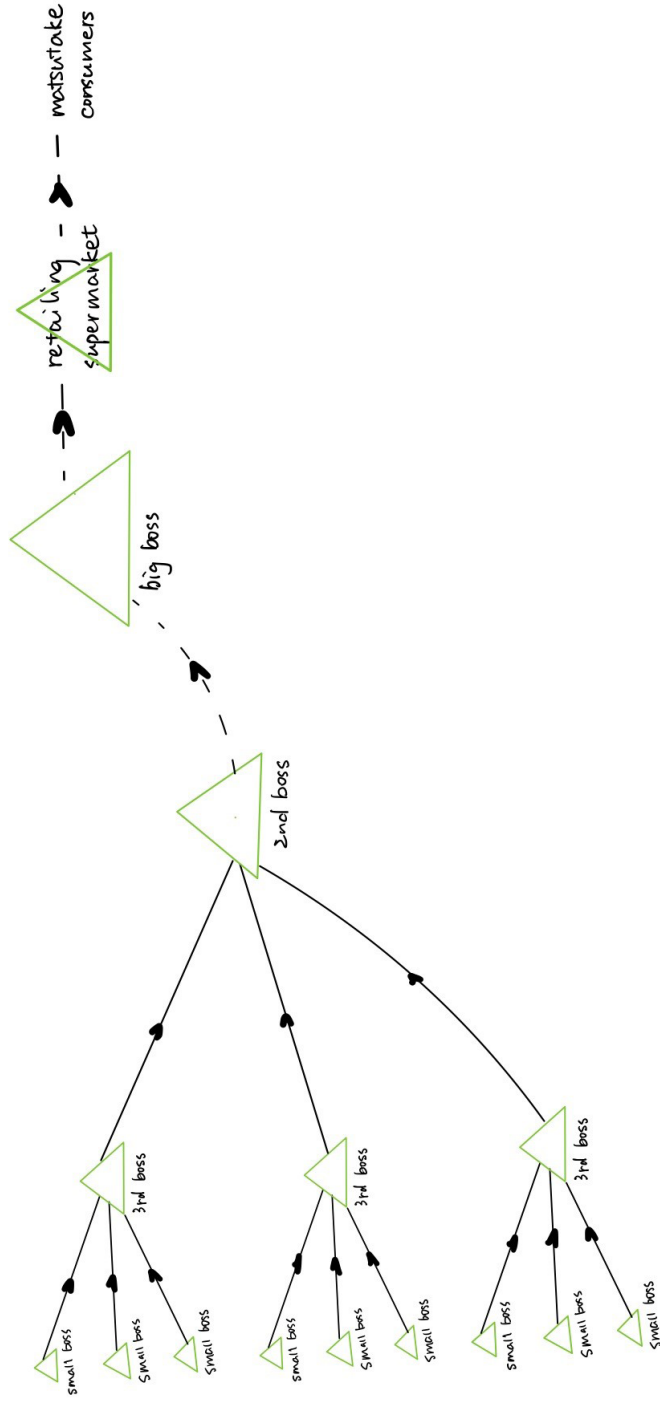


Figure 3.1 A diagram showing the traditional structure of the trade in matsutake mushrooms from the villages to the consumers, and from southwest rural China to eastern urban China. Source: the author.

I visited a second boss working in River Village, a couple called Kai and Hua, the husband Kai told me:

Yesterday I sold 50 kg and lost 500 RMB. Today I will lose more money.

By this Kai meant that the price offered by the big boss in Kunming was lower than that he paid to purchase the matsutake. I asked the obvious question. 'Why are you still purchasing it today? If the price is bad, the more you purchase, the more money you'll lose.' He answered:

For those handing over goods to us every day, they come with goods, we will purchase. For those who do not come every day, they come, we can refuse to purchase.

In fact, when business was good and the couple were earning money, more than a dozen third bosses came here to deliver. When the business was not so good and they were losing money, Kai rejected some deliveries on the phone, and only four or five third bosses came over to sell.

Another third boss, Jing, who worked with Kai and Hua, gave a similar response – stability is prioritised over finance. 'Sometimes the purchase price in the mountains is even higher than the price (I sell to them) here,' he explained. This happens particularly when matsutake on that day did not yield as much as before. There are less matsutake than the traders need, so in order to deliver the regular quantity to their fixed buyer, the second boss, third bosses have to pay more to the local traders from the village, competing with other traders to gain the right amount of matsutake. That is why Jing purchased with a price higher than he sold. 'But you will still do the business even when you lose money on it?' I asked. Jing confirmed that yes, he would, even if he lost money in the process. What is illustrated here is a promise of stability – stable delivery or receiving of goods no matter how the market may fluctuate. This in return guarantees the trader a stable position in the chain, however good or bad the market may be. The position is a safety net: a 'positioned' person knows he will be able to sell out all the goods he purchases every day.

There are, of course, issues that threaten such stability – including the temptation, when supplies are low at the start of the season, to sell their matsutake to the traders who offer a price higher than the market price. Similarly at the end of the season, when matsutake is abundant, there is the temptation to buy less and reject the low-quality goods.

However, in the interests of preserving stability and reliability, a buyer must take in all the goods from the seller even if it means losing money. In the long term reliable buyers will gain a better position in the chain and achieve greater success than those who try to benefit from transient gains at the start and end of the season.

Stability and reliability are required by the trading process. Yet both are built upon, and contribute to, close social relationships. These are mostly based on kinship and childhood friendships, as between those sent to boarding school. These friendships are cemented through this desire for trust and a stable daily routine of trade. In the next section I show how the advance of digital technology in commerce has disturbed this stable socio-economic complex.

Digital disturbs the local socio-economic complex

The ethnography revealed one striking exception to this fear of outsiders enhancing the internal solidarity of the villages. Nongbu is one of only two WeChat traders in the area and is clearly the most successful matsutake trader. Hailing from Mountain Village, he drives down daily to River Village at between 3 and 4 p.m. to tour other villages, then eats at a restaurant in River Village around 6 p.m. Here he waits for small traders to contact him and bring their goods.

Soon after meeting Nongbu I was travelling in his car collecting matsutake mushrooms from village-level traders (something a third boss would traditionally do). He pointed to a couple as we passed them and said:

You see them there? They have been doing this business for more than 20 years. But they remain small. I have only been doing this for seven years. Look how big I've got, and how successful I am. That's because I do WeChat business with outsiders. People here are too afraid to do that. They are afraid they send the goods and do not get the money back. I'm not afraid of that. I'm not afraid of strangers.

While other traders had rejected me several times when I requested their WeChat details, Nongbu added me to WeChat before I even asked, hoping I would lead to more outside customers. He explained:

The people around you are rich. You sell matsutake to them. You do not need to do anything. I tell you the matsutake is 800 RMB/kg, then you tell them the price is 850 RMB/kg. I select the best

matsutake and take care of all the delivery, you eat 50 RMB/kg. You think about it.

Later I could see that this was Nongbu's pitch to all seemingly rich outsiders. His aim was to turn strangers into brokers and he was open about it: 'When I meet someone, no matter where and how I meet him, I add him on WeChat first.' As a result, he now knows many brokers as well as customers from big cities, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou, to whom he can sell mushrooms at a higher price than to local upper-level traders.

Nongbu is a Tibetan of Mountain Village. Now in his forties, he is unmarried and was once known for his hobby of gambling. Although not valued in traditional Tibetan culture, gambling seems to make Nongbu more calculating and adventurous in commerce. He started in commerce by helping his relative, who worked as both a small boss and a third boss in Mountain Village. That means his relatives not only collected matsutake directly from pickers in Mountain Village, but also travelled to buy from other small bosses and delivered the goods together to the second boss.

This allowed Nongbu to interact with the second boss. Through him, he met people working in retail and came to understand how the more remote part of the chain works. He picked up a useful tip from the second boss: write his phone number on the boxes of matsutake that he packed. He may not be able to meet the many levels of middlemen his boxes travel through, yet if any of the middlemen at any level is interested in his matsutake, and short of supplies from their regular collaborators, they might try the phone number on the box, call Nongbu directly and offer a price much higher than that in the villages.

When and how Nongbu parted company from his relative and started his business independently remains unknown to me. When Nongbu works with the higher level of middlemen outside the village area, he collects matsutake in the early afternoon from pickers in his own village. From late afternoon to the evening he drives downhill to sniff around, make phone calls and buy from other small bosses in other villages who might sell to him; by midnight he delivers all the matsutake to the buying company outside the village area. This in effect upgrades him from a small boss into a second boss, though not as part of the regular, stable chain. Such an experience made Nongbu appreciate the lucrative convenience of building direct contacts with higher levels of middlemen, thus cutting out middlemen in between. With the advance of WeChat, he started to build even more direct contacts with individual consumers in eastern cities, seeking to remove all the middlemen in the chain.

It was the development of WeChat that enabled Nongbu substantially to shorten the supply chain and to deal directly with metropolitan consumers, such as affluent tourists visiting Lijiang. He could then deliver directly to their address using a logistics company. Through buying from small bosses and selling directly to these affluent consumers, Nongbu cut out four levels of middlemen: the third boss, the second boss, the big boss and the high-end retailing supermarket. This leads to far higher levels of personal profit.

At this point, even the stable traders on other chains will sell to him. Nongbu is a local trader, and traders understand a person trying to make more money. The sense would be that ‘other things being equal’ it is sociality that comes first, and they still take pride in that. However, when there is a difference in prices some of these traders will then favour the more lucrative route. They try not to see this as a contradiction but rather as something understandable or forgivable in the circumstances. Furthermore, they can see the way the wind is blowing, and realise that the chain is no longer the stable system it once was.

By the end of the season in 2022, Nongbu strategically managed to drive away the second boss couple with whom I worked in River Village. After the couple left, several of their regular traders ended up selling to Nongbu (Fig. 3.2). His strategy is not valued in local society where, as noted earlier, Nongbu has been considered a figure of dubious morality by his local community.

The impact of WeChat trade upon the stable chains intrusively manifested itself over several days before the Mid-Autumn Festival in 2022. A crisis point was reached. The Mid-Autumn Festival is a major Chinese festival and a time for gift giving, which for many affluent merchants in big cities means sending matsutake to their patrons and collaborators. Matsutake is a proper business gift – an expensive luxury, healthy, not too personal and easy to share with the family. Nongbu received many such orders on his WeChat. Once again he used this to try and persuade me to become his broker.

The guy who worked with me earned 50,000 yuan just in the few days of Mid-Autumn Festival. That is how much you can earn. He added 800 RMB per kilogram. On some orders he added more. He earned much more than me. You can do that too. You can add no matter how much you want, and I won’t raise the price. I will just get 50 for each order. Together, we will be able to make lots of money.

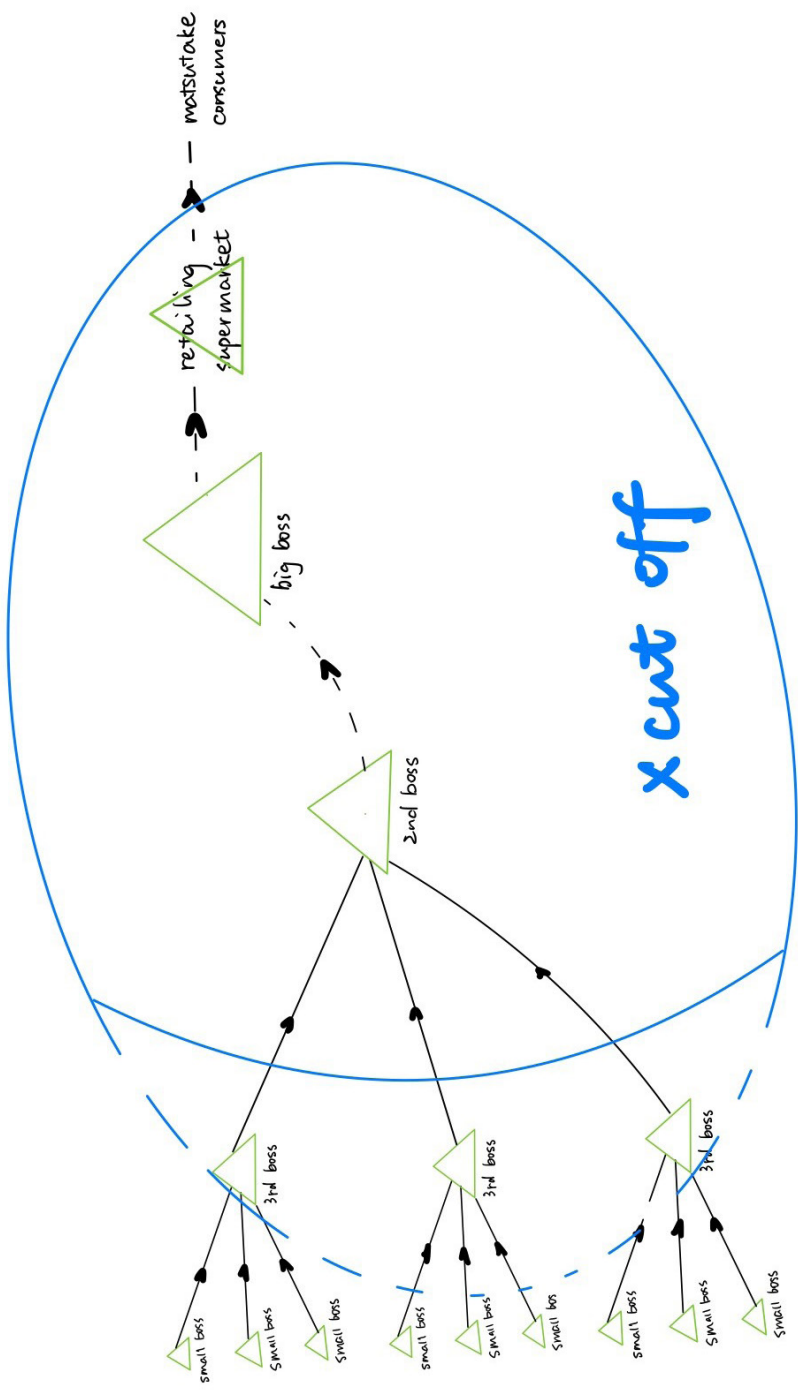


Figure 3.2 A diagram showing how middlemen have been cut out of the trade network in matsutake mushrooms from the villages to the consumers, and from southwest rural China to eastern urban China. Source: the author.

In contrast with the large quantity of orders, the yield of mushrooms is low. That is because the time of the Mid-Autumn Festival falls quite late in the matsutake season. Using his advantage in price, Nongbu bought up all the matsutake in the area, declaring that 'other bosses can't get matsutake'. He was referring to the second bosses who collect matsutake in the villages and transport the goods to Kunming on a daily basis.

There was no matsutake left for them to buy. These days, when they see me in town, I greet them first, but they will not talk to me. For those who did, their attitude to me was pretty bad.

Nongbu was proud of his achievement. He talked like a winner, claiming that 'they will be sifted out eventually. They are middlemen. Middlemen will be sifted out'.

Several days later, when I went to visit Kai and Hua where they worked, I was surprised to find Nongbu there. Hua said to me in an angry tone, 'he [referring to Nongbu] earned 7,000 yuan yesterday!' Nongbu grinned, though he was not totally at ease. At that moment the emotional contrast between his grin and their anger illuminated an economic contrast – Kai and Hua kept losing money in early October while at the same time Nongbu earned several times more than their normal days. The contrast was between the fact that Kai and Hua could not make a profit due to an insufficient amount of matsutake, a situation brought about by Nongbu who had disrupted supplies to other traders in the area. After another two days I dropped by to see Kai and Hua, but they were no longer there. When I saw Nongbu, I asked him if he had seen Kai and Hua. He grinned again and said, 'I sent them away.'

It was his direct contact with brokers in the big cities, as well as consumers in those eastern cities, that enabled Nongbu to remove four levels of middlemen. Regular traders could not compete because, as noted above, the position they held in the established chain meant that they would rather lose money than fail to deliver a stable supply. The way they were socially embedded also meant that such failure caused personal embarrassment, as well as potentially losing traders their place in the chain.

Structure, power and transformation in the economic field

In the following section I will explore the way in which Nongbu has transformed structural relations and the realm of power. In order to make this argument, I would like first to define what I mean by 'field',

‘structure’ and ‘power’. I conceive matsutake trading in villages as an ‘economic field’ in Bourdieu’s sense (2005). The ‘structure’ of an economic field is then the relations of unequally distributed forces of agents, who deploy their forces to confer power over the field in relation to one another (Bourdieu 2005).

To unpack this, the ‘structure’ of the matsutake trade in villages refers to the pattern of traders’ socio-economic relations. This, as has been shown, is both a chain and a hierarchy that creates inequalities of power, but also co-dependence. This structure used to be a stable, inter-dependent socio-economic complex, as described in the first section and illustrated in the first diagram. However, it has now been transformed by Nongbu and the power of his WeChat network.

‘Power’ here is used in the sense of Foucault (1978) – meaning an overall and immediate effect produced within the interplay of multiple forces. An example of the relationship between structure and power in the economic field is provided by Skinner’s (1964, 1965a) research on markets also in southwest rural China during 1949–50 (Skinner 1964, 1965a). In his research, structural hierarchy was expressed through relations between a gentry class and a peasant class. The gentry class invested in the marketing system and controlled the market. Petty traders from the peasant class gave commission fees to the gentry class to trade in the market. Power emerged from control over the market and was translated into lucrative commission fees.

In the villages, where middlemen are interdependent – they are each other’s market and they control each other’s market – their power is in equilibrium. However, through his WeChat network, Nongbu has crafted a market of his own: his market is no longer dependent upon other local middlemen. He now has power in his own right.

The use of WeChat in developing Nongbu’s power shares some surprising resemblances to the effect of writing in developing bureaucratic states. Anthropologists have long been interested in how a literate bureaucracy enabled the establishment of centre-periphery links that transcended geographic distance, which accrued power to the centre and contributed to state formation (Goody 1986; Scott 2011; Szonyi 2017). Along with examples of early empires (Woolley 1963; Goody 1986) and colonial regimes (Messick 1993), China is perhaps the most cited example. The technology of writing in China was critical to the unity of such a large empire and the consolidation of power in the emperor (Lewis 1999).

This provides a precedent for the way in which a digital communication technology has also become transformative through overcoming

distance – and in this case also time. Nongbu’s ability to communicate instantly across thousands of miles depended upon the technology of WeChat. It is through WeChat that brokers advertise, receive enquiries and requests, place orders, transfer money and make their deals. While the emperor was able to ‘maintain direct authority over even the lowest levels of personnel’ (Green 1981, 367), Nongbu could directly contact brokers and consumers thousands of miles away in eastern cities, thanks to WeChat.

Nongbu’s WeChat network differs from the emperor’s literate network by the way a digital network can *multiply*. WeChat connects Nongbu not just to brokers but in turn to their networks, which then constitute a network of social networks. Nongbu wanted to turn me into his broker precisely because he was interested in my social relations; as he stated when he first met me, ‘people around you are rich’. The multitude of social networks enabled by WeChat substantially increases the quantity of relations he can simultaneously engage with by making a few clicks on his smartphone. A single broker on his WeChat becomes a node creating access to another social world, and thereby to the whole pack of social relations in that world. This WeChat mode of networking, as a network of networks, differs significantly from conventional personal networks both in spatial scale and in orders of magnitude. It is this *multiplication* of social networks operated at once by an individual that digital technology enables; and that is an unprecedented capacity.

This new source of power is translated into Nongbu’s advantage in purchase price. Price tells of the power and structure of the field – ‘it is not prices that determine everything, but everything that determines prices’ (Bourdieu 2005, 197). Nongbu’s huge and singular advantage in price has announced this new source of power which transforms the structure of the field. In short, it is the operation of this network on WeChat that produces Nongbu’s power.

In the next section, I examine a parallel case in Shangri-La town. Here another established structure is facing imminent transformation, again induced by digital networks. I will show three key components of such digital networks, which work together to constitute the matrix of the transformative power.

Part II: Shangri-La town

Unlike the villages, Shangri-La town is very open to outsiders, especially tourists. It originally took the name Shangri-La from the success of the

novel *Lost Horizon*, with the clear purpose of attracting tourists. This worked well and has brought a thriving tourist business to the town, including some Europeans. According to News of China (19 September 2023) between January and August 2023 Shangri-La attracted over 10 million tourists, generating over 12 billion RMB for the town.¹

Established structure: the socio-economic complex

For traders in the Shangri-la matsutake market, making or losing money is all about timing and the price of buying and selling. Walking around and observing in the large covered hall that holds the market, the first thing one notices is how well traders know each other and the strong social relationships they enjoy. They have found that working together can not only enhance overall profits, but also acts as a safety net against any individual losing money. The trade is precarious, partly because matsutake decays quickly and will only obtain its highest price if it is sold on the same day as it is picked; by the next day its price will have halved. Traders therefore buy each other's surplus to even out the risks, which depends upon and solidifies this social bonding.

For example, in accompanying Dunzhu and his brother, I saw how they spent their day picking matsutake. By the time we arrived at the market, it was often 4.30 p.m. Tired and hungry, all we wanted was to sell out and go home. This desire grew stronger and stronger as time went by, one day reaching 8 p.m. Dunzhu knew that failure to sell by 9 p.m. probably meant the matsutake would be left until the following day, with the consequent drop in price. I tried talking to every person passing by our stall who made any kind of eye contact with our mushrooms. After another failed attempt, Dunzhu smiled at my desperation, commenting 'Obviously that person wouldn't buy. She's a tourist'. At 8.30 p.m. Dunzhu walked around and talked to the stall traders he knew one by one. When a guy nodded and paid, the three of us were so happy we almost leapt in the air. A broad smile spread across Dunzhu's face and he said simply 'Thanks, bro' (Fig. 3.3). As we cheerfully packed for home, Dunzhu and his brother walked as though they were dancing. They had not made money that day, but at least they had not lost more. They were also able to go home before 9 p.m., which would not have happened except for the help of a trader with whom Dunzhu had a long-term relationship and might one day return the favour.

This sociality between traders can be seen from their facial and body language. When they see a familiar fellow trader they march forward, smile broad smiles, pat each other on the back, no matter whether it is



Figure 3.3 A photo of the moment around 8.30 p.m. when Dunzhu's mushrooms were bought by a trader who is also his friend. Source: the author.

a man or woman, lean closer and chat for a minute before they carry on their own business. This was typically true with Dunzhu; he would bump into other male Tibetan traders, make jokes about girlfriends and have a good laugh. Afterwards, Dunzhu would tell me he buys from that trader or that trader buys from him.

The ethnographic detail reveals how the matsutake trade in Shangri-La town is constituted by a locally embedded complex of intertwined social and economic relations. WeChat traders in Shangri-La extend the traditional socio-economic complex to groups such as hotel owners and tourist workers who now participate in the local matsutake market. Hotel owners in Shangri-La are often people who were born and grew up in big cities, but who settled in Shangri-La when the government opened it up for tourism around a decade ago. These hotels have successfully attracted middle-class tourists, and by this stage have acquainted themselves with a large number of prosperous people from all over China – who in turn are now on their WeChat.

As a result, it was a simple transition to also become WeChat traders. Especially since 2020, many hotel owners found this an important alternative revenue stream that could help to compensate for the decline of income from tourism due to Covid-19. They advertise matsutake on

WeChat Moments and their customers would place orders with them on WeChat. Upon receiving these orders, a hotel owner would purchase matsutake from the market and deliver as requested. In matsutake season in 2023 an active hotel-owner may have orders ranging from just a few to around 40 every day, and they often have a regular trader to work with.

A typical example is Jiao. She is a non-local Tibetan who runs a hotel and a shop in Shangri-La Old Town. Her customers get to know her and then trust her enough to buy matsutake from her on WeChat. In turn she always buys from the same trader whom she trusts. She explains that he is:

an old friend. We've known each other for almost twenty years ... you go to him all the time, he will allow you to pick good, pretty ones from the entire basket. Otherwise he won't let you pick. If everyone picks out the pretty ones, how can he do business? Traders like him can easily lose money.

WeChat traders such as Jiao constitute part of the socio-economic complex, not only because Jiao has a working socio-economic relation with a trader, but also because she understands and practises a morality of sociality in the market, a regard for each other. Jiao appreciates that taking only the pretty mushrooms from a basket would make it difficult for the trader to earn money; and the trader understands that if Jiao sends ugly mushrooms she will lose her customer and reputation. In this mutual beneficial relationship, there certainly is an economic calculation, as game theory would explain. Yet its basis lies in the morality of sociality that binds them into the socio-economic complex of the market.

WeChat network components: making transitory relations durable

Hotel owners such as Jiao successfully kick off their own matsutake business because they are well connected – not only with local traders in the market, but also with a large number of affluent consumers in big cities: Jiao has more than 7,000 on her WeChat. They know these consumers from previous years when the consumer visited their shops or stayed at their hotels. Before the era of WeChat, relationships like this, no matter how pleasant, had a transitory nature. When the tourists came back home and carried on with their own lives, relations with friendly people at a faraway holiday destination tended to lapse. Such connections naturally fade. However, with WeChat, the transitory

relationship becomes more durable. WeChat maintains it as a constant or latent presence, ready to spark back into life, sometimes by clicking 'like' under each other's WeChat Moments and sometimes by purchasing.

Jiao proudly showed me her WeChat network, 'all regular customers for many years'. Then she added:

Doing business is a strange thing, you know. You don't know why, but you just trust this person. If you want to buy something, you buy from this person. This is kind of ... between a person and another person...

She was looking for the right word, and I sought to help. 'Do you mean preconnected relationships (*yuan fen*)?' I asked. She agreed:

Doing business really depends on your karma (*fu bao*). You know, there are so many restaurants serving chicken hot pot in the Old Town, but every time I want to eat chicken hot pot, I only go to one particular restaurant. I've never been to others for so many years. This is really a kind of ... That restaurant always has many customers and they are so successful. That family [the family who ran the restaurant where chicken hot pot was served] owns so many houses, and the boss drives a Land Rover.

Jiao pointed at one particular person among the 7,000 and told me:

I actually don't remember his face or what he first bought from me. But I know he is old because he sounds very, very aged, and he never types texts but always makes voice calls, which is characteristic of old people. Every year he calls me once and places an order of matsutake. I think of him in every matsutake season. I think to myself – he is so old, is he still alive? And then he calls, and we chat, and I am really happy to know this person is still alive and well and in good spirits, every year.

Jiao uses the example of her favourite hotpot restaurant in Old Town to illustrate how karma influences so many of the relationships that nurture her business. Yet the difference between Jiao's regular customers and those of the restaurant is that while most of the latter's customers live within walking distance, Jiao's reside thousands of miles away. Were it not for WeChat, Jiao's network of relations would not exist. It is through WeChat that an interaction so fleeting, and which left no impression on

Jiao at the time, develops into a relationship strengthened every year by periodic exposure, thoughtful chats and monetary transactions. The durability of WeChat encompasses the relationships connected on its platform. It prevents transitory relations from fading away and instead makes them last.

Multiplication of networks: a network of networks that transforms structure

While people such as Jiao are crafting relationships one by one into a network on WeChat, local supply-chain companies of matsutake have also recently developed. These seek to expand quickly by tapping into such networks in bulk. Such companies receive orders from hotels with extensive networks. They wrap the matsutake as instructed by hotels (some hotels provide the supply-chain company with designed gift packaging, complete with hotel logo) and send them directly to the customer's address.

The networks that supply-chain companies tap into are not limited to WeChat networks of hotel owners. They also include the networks of other non-local WeChat traders, as well as those of live streamers who have proved successful and receive lots of orders. The networks of the successful live streamers are of another type, different from those to be discussed later in this chapter. Rather than a direct personal relationship, they curate a relationship between the customers and their style, brand and reputation. This relationship is developed around a great many products, with matsutake being just one of them.

Various types of networks that develop with digital technology are the source of orders for supply-chain companies. Some types are more socially and personally involved than others, and a supply-chain company does not discriminate between these. For example, a common slogan is *yijiandaifa*, meaning 'we will work with you even if you only have one order'. In other words, the very basis of the rapid expansion of supply-chain companies lies in the multiplication of networks built with digital technology by different entities. With digital technology, a multiplicity of networks, a network of networks, can be tapped in and operated all at once.

Almost all supply-chain companies of matsutake in Shangri-La are run by local Tibetan people, many of whom are the children of former matsutake traders. They correspond to the system described by Nongbu, in that they collect matsutake from small bosses and third bosses with whom they have long-term socio-economic relationships,

inherited from their fathers. In the local socio-economic complex of Shangri-La, they are situated in the position of those who used to be second-bosses (see Fig. 3.4 below). In fact, mostly they have quite similar ambitions to Nongbu, although they do not know each other. As shown in the illustration, the digital has radically transformed the right half of the entire chain. At this point it is also starting to have an impact on the left-hand side.

An example is provided by Company Z, one of the biggest supply-chain companies in Shangri-La. Z has grown dramatically since it was founded in 2019; it sent out 10,000 boxes of matsutake (one box equals one kilogram) on a daily basis during the peak of the 2023 matsutake season. A founder of Z claimed to me that in the near future he will have so many orders from the different sources that he will be able to purchase the entire stock of matsutake in the Shangri-La market. Like Nongbu, he envisages that this will enable him to use his monopoly to raise the purchasing price, cementing the price advantage gained from using digital technologies. He predicted that ‘one day there will be no stalls in the market’.

If his predictions do become reality, the diagram will look very different. It will mainly be a regime of monopolistic power. This provides an example parallel to the case of Nongbu in villages: how the multiplication of networks enabled by digital technology may generate overwhelming power that could ultimately destroy the structure of the conventional economic field.

Why the WeChat network succeeds while the live streaming network fails

Yet not all networks have been successful. Live streamers of matsutake, often from eastern cities in China, are perhaps the clearest example of a group that tried to use new digital networks to eliminate all middlemen between local traders in Shangri-La and affluent consumers in big cities. The typical strategy of live-streaming sellers is that they live stream with their smartphone on the platform Douyin while walking around the matsutake market in Shangri-La. They might film the trader’s matsutake stall, so as to try and give their audiences the visual experience of being in the market.

Douyin (TikTok) is a platform where people scroll through video after video as determined by the platform algorithm’s reading of their scrolling behaviour. As a result, the live streamers need to have encounters that seem to catch viewers by surprise. The viewer is

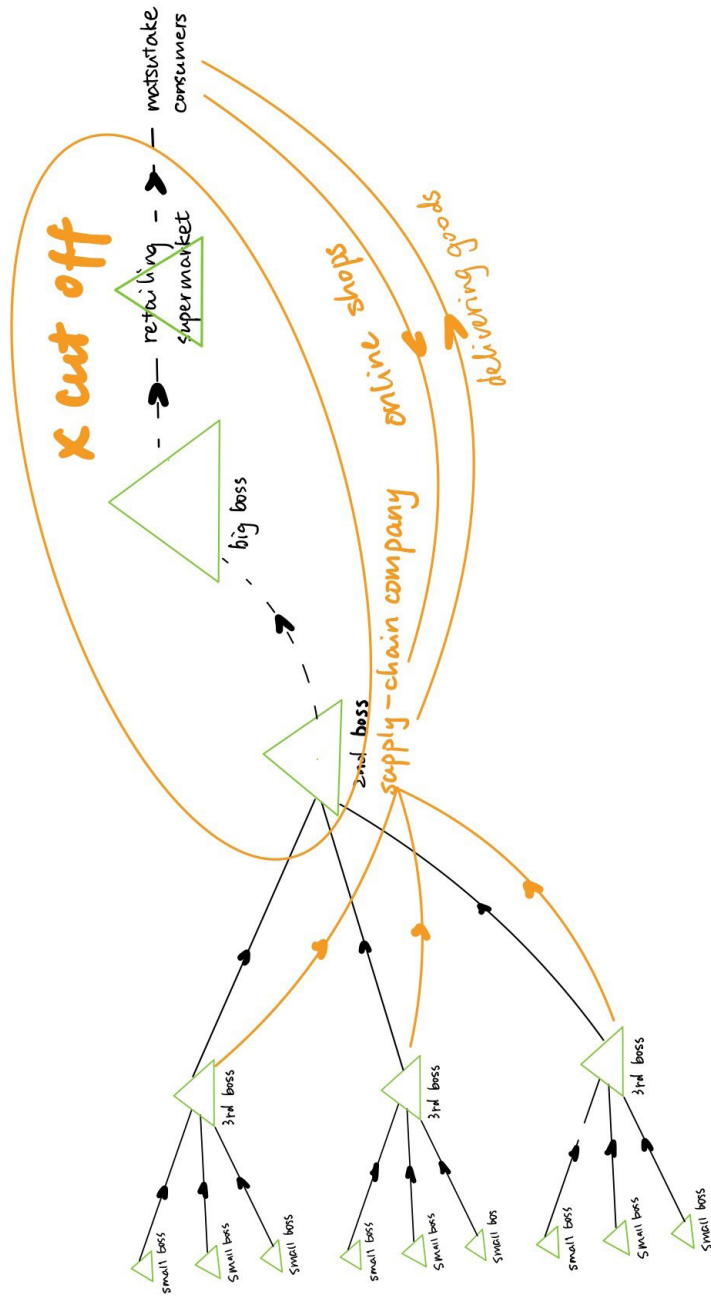


Figure 3.4 A diagram illustrating how the supply-chain companies have also cut out middlemen. This has led to a reorganisation of the trade network from the villages to the consumers, and from southwest rural China to eastern urban China. Source: the author.

suddenly confronted with a vision of really high quality matsutake, along with the claim that these have been bargained down to an apparently impossibly low price. The live streamers hope by doing this to attract random audiences, some of whom might then place orders.

Live streamers will therefore pick up the finest and best-shaped fresh matsutake from the Shangri-La market and draw these close to the camera. But they would not place orders for these because they are expensive; these images are only for advertising purposes. When the live streamers receive actual orders, they send out mushrooms which are less than ideal in shape and colour from Sichuan Province, where the price is between 100 and 150 RMB per kg cheaper than the Shangri-La matsutake. I was told this could work because inexperienced consumers cannot differentiate between the products of Shangri-La and Sichuan. Even for those live streamers who do film the same goods they are selling, the strategy remains one of capturing an online passer-by's attention with startlingly low prices.

This live streaming strategy could potentially cause a crisis for local traders if and when live streamers undercut them by claiming a price that is lower than theirs – even if the streamers would not actually be able to deliver such high-quality mushrooms at the price they claim. Traders did indeed complain of losing customers when live streaming was popular. Given how hard it is to make money in the matsutake business and the risks involved, as well as the perception that the business is getting even more precarious, it is not surprising that many traders were angry with live streamers. Uncle Hebu, a big trader local to my fieldsite villages who has a freezer store in Shangri-La market, commented:

I get irritated just by the sight of a live streamer. They flood in, disturb the entire market (in terms of decreasing the price), then, when they cannot get orders and earn money, they simply leave.

In the 2023 matsutake season a young woman with a red backpack appeared in the market every late afternoon and live streamed every evening. As with other live streamers, she really stood out in the market for being unsocial. In contrast to these unsocial live streamers, almost every trader is relaxed, looking at all passers-by, greeting and inviting them to buy and talking with other traders in ways that show they know each other quite well. In contrast the live streamers simply moved quickly through the market, their bodies tense, tightly holding a rack with a phone on it and talking quietly to their microphone in order to live stream. Following the young woman one day, I saw how she

walked around the market, entering from the side. She neither talked nor greeted people. When challenged, she just turned back to me and murmured softly, 'I really don't sell much. I'm just showing things to people'. She appeared awkward and distant.

The next day, when I met Dunzhu on his stall, I asked him about the woman. Dunzhu expressed contempt:

That one. I am sick of her. I know her. She was here last year too. She wanted to film my goods. I allowed her to film my goods and I allowed her to touch my goods, but she did not buy from me. This is not the way of *zuo ren*. Other people will be considerate to you, and you should be considerate to other people. It's a reciprocal thing. I scolded her and told her never to come to my stall again.

By using the phrase '*zuo ren*', Dunzhu was suggesting that such behaviour is more than rude; it shouldn't really exist in our world. His views carry a morality of what a person should be like. In the phrase '*zuo ren*', *ren* means 'person' and *zuo* means both 'doing' and 'being' or 'existing'. The existence of a proper person is defined by their behaviour, and because of how she behaved the existence of that woman was despised.

Dunzhu shook his head and then looked at me. 'Don't get in contact with people like that,' he advised. 'She is not OK.'

Lacking reciprocity, this young woman was considered to lack morality. Not only had she not bought from Dunzhu, but she had handled his goods. Matsutake must be kept away from such handling, which accelerates its decay. To keep matsutake fresh, traders often keep them dry from the moist air, crowding them together under the cover of a cloth or plastic foil so that they retain just the right amount of moisture. The matsutake is revealed only when another trader comes to buy. Relationship-grounded traders try to choose quickly, so that the matsutake can be covered again as soon as possible.

However, live streamers need to expose all the matsutake to their cameras for a long time, take out many of them and hold each one in their hands for a while, so that the audience can inspect them closely. Dunzhu was being considerate to her by understanding that this is what she required if she was to attract audiences to buy, and he was allowing her to do this with what he considered his most attractive mushrooms. What placed her beyond the pale was not just that she did not buy from him, but that she failed to recognise that this was a social relationship in which she should behave accordingly. From her perspective, the

strategy was precisely not to buy the mushrooms she was advertising, but to use them as bait, then substitute them with cheaper ones from other traders.

From her accent I could tell that this particular live streamer came from Zhejiang Province, the source of many of these live streamers. The key period was 2022, when many came for the matsutake season in the hope of securing orders. Yet despite their attempts to undercut the market, they failed. Not only the more amateur ones, such as this young woman, but even quite famous live streamers failed to get many orders. In 2022 Gelila, a big matsutake company, invited CiCi, a huge live streaming star from Hong Kong with over 10 million followers, to sell matsutake on her live streaming channel. In 2023 Gelila cancelled all its investments in live streaming mushrooms.

‘Many people watching, few people buying’, I was told by way of explanation. This was confirmed by Uncle Hebu. He observed the outside live streamers during the entire seasons of 2021 and 2022, seeing them coming initially as a flood, then gradually fewer. In 2023 no more than five now remain.

The network that live streamers taps into is one calculated and configured by live streaming platforms such as Douyin. This network might be presented by Douyin as constituting all potential customers interested in matsutake from all over China, making a live-streaming platform appear to be more advanced and automated than WeChat. On WeChat one has to build relations one by one, accumulating them over time to build a network. In contrast, on live streaming a tailored network is generated instantly and automatically by the platform; it reaches target audiences no matter where they physically are. Transcending limitations of space and time further than WeChat, live streaming nevertheless failed for matsutake trading, even when attempted by professional stars with over 10 million followers.

There are two likely reasons why the live streamers’ network failed while WeChat networks are successful. The first was suggested by experienced WeChat traders in Shangri-La town. ‘Many watch and few buy’: after observing live streamers for two matsutake seasons, they drew this clear conclusion. They meant that the network of live streaming consisted of people who enjoy watching matsutake markets but are not necessarily interested in buying produce. In contrast, the WeChat networks built up by the market traders constitute people who actually consume matsutake and present matsutake as gifts to others. In other words, WeChat traders believe live streamers fail because their wide-reaching network does not consist of the right people.

The second likely reason is that live streaming networks do not connect to the right type of social relations. This is clarified through an anthropological perspective on the wider relationship between society and economy. Several foundational anthropological texts (Malinowski 1920, 1922; Mauss 1925) have described a fusion of economic and social value. Yet equally they and other works considered these were broken down by monetary and then capitalist systems (Weiner 1988; Wallerstein 1974, 1980; Wolf 1982; see also Sahlins 1988). China has provided a counter case in which monetary and social relations are emulsified into an integrated whole (Fei 1939; Yang 1994; Yang 1995; Yan 1996; Martin 2015; see also Feuchtwang and Bruckermann 2016; Guang 2014; Zheng 2019). Nongbu and the hotel owners respected and retained those traditions, allowing their economic advance and social advance to support one another. In contrast, live streamers in the matsutake trade failed precisely because they failed to engage in the requisite social relations, both offline and online, and had to leave Shangri-La.

This case contrasts with some of the examples of live streamers in Chapter 8. Live streamers in Yiwu, in eastern China, can successfully sell simple utility goods, such as a pair of scissors, through algorithm-generated networks, without necessarily requiring this form of social embeddedness (Lai 2022). Other successful live-streaming strategies discussed in Chapter 8 also involve selling in the ‘influencer’ style through singing and dancing. Here live streamers do form social bonds and the audiences give them virtual gifts (e.g., Sun and Gan 2020; Zhang 2019, 2021). The explanation for these contrasts includes regional differences, given Skinner’s (1964) work on the social aspects of trade in southwest China. It also includes differences that reflect the unique nature of matsutake mushrooms and their associated trade.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed the fundamental relationships between structure, networks and the individual. It started by considering the arguments of Castells that the digital age is now the network age, in which networks and the individual have disassociated and the network diffuses throughout social structure and adds to the top-bottom divide. In one of the examples he gives, networks make workers into ‘lean individuals’ (2010 [1996], 302) and consequently more vulnerable in capital-labour relations.

However, this ethnography shows very much the opposite. In my field, individuals have not been disassociated from networks; they have rather found ways to extend networks to such a degree that they can challenge and change the structures within which they live. While Castells considers networks to be embodiments of the established social structure which work to amplify its polarisation, in my fieldsite the established social structure has been neither enhanced nor maintained: it has been significantly transformed.

This is illustrated by the case of both Nongbu and the supply-chain companies in Shangri-La. Nongbu started as an assistant to a lower-status third boss long positioned within a stable, interdependent socio-economic complex of matsutake traders. He then used a network of social networks built on his WeChat to transform significantly the very structure of that field. He went on to become the most successful trader, drawing the greatest advantage from his operation. In Shangri-La the supply-chain companies had started from a reasonably level field and a socio-economic structure that had been relied on for decades. While many traders had expanded their networks in recent years, they also used their networks to help other traders to assimilate surplus – a shared problem for most traders, meaning that a favour will be returned.

However, supply-chain companies, such as Company Z, may change this structure. By tapping indiscriminately into networks accumulated by hotel owners, online shops and successful live streamers, supply chain companies have secured a network of buyer networks, leading to a massive daily volume of buying and selling. They then buy all the matsutake from those small traders who regularly sell to them, meaning that these traders no longer have surplus to worry about. As a result of that multiplication of networks, the daily volume of trade has been growing fast. This opens up a new scenario, in which companies will be able to buy from all the traders. In that eventuality, traders will no longer need each other's help in dealing with surplus mushrooms. If this comes to pass, the long-established socio-economic complex of traders in Shangri-La will have been transformed into a monopolistic regime.

This suggests a need to rethink the relationship between structure, networks and the individual. The individual-crafted network can generate structurally transformative power because, in analytical terms, this is the product of a matrix. The matrix is an emulsification of three key components. The first is how WeChat makes transitory relations durable and accumulative, as when a hotel owner turns visitors into longer-term commercial customers, or when a trader in Shangri-La uses WeChat to

turn thousands of affluent matsutake consumers living in eastern cities on the other side of China into a network of customers. As is discussed earlier in this chapter, the power of such a WeChat network has its precedent in the written administrative network that also created a new capacity to transcend time and space, thus consolidating the power of the emperor in China. In the case of the matsutake trade, the power that emerges from the WeChat network is not imperial, but economic power in the market.

The second key component is revealed through comparison. While the network generated by the algorithm in live streaming is still more advanced in transcending time and space, live streamers failed in the matsutake trade. This then poses the question of what it is in the people-built WeChat network that is so crucial to success, and which is evidently missing in the algorithm-generated live streaming network. Experienced WeChat traders of matsutake believe that the answer lies in live streamers' networks being made up of the 'wrong' people. Live streamers' networks consisted primarily of an audience interested in watching but not in buying, and that has no wider context to this trade. In contrast, WeChat traders' networks consist of people who have consumed Shangri-La as tourists and purchased many Shangri-La products before. Another important element missing from live streaming networks is the social relations crucial to the matsutake trade. A large body of anthropological literature tells us how the social and economic has traditionally been integrated in China rather than being seen as intrinsic opposites (Skinner 1964; Martin 2015) – an enduring assumption in Western conception, reflected in anthropological dualisms such as gift vs commodity and substantivist vs formalist analysis. Such integration is again supported by the fact that a successful WeChat network in the matsutake trade in southwest China is constituted not by purely economic exchanges, but also by wider socio-economic relations, which are lacking in live streaming. In short, the second key component is social-economic relations with the 'right' people: that is people who are connected by more than just the nexus of trade.

The third key component is the way in which digital technologies allow the multiplication of networks. One single network can connect into multiple social networks. Nongbu's strategy of developing brokers means that he is linked not just to a new individual, but to the whole new social network of that individual. Networks of networks grow at an exponential rather than linear pace. In a similar fashion the supply-chain company's strategy of collaborating with established networks shows how WeChat allows such a network of multiple networks. These three

key components of WeChat networks weave together into a matrix. This in turn generates the kind of power that can transform the structure of the field.

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Note

- 1 Information source: <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20230919A05RL400>. Words in original: ‘中新网昆明 9 月 19 日电 (记者 胡远航) 记者 19 日从云南“开好局、强信心、促发展——贯彻落实党的二十大精神”系列新闻发布会获悉, 今年以来, 香格里拉市旅游市场迎来“井喷式”增长。1–8 月, 全市共接待游客 1044.96 万人次, 同比增长 61.61%; 实现旅游业总收入 121.21 亿元, 同比增长 64.26%.’

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Doing social e-commerce: Chinese grass-roots women and their search for a better life

Haichao Wang

Introduction: imagining a ‘better life’

In contemporary China a pronounced and deepening societal stratification poses a pressing challenge, manifested primarily through widening socio-economic disparities (Bian 2002; Guo 2016; Wu 2019). The most palpable repercussions are experienced by the lower echelons of society, who have to grapple with formidable economic burdens and psychological stress in their daily lives (Bian et al. 2018; Wu and Wallace 2021). While the ubiquity of social media platforms – such as *Weibo*, *Douyin* (known internationally as TikTok) and *Kuaishou* (similar to *Douyin* but targeting users in fourth-tier cities and rural areas) – has to some extent mitigated class barriers by enabling content sharing among grass-roots Chinese, it has simultaneously heightened awareness of profound disparities between social strata (Ma 2019; Miao 2017). Ethnographic research reveals numerous instances of individuals who report that social media has exposed them to greater knowledge of lives distinct from, yet related to, their own (Sandel and Wang 2022; Lin and de Kloet 2019).

These individuals, both men and women, acknowledge the allure of the seemingly modern and refined lives led by others online, primarily reflected in material abundance. This situation has also been documented in Wang Xinyuan’s (2016) ethnography of factory workers and among other marginalised groups in rural and ethnic-minority regions in China and beyond (Oreglia and Srinivasan 2016; Zheng and Norbani 2023). Encounters through online worlds maintain and foster already existing aspirations, propelling numerous ordinary women to pursue social e-commerce. (This field is particularly popular with women as it offers

relatively low barriers to entry and a business model largely built on social relationships.) Such commercial activity, colloquially known as WeChat business (Ch. 微商 *weishang*) is predominantly undertaken by women aged between 20 and 40, encompassing university students, housewives and white-collar workers from lower social classes with limited financial and social prospects.

The gravitation of these women towards social e-commerce reflects current political discourse of digital capitalism (Zhao and Schiller 2001; Huang and Tsai 2022), both in China and internationally. Such discourse positions social media-based petty commerce as the most efficient pathway to personal, social and economic advancement (Ukpere et al. 2014; Mahadeo et al. 2015; Hu 2020; Wiig et al. 2024). At present China's primary e-commerce hubs are situated in villages outside urban centres – predominantly in the southeastern coastal provinces of Zhejiang and Guangdong, as well as in several north-central provinces, where grass-roots e-traders have achieved economic and personal empowerment (Qian 2021a, 2023). These findings align with broader discourse on the digital and e-commerce empowerment of marginalised groups – as observed not only in mainland China (Zhu et al. 2022; Zhou et al. 2023) but also across the global south, including Africa, the Middle East and regions of South(east) Asia (Hossain and Rahman 2018; Sakai and Fauzia 2022). Notably, these empowerment narratives emphasise the benefits for female practitioners in these regions; they are not merely achieving economic independence, but are also redefining female values in the digital era (Wang and Keane 2020; Zani 2020; Hailemariam et al. 2022). As feminist scholars (Jacka 2013; Zhang 2018) have noted, social media-based e-commerce is both gendered and intersectional, shaped by the specific societal contexts in which these women operate.

This chapter thus emphasises bottom-up daily practices among grass-roots female participants who, through reflection and negotiation (and even self-creation) of available material resources and social norms have enabled business activities and thus realised their life aspirations (Yu 2017). The most representative example is Qian Linliang's study (2021a, 2023) of Taobao villages and grass-roots e-traders in China. Qian's ethnography reveals that the creation and operation of the 'Taobao retail empire' is concerned less with macro national policies and local government support than it is with the actions of e-traders themselves. Indeed, these traders, although excluded from upper-class policies and services, achieve their vision of the good life under the neoliberal ethos by leveraging certain policy loopholes and circumventing platform constraints (Qian 2023). This ethnography also emphasises the e-traders'

agency in manipulating daily praxis within surrounding environmental factors, be they political, technological or moral (Qian 2018). In this process digital empowerment may or may not occur, and e-commerce may conversely create new social (digital) inequalities (Qian and Chen 2023). As proposed earlier (Yu and Cui 2019), the term ‘empowerment’ might better be replaced with ‘digital enablement’, referring to a developmental process of seeking solutions to complex social problems facilitated by digital technologies. This framework emphasises women’s ‘gendered experience with ICTs and digital economy at the individual level as they negotiate their female roles at the intersections of family, village and business’ (Yu and Cui 2019, 421).

This chapter examines the day-to-day activities of WeChat businesswomen to highlight three key relationships:

- 1) their utilisation of the primary platform WeChat and various mobile applications such as beauty cameras, and the corresponding consequences
- 2) the nature and origins of these women’s aspirations for a better life
- 3) the ways in which the first two relationships facilitate a specific trajectory.

While scholars have extensively documented the utilisation of platforms such as Taobao for both low-level, rural-to-urban and formal e-commerce activities in China (Wallis 2015; Liu, Zhang and Gao 2020; Qian 2021a), this chapter extends this research by emphasising a dual and contradictory trajectory. In this trajectory the utilisation of existing social networks for commercial purposes symbolises the embrace of individualistic values and acknowledged associations of modernity (Yan 2010; McDonald 2016; Miller 2017), while simultaneously giving rise to a new form of collectivity.

It should be noted that WeChat business has precedents in women leveraging pre-existing networks of kinship and friendship to initiate entrepreneurial endeavours. Notable examples include the ‘party-plan’ model, employed in sales such as Tupperware (Clarke 2001) and Ann Summers lingerie and sex toys (Storr 2003), which relied on private gatherings among groups of women for product demonstrations and sales. While social e-commerce in China often begins with these personal connections between women (Zani 2020), WeChat as an online platform promotes further expansion through new social connections with total strangers (Zhang, Sun and Ding 2023), grounded in the saleswomen’s personal taste and capability to maintain relationships.

Most WeChat businesswomen are struggling with relatively meagre incomes and subpar benefits and, commonly, job insecurity. This is especially true for students based at relatively low-status colleges and housewives who depend on family financial support. Although they commonly use terms such as ‘good life’, ‘better life’, ‘successful life’ and ‘the life one’s happy about or satisfied with’, WeChat businesswomen do not provide precise definitions of the lives to which they aspire. Instead they portray these vaguely, such as:

A better life should be a state of life that we aspire to, a state of life that we keep striving for without giving up within a life that is not quite as good as we would like it to be.

The way in which WeChat businesswomen express these aspirations seems to include firstly a desire for material improvement that reflects contemporary China’s materialist-political ideology (Qian 2021a, 2023; Rippa and Oakes 2023), and secondly a desire for comfort and decency in human emotional realms (Zani 2020). In line with wider shifts in cultural values, these are increasingly expressed in terms of consumption (Li and Zhang 2000; Jin, Li and Wu 2011; Wang et al. 2012; Wang, Y. 2016; Song et al. 2016), both their own and through WeChat business, aimed at supplying goods to others.

Digital media have become central to this new landscape of consumer culture exemplified by Alibaba’s initiative of ‘Double Eleven Shopping Carnival’ and other commercialised festivities (Sun and Creech 2019). Yet there is a reason why the core platform for these grass-roots women is WeChat, just as there is a reason why Facebook and Instagram (Hossain and Rahman 2018) dominated societies and groups outside China. In China WeChat has been described as ‘super-sticky’ (Chen, Mao and Qiu 2018); its burgeoning user base and diverse functionality, such as one-to-one text and voice messaging/call, Friend Moment, WeChat Group and WeChat Pay, have made the platform an indispensable infrastructure in the fabric of daily life (Plantin and de Seta 2018). This ‘super-sticky’ aspect is the foundation for its usage here, as this chapter will show. WeChat’s established position within people’s social networks thus becomes its potential for new economic activity, alongside its technological functionalities (Yu 2017).

Compared to professional e-commerce platforms such as Taobao, which cater predominantly to established merchants or individuals engaging in formal and anonymous transactions (Zhou et al. 2023), WeChat business remains largely shaped by gig-based

or informal endeavours heavily reliant on social relationships (Dong 2022). This renders it analogous to anthropological observations of how local grocery stores work in building a community (Kenen 1982). Furthermore, WeChat business has gained renown for offering relatively high returns on investment, requiring minimal economic outlay in terms of stocking, inventory management and marketing (Zhou et al. 2023). It is also gendered and associated with products catering predominantly to women, such as skincare items, mother and baby products and household goods. Although WeChat business may not always result in substantial economic advancement, many practitioners find solace in its contribution to saving on daily expenses through procurement of everyday items at low purchase prices, as most of them explicitly noted:

Regardless of whether substantial profits are generated, saving money is always right. After all, in our daily lives, these essential purchases are inevitable.

Drawing upon five years of participation and observation of a Chinese WeChat business brand (S company) specialising in skincare, along with involvement with five of its thousands of first-tier agents' sales teams (averaging 120 grass-roots businesswomen per team), I will describe three major dimensions of social e-commerce. The first section examines how WeChat businesswomen acquire proficiency in utilising various photo-editing applications in order to enhance the visual presentation of products and their daily lives. Guided by the company, they present a visualisation of taste that positions both themselves and their products within a particular aesthetic. For instance, a student might employ a specific camera filter appealing to university students, such as 'Japanese cute style' or the 'Scandinavian minimalist style'. Unlike most business practices, these draw directly upon the seller's personal life and social milieu, emphasising the way in which the self reflects the 'values and aesthetics' implicit in its social relations.

The second section then describes how these women develop individual skills through online team sessions of 'product knowledge training', 'team management knowledge training' (for higher sales ranks) and 'short video editing and training for building a Douyin account'. These skills demonstrate a commitment to a cosmology in which learning and diligence become underlying assumptions that individual hard work pays off with a better life. These values are rooted in a wider cosmological debate as to whether social and economic inequality is primarily

a structural issue or a consequence of insufficient individual effort (Guo 2016; Li, Gu and Zhang 2015; Lin and Wu 2009). WeChat business promotes conventional values around hard work set against a consciousness of structural inequality, including gender and other disparities such as education (Murphy 2020; Wallis 2015).

The third section presents the ways in which activities discussed in the preceding sections have transformed traditional e-commerce. This transformation, in turn, affects the dynamics of offline socialising, providing a new spiritual world online – as observed among female migrants engaged in WeChat business in Taiwan (Zani 2020). This new world is more concerned with ‘encouraging each other to be better people who live a better life for themselves and their families’, thereby placing greater emphasis on other invaluable gains, such as new forms of community, rather than on purely economic benefits.

Photo-editing *taste*: building an attractive WeChat Moment

After her lunch break Cui began to sort out the product photos and other daily snapshots taken on her smartphone, which she used to share on her WeChat Moments: *pengyou quan* (Ch. 朋友圈), ‘the friend circle’. The rationale behind selecting specific representative photos for transfer to her iPad was Cui’s imminent training session for her sales team, comprised of WeChat group members, scheduled for later that evening. Cui would routinely access her two WeChat accounts: her personal account on her smartphone, primarily employed for sending voice messages resembling walkie-talkie communication, and her sales team services account on her iPad, used to transmit accompanying photos in support of her voice messages. The term ‘WeChat Moment construction’ (Ch. 朋友圈建设 *pengyou quan jianshe*) is commonplace jargon within the WeChat business enterprise. This concept entails a cluster of acts including the meticulous editing, selection and timing of every product photo, as well as adding a paragraph of advertising copy or a life-sharing picture intended for posting on WeChat Moments.

‘WeChat Moment construction’ – a term specific to WeChat business, and resembling much other jargon exclusive among e-traders in conventional e-commerce industry (Qian, 2021b) – differs significantly from the widely analysed and documented term *persona* (Ch. 人设 *ren she*). The latter emphasises the forging of a public identity by selecting preferred individual elements to perform (Miao and Tian 2022). In my fieldwork,

especially within this company, which targets the lower market segment, the concept's *persona* was rarely mentioned as the company now views it as insincere. They associate it with the negative reputation created by some WeChat companies and participants through building fake personas in order to deceive consumers and sale agents.

The construction of one's WeChat Moment now aims to optimise exposure by strategically posting content at opportune times, infusing sufficient allure and sophistication to attract existing WeChat contacts into becoming customers or to prompt individuals recently added on WeChat to engage with the content. This mirrors professional marketing strategies employed in product packaging and promotion while stressing more the cultivating of one's technique to present the self. The distinction thus lies in the fact that WeChat businesswomen not only promote their goods, but also package themselves as soft commodity-values alongside the products they have displayed in WeChat Moments, the exclusive facade (Ch. 门面 *menmian*).

For Cui, a 21-year-old college student who ascended to the status of a first-tier agent three months ago, a priority among her responsibilities is to impart the significance of meticulously crafting a high-quality WeChat Moment to her 102 sales team members. This was the focus of her regular fortnightly team training sessions. Cui felt these sessions were essential because the company's monthly training sessions fail to align with each team's specific circumstances. The current month's topics (on how to promote products and recruit agents through offline activities) seemed irrelevant to Cui. For her team, the recent addition of several new agents necessitated the training of 'product knowledge' (Ch. 产品知识 *chanpin zhishi*) and the 'methods and precautions of constructing WeChat Moment' (Ch. 朋友圈建设注意事项 *pengyou quan jianshe zhuyi shixiang*).

To enhance her sale team's effectiveness within the whole company, Cui imposed rigorous requirements upon herself. Believing them to be of paramount importance, she organised these training sessions for her sales team at least every two weeks, but sometimes weekly or even on an impromptu basis. Typically scheduled after eight or nine o'clock in the evening, these sessions allowed team members, especially college students and young mothers, to participate during their relatively free hours. She was particularly concerned that some senior team members had recently neglected their WeChat Moments postings. This prompted her to address the issues of content and timeline incoherence, considered indicative of low-quality WeChat Moments. Cui instituted a daily posting regime for her sales team members of three to four posts, typically featuring high-definition and meticulously crafted photos.

Additionally, agents were expected to share either their personal product usage experiences or customer feedback, and to offer insights into their daily lives to forge a sense of intimacy between them and potential customers (Sandel and Wang 2022). These were mandated to be personally taken and edited by the agents themselves, to discourage the practice of copying from other agents or the company's database. Cui considered any failure to produce original content to be an expression of laziness. She insisted that:

If all the images featured in your WeChat Moment are personally crafted by you, it boosts your credibility and shows your commitment to WeChat business rather than just sporadic activities ... These signal to others that you have a creative side and can see WeChat business as a legitimate career, further solidifying their trust. The key to building a compelling WeChat Moment is to show yourself, and consistently putting in long-term effort proves to be highly effective in capturing the trust of others.

For Cui, it was important for new agents to learn how to generate content based on a thoughtful analysis of the personal characteristics of the contacts on their WeChat. This should determine the most suitable quality and taste for their posts which extend beyond mere popularity or attractiveness; they are expected to develop a persuasive influence through which to convince others to purchase their products.

At 8 p.m. that day Cui began the training session by sending a red packet to the group, a classic Chinese expression of appreciating social relations or communal activity (McDonald 2020). The current landscape of China's photo-editing market boasts numerous mobile applications catering to diverse aesthetic preferences, such as 'Meitu' (Ch. 美图秀秀 *meitu xiuxiu*), 'Pitu' (Ch. P图 *pitu*), 'B612 Click' (Ch. B612 咔叽 *ka ji*), 'Light Complexion Camera' (Ch. 轻颜相机 *qingyan xiangji*) and 'Butter Camera' (Ch. 黄油相机 *huangyou xiangji*). Each offers distinct features for photo editing and quality enhancement.

In the training session, Cui recommended the use of BeautyCam (Ch. 美颜相机 *meiyan xiangji*). In her view this application stood out for its diverse array of stylish filters, encompassing themes of 'Japanese cute style', 'Korean fashion style', 'Refreshing style', 'Oil painting style', 'Vintage style' and numerous others (Fig. 4.1). These filters aligned with the current preferences of women students and were expected to enhance the texture and appeal of daily life postings. Cui went on to explain:

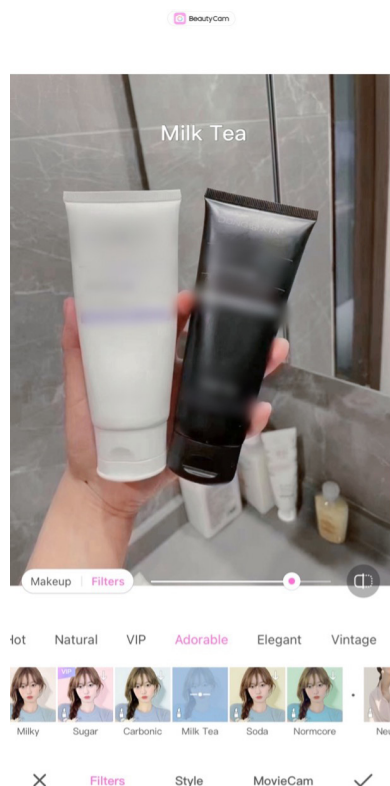


Figure 4.1 A photo of a facial cleanser taken by a sales agent, then edited and enhanced in the BeautyCam app. Source: the author.

Training on how to take photos and tips on how to use photos of products are not only to make agents aware of the importance of taking good-looking photos to (promote) selling (for making money), but also to get agents to actively use these products ... There are two reasons. One is that the agent's usage is also the consumption of the product, which we call 'self-using', included in the sale records of their upline agents. Second, and importantly, if you only use the product photos provided by the company, people will think you are not a sincere person. They can't even see your own use of the product – on what basis can you convince them that this product is good to buy? Therefore, the product photos must be taken and edited by agents themselves. It is also the first rule of constructing one's WeChat Moment ... So all this is about taking photos, editing them, designing them with good taste ... They are the basic skills, equipped to be the qualified WeChat businessperson.

It becomes apparent from Cui's subsequent elaboration on 'self-using photos' that her emphasis extended beyond the transactional aspect of merely selling more products. In the tradition of pre-digital 'party-plan' sales methods, the term 'self-use' emphasises the sales agent's personal experience of the product (Storr 2003). This recreates a genuine word of mouth effect, fostering trust and countering the prevalent criticism within the WeChat business realm where commodities have been often labelled as 'three non-products' (Ch. 三无产品 *sanwu chanpin*) – no producing date, no producing address and no official approvals. Such 'counterfeit and shoddy products' (Ch. 假冒伪劣产品 *jiamao weilie chanpin*) are initially related to the widely discussed (un)safety issues of China's food (Yan 2012). The showcasing of social relationships, encompassing elements such as trust, commendation, scepticism or disparagement, becomes a conduit for expressing personal commitment based on shared values (Chow and Chan 2008; Beugelsdijk and Klasing 2016) (Figs 4.2 and 4.3).



Figure 4.2 These photos of a facial cleaning powder, showing its application by the sales agent herself, were edited using a specific photo-editing app, then posted on WeChat Moments. Source: Miss Zhang.



Figure 4.3 Further examples of photos showing the same ‘self-use of products’, taken and enhanced by a sales agent and posted on her WeChat Moments.
Source: Miss Lv.

To facilitate this, the recommended application BeautyCam, introduced by Cui, not only features the ‘Japanese cute style’ method of photo editing, demonstrated during training sessions, but also encompasses various filters catering to the preferences and subjectivities of white-collar clerks and young mothers. For instance, a white-collar worker with a penchant for movies opted for the ‘film texture’ filter to edit her photos, thereby accentuating her individual interests. The practice of taste in the WeChat business community diverges from Bourdieu’s (1984) concept of cultural capital, which implies symbolic violence between social classes. Instead, the practices of WeChat businesswomen follow the general policy of the WeChat business community which abjures any

predetermined or consistent taste category. They support the idea that the aesthetic tone revealed in WeChat Moments should be tailored to an individual's socio-economic circumstances.

This approach emphasises communal virtues such as integrity and sincerity, regardless of one's (often low) class status. For example, Juyan, a second-tier sales agent, had a four-year-old daughter who attended kindergarten. Due to familial responsibilities, she had left her previous employment upon marriage and had engaged in WeChat business for four years. Juyan expounded on the importance of aligning her chosen taste with her personal life circumstances:

We can't create a false person ... because, imagining you started off as just a regular young mother, like me, from a simple background with limited education. My original friends know this, right? So, if I tried to flaunt a high-end lifestyle, like buying luxury goods shown on WeChat Moment, or if I attempted to portray myself as highly educated, no one would buy it. Even worse, they'd think poorly of me, assuming I'm just pretentious and trying to cheat them.

In fact WeChat business, and the commercial activities of any other direct marketing company, may lead to false and exaggerated propaganda. The sector has faced widespread criticism in China (Shi 2022) as a result. Such criticism extends to WeChat businesspeople, as Juyan further observed:

Those intentionally pretending to have refined tastes to gain public attention used to be criticised as a (WeChat business) tactic, resembling the brainwashing pyramid scheme! In our company we strongly reject this approach and insist that sales agents avoid using such overly exaggerated ways. This distinctive approach sets us apart from other WeChat business companies and sales agents. We pride ourselves on being sincere and the real person.

Establishing a corporate culture with core values rooted in the pursuit of integrity and sincerity, expressed through factual representation and a commitment to grounded practices, has emerged as a prevailing institutional ideology and collective values within the S company. This can be seen from the other example of Linjie, a first-tier agent overseeing more than 100 agents. As one master's student at a prestigious university, with two years of experience in WeChat business, Linjie earned an average monthly income of 10,000 RMB (around £1,000). This income not only covered her daily expenses, but also supported her tuition fees, thereby affording her a

relative financial advantage. This financial stability also enabled Linjie to indulge in travels across the country during public holidays, showcasing her vibrant and upmarket lifestyle on her WeChat Moments.

The tangible benefits arising from the expectation of subsidised living expenses and affordable 'self-use' skincare products have enticed numerous college students to embark on WeChat business ventures. Unlike Linjie, this trend is particularly pronounced among individuals facing challenging financial circumstances and attending less renowned colleges, with limited prospects in academia or professional industry. However, Linjie's lifestyle serves as an inspiration for this group of college students, who long for an energetic college life that combines academic success with broader life experience through doing WeChat business. As Linjie explained:

Now, WeChat tells us that the success can be achieved through sincerity and hard work. Take me as an example. As a student, I need to focus on my studies while managing this small business effectively, as it is demanding ... As I'm involved in academia, my posts feature simple and fresh styles in both photos and content, reflecting my personality. I've stressed this perspective repeatedly to the agents I oversee. It's crucial for individuals to have a clear understanding of themselves, knowing what (kind of taste and life) suit them. This self-awareness can motivate both sales and individual progress, leading to a better life.

Since the idea is to minimise any disparity with individuals' actual offline lives, the presentation usually involves only slight photo editing to maintain sincerity. The intention is to attract like-minded individuals and together set personal life goals. While Linjie focused upon her university student status, Juyan's daily posts encompassed visits to the beauty salon, hinting that the money she spent was earned from selling the products she promoted online. Additionally, Juyan showed how she prioritised her daughter's education by enrolling her in a reputable local private bilingual kindergarten, thus demonstrating the modern approach to motherhood that is arguably associated with China's growing consumerism (Zhang, Sun and Ding 2023). This genre of content appeals to young mothers with similar aspirations of achieving the financial and social competence to become a qualified mother in contemporary China (Zhang, Sun and Ding 2023). Although based on individualistic lifestyles, this portrayal of taste consistently alludes to broader shared life expectations and aspirations that often concern ordinary people in China today.

The ‘panacea’ for a better life: learning and diligence

All this activity separates WeChat business from the model of capitalist enterprise that reduces relationships to merely buyers and sellers in an abstract market space (Zani 2020). This section of [Chapter 4](#) explores how agents align with their customers around the consolidation of normative values expressed in the ideal of commitment to learning and hard work. This consolidation was primarily exemplified by Yanyan, who had studied hairdressing at a vocational school and joined the team less than three months before. Following her participation in the training session on ‘how to create an attractive WeChat Moment’, she posed a genuine question in her WeChat group:

The examples the group leader just mentioned were basically outstanding individuals from top universities, schoolteachers or good-looking agents who naturally exude positivity. For ordinary people like me without notable backgrounds or specific strengths, how do we kickstart our business? What should be our taste or approach to attract people?

Yanyan’s question resonated with most of the third-tier agents, as the commercial ethos of the S company primarily targets the lower end of the market. Recognising that agents at grass-roots level may not possess clearly defined tastes to craft their WeChat Moment around and so attract an audience, the company encouraged agents to coalesce around qualities of learning and hard work (Ch. 学习和努力 *xuexi he nuli*). In addition, since this is seen as a traditional Chinese ethical value, many upper-tier agents as well as lower-level agents have naturally embraced and internalised this ideology of enduring hardship (Ch. 吃苦耐劳 *chiku nailai*) (Bruckermann 2020). Sunya, a third-tier agent recruited nearly a year ago, found herself positioned as a modest performer within a 120-member team. Despite making efforts to capture and edit photos independently, she struggled to meet the minimum monthly sales requirement of 1,000 RMB (around £100). Sunya attributed her failure to a lack of diligence:

I haven’t been putting in enough effort at my end ... My team leader pointed out that I haven’t been taking my WeChat Moment seriously and have not been engaging enough with both new and existing customers. I know what needs to be done, but I just can’t seem to follow through. Initially, I worked hard on editing the

photos I took and stuck to the requirement of posting three or four times a week. However, after two or three months I couldn't keep it up, probably because my product sales were minimal, and I feel discouraged by the lack of earnings ... Up until now, I'm essentially a self-use agent, buying the minimum number of products every month along with some good friends, getting a 60 per cent discount off the retail price. Anyway, saving money is also satisfying.

Sunya's situation would be a familiar scenario within every sales team. Numerous first-level agents described such experiences during their knowledge-sharing sessions:

Doing WeChat business is just like studying in school ... You will have the high achievers, the average students and those who struggle with the school. The ones who are poor in academic performance might give up after just two days of studying, while the high achievers know exactly what they're doing and eventually find success. But the majority fall into the ordinary category that require constant *guan* (Ch. 管, governance or guidance) ... Managing a team of WeChat businesswomen is akin to managing these students: you must keep pushing those in the middle to post and encourage them to engage in private chats with potential customers, then motivate them to continuously learn various skills so they can make progress. There's no other way to do it!

What such presentations tend to gloss over is the degree to which 'success' does not solely hinge on studying and hard work. The economic and social disparities faced by agents from lower social classes reflect a deeper structural inequality (Wallis 2015): these individuals are likely to be able to sell primarily to customers with low spending power. They are also subject to technologies over which they have no control. For example, Tencent's technical intervention in WeChat Moments in late 2020 involved the folding and streamlining of postings posted by WeChat businesspeople (Dong 2022). This intervention has significantly diminished the visibility of business activities, presenting a practical challenge with no apparent solution for WeChat businesses – a development regretted by most of my informants. Secondly, the tiered-profit model, for instance within the S company, means that only the 1,500 first-tier agents out of the total 150,000 are likely to see a significant change in their economic status, with an average monthly income of between approximately 10,000 and 20,000 RMB (£1,000

and £2,000). They are followed by the second-tier agents, around 5,000 of the total members, who can achieve a monthly income ranging from one-third to one-half of the first-tier agents. The remaining third-tier agents primarily serve as the loyal consumers of the company itself – as the monthly sales generated by lower-levelled agents constitute a decent portion of the revenue stream. Known as the pipeline revenue (Ch. 管道收入 *guandao shouru*), this situation is basically true of all WeChat business enterprises.

All these agents working at lower levels have resorted to a collective commitment to learning and diligence. This effectively aligns both corporate and individual ethos with an internalised ideology deeply ingrained in Chinese society and culture. This ideology, which asserts that ‘a better life is always achieved through hard work and a wise mind’, remains a legacy of the socialist ethic of hard work that is intensively documented in Chinese discourse (Madsen 1981; Harrell 1985; Li et al. 2004). Yet this too has become a pervasive consensus perpetuated in China’s education system (Yang 2020). This is especially significant given the widespread belief that Chinese students spend over a decade working hard and preparing for the college entrance examination or *gaokao* (Ch. 高考). Success in this exam is viewed as the only pathway to upward mobility for the vast majority of ordinary families in China today (Cockain 2020; Howlett 2022).

As a dominated discourse, it has exacerbated the poignant experience of anxiety and stress heatedly discussed among ordinary Chinese (Xiang 2022; Cheng and Hamid 2025). A sense of failure by the grass-roots populace hints that their struggles stem from insufficient effort, immediately linking to the other prevailed discourse on *suzhi* (Ch. 素质), or human quality (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2007). This *suzhi* discourse is also relevant to Chapter 1 by Li Xiaolin, which discusses sexualised content as a form of vulgarity created in the period-tracking app by some users of low *suzhi*; it is seen to run counter to traditional Confucian roots that would help to develop civilised persons (also see the Conclusion of this volume by Daniel Miller and Wang Xinyuan). A person with higher *suzhi* in the marketplace is deemed to be the ideal contributor to national modernisation and societal development projects (Yan 2003a, 2003b).

Structural inequalities of this kind are of considerable significance; they have also been heavily documented (Morduch and Sicular 2000). However, the main focus of this chapter has been to consider the impact of new digital technologies upon the emotional experiences of these lower-class women (cf. Zani 2020). Initially lacking any prior

business experiences, WeChat business became for these women a learning practice, in which they navigated the nuances of selling tasks from a rudimentary starting point. Secondly, and importantly, the women leveraged internalised values into their ventures, illustrating how they reclaim agency in the pursuit of a better life (Qian 2023) through engagement with WeChat business and its associated use of digital skills.

The discussion in this chapter uses two representative ethnographic examples, training sessions about product knowledge and promoting products on TikTok, to illustrate these dynamics. It further reveals that these online learning activities eventually forge the new online communities – an emerging sociality that transforms conventional e-commerce. This transformation, in turn, changes how these women socialise, a development that has both individualistic and collective significance.

* * *

After dinner at 7.30 p.m. Xiaomei handed over her three-year-old son to her mother-in-law and husband. She carefully explained the bedtime routine, from bathing him to choosing the right pyjamas and reading a specific picture book before tucking him into bed. As they settled in for the night, Xiaomei pulled out a brand-new notebook along with her smartphone. This notebook was a reward she received last month for ranking fifth out of 102 in total sales, a token of encouragement to keep up the hard work. Seated at the living room table, Xiaomei eagerly awaited her team's training session on product knowledge. She had decided to dedicate this exclusive notebook to record her understanding of the company's entire product range and how to address various skin problems for her customers.

Xiaomei's dedication and in-depth knowledge has had a significant impact. Last month one of her loyal customers, who had long suffered from facial allergies, completely recovered thanks to Xiaomei's recommended product combinations and maintenance tips. This satisfied customer even referred several friends to Xiaomei. As a top-selling third-tier agent for the past six months, Xiaomei remained committed to furthering her product knowledge. She aimed to achieve a spot in the top three over the next three months and simultaneously to recruit two more third-tier agents; she herself sought to rise to second-tier status, giving her access to lower-priced goods and increasing the profitability of her work. Facing financial pressures with her husband's building materials industry in decline and her son about to enrol in an expensive private

kindergarten, Xiaomei believed in the power of her product knowledge to help customers to solve their skin problems, which in turn served to boost her sales. She explained that:

Instead of posting some fabricated life insights aimed at bringing potential customers closer, I believe customers, more than anything else, want to see how skincare products effectively address skin issues. A customer's concern lies in the effectiveness of these skincare products – after all, making money is not easy, and nobody wants to see their hard-earned money go to waste. That's why I am keen on learning product knowledge – not just for showing off, but to truly understand the main ingredients and efficacy. This allows me to recommend the most suitable products to customers. Today's training session will focus the causes of acne-prone skin and related conditioning products such as amino acid cleanser, lavender essential dew, herbal mask powder, hyaluronic acid hydration mask, acne cream etc ... Recently, I happened to meet a few college students who are dealing with various degrees of acne-prone skin. Perhaps sharing this information on my WeChat Moment will be more appealing to them.

The entirety of the product training session spanned approximately an hour, yet Xiaomei found herself revisiting the voice messages repeatedly. She diligently transcribed the content into her notebook, taking nearly three additional hours to comprehend the product knowledge and coordination skills. She concluded her work late at night, at around 11 p.m. Such product training, along with other learning sessions such as 'offline product promotion', 'online traffic attraction' and 'WeChat Moment construction', occurred almost weekly in Xiaomei's sales team.

The primary speakers in these sessions were typically the group leader, second-tier agents and selected third-tier agents known for their outstanding sales performance or expertise, such as photo editing and proficiency in product knowledge. Most of them are happy to share experience within the community, as it has always been seen as an honour, an outstanding status, as well a means of improving themselves by honing public communication skills. Following each product training session, agents were tasked with capturing screenshots of the training content and showcasing the effectiveness of their learning process, then sharing them in WeChat Moments for others to view (Figs 4.4 and 4.5). All of this exemplified the point made in the section above concerning the necessity of continuous learning and diligence.

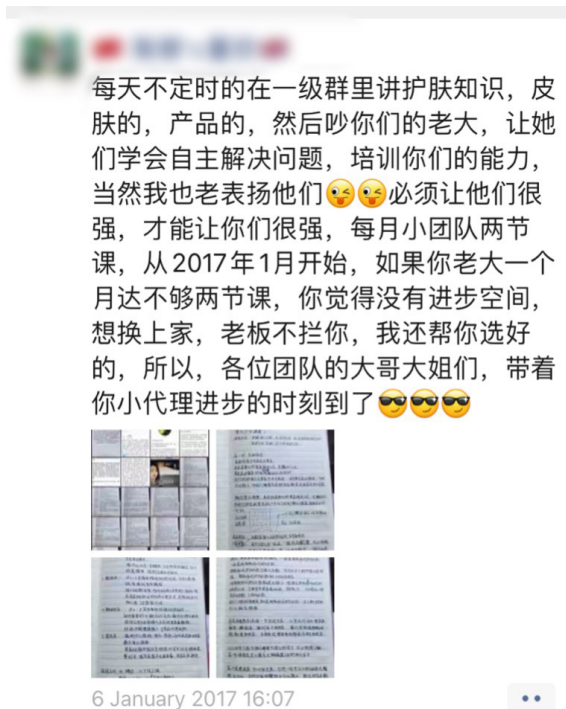


Figure 4.4 The ‘note-taking’ practice took place during various training sessions of ‘product knowledge’ within WeChat business groups. These related photos were later posted in agents’ WeChat Moments to show their diligence. Source: Miss Yang.

An additional example was Jiajia, a 24-year-old receptionist at a private music training organisation. She had engaged in WeChat business for a year and a half. Holding the position of a second-tier agent, she oversaw six third-tier agents. Apart from Tencent’s technical intervention into the WeChat Moments environment, the emergence of the fan economy (Ch. 粉丝经济 *fensi jingji*) (Liang and Shen 2016) on short-form video platforms such as Kuaishou and Douyin (Lin and de Kloet 2019; Wang et al. 2019) has posed a formidable challenge to the viability of WeChat business. The fan economy has impacted on the volume of sales for agents at all levels, and made their profits correspondingly diminish.

In early 2021 the S company made substantial investment in inviting professional industrial trainers from the short video industry to conduct intensive online training courses (Fig. 4.6). The courses covered various topics, including analysing the algorithm of Douyin’s recommendation mechanism, defining one’s vertical classification (resembling



Figure 4.5 A training session of ‘product knowledge’ took place in one sales team, with the group leader herself sending long voice messages to deliver that knowledge to her WeChat group. Source: Miss Wei.

the WeChat Moment construction in reflecting personal taste and value) and showing how to produce short videos expected to attract large audiences. Jiajia attached great importance to this training and actively mobilised her agents to participate. After the training sessions she diligently documented extensive notes, expressing her enthusiasm that:

I gained a lot from this five-day intensive training ... Now, I don’t have to rely on blind imagination to understand the workings of the recommendation algorithm, nor do I have to experiment repeatedly with different videos to figure out what content could be more popular than other types. The training was direct and detailed, providing me with a clear direction on how to build a Douyin account.

Subsequently Jiajia diligently applied what she had learned, trying to commit to creating and uploading a short video on Douyin every day.

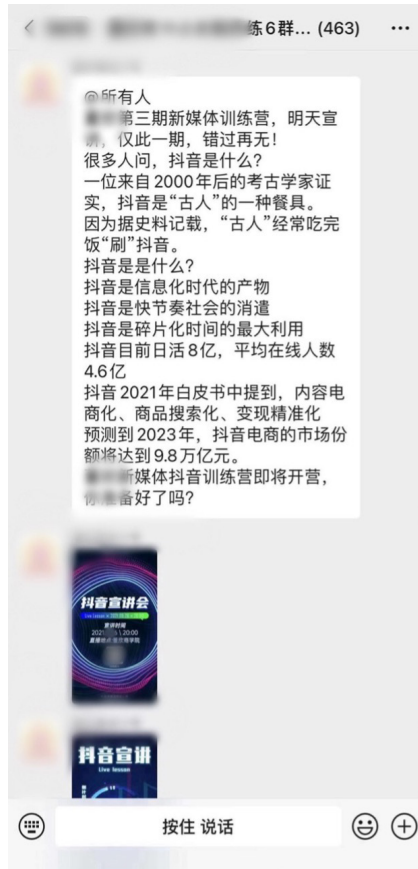


Figure 4.6 A training session about promoting products on TikTok (Douyin) was initiated by the company. Source: the author.

She followed the advice provided in the training sessions, adhering to recommended upload times and paying careful attention to details in video content. This routine persisted for nearly two weeks. Despite her efforts, the exposure of her video productions did not result in any considerable change, which eventually resulted in her giving up on this. Jiajia explained:

I found that building a Douyin account is even more challenging than maintaining WeChat Moment. Creating short videos demands more digital skills and is time-consuming. To make a short video, you first need to determine the content and how to make it engage. This involves planning how your expressions will attract viewers.

Excellent content is crucial. Then you spend time shooting clips, which is challenging since you must appear on camera. If you prefer not to be on camera, you must find related pictures or video clips to piece together. After that you need to edit these clips, which requires basic editing skills, including choosing transition styles and organising the clips with logical intent. Finally, you must select the right background music and fonts, for text is all about aesthetic ... Making a one-minute video may take an entire day or even longer ... Aside from these practices based on aesthetics and taste, a lot of learning and persistence are required. However, we all know that it's tough to learn and implement these skills consistently – otherwise every agent would be a sales guru and every person would become an online influencer.

The emphasis on the virtues of studying and hard work was a recurrent theme articulated by WeChat businesswomen. It is important to note that this chapter does not intend to assert that these lower-tier agents are unaware that their economic and social hardships are structural and difficult to overcome simply through diligence and persistence. Instead, these women make conscious efforts to alleviate real-life challenges by engaging actively with these internalised universal values, alongside attending online training sessions related to the digital skills, industrial and product knowledge (Yu and Cui 2019), irrespective of whether they ultimately apply the knowledge to their daily practice of WeChat business or not. Their participation reflects an expectation and genuine aspiration, with the hope that their communal activity and engagement will contribute to achieving a better life. For some participants these group activities do provide a solution to constraints they encounter in everyday life.

Conclusion: individualism and collectivity as dual aspects of WeChat business

This chapter has focused upon the way in which grass-roots women experience their involvement in new forms of retailing based on digital media. The foundation for this kind of sales technique resembles the pre-digital 'party plan' developed within Western capitalism, where low-income women used their personal connections, both kinship and friendship, as the initial 'market' for selling products, then hoped to grow the business through the expansion of their relational network

(Clarke 2001; Storr 2003). However, this chapter has focused on other, less well documented possibilities that have developed, mainly thanks to new digital technologies such as WeChat. Specifically, these include the presentation of individual taste through photo enhancements, the subjectification of the ethos of success through hard work and learning and, based on the preceding two aspects, the emphasis on the development of a dual and contradictory trajectory. The utilisation of existing social networks for commercial purposes symbolises the embrace of individualistic values, while simultaneously giving rise to a new form of sociality that serves to reconsolidate persisting collective values.

As with Liu Chun's analysis in this book (Chapter 3), this ethnography suggests something quite different from the more dualistic Western writings about an opposition between individualistic and abstract capitalism, on the one hand, and China's social bonding created purely through gifting on the other. Alongside more recent anthropological work, more complex possibilities become apparent. In WeChat business, the emergence of individualistic values such as self-worth and financial independence surprisingly results from the socialist projects of the Maoist era. The later societal and economic transformation further underpins the shifting of value systems among ordinary Chinese (Yan 1996; Stafford 2013; Barbalet 2016).

Certainly, these WeChat businesswomen aspire primarily to a materially advanced life expressed through capitalist values of increased consumption (Dong 2022; Zhang, Sun and Ding 2023). They are also being trained to avoid generic styles and tastes, focusing rather on what makes them authentic individuals. As anthropologists have shown, the idea of the individual varies across diverse cultural contexts. For instance, Marilyn Strathern (1992) illustrated this through the contrast between Melanesia and the English, pointing out that the individual in the former was viewed more as an amalgamation of multiple social relations (Carsten 1995, 2004). These ethnographic studies imply the conceptual de-constructability and analysability of the term 'individualism'. They highlight that it emerges from the person's own reflections upon sociality and is shaped by prevailing social norms.

In the context of WeChat business, it is the company that shows its agents how to create a sense of individualism through photo crafting. As a result, individualism is situated as a task within the commitment to hard work and learning; it is in no way a repudiation of the normative and often authoritarian moralities that bring people into alignment with the state and the company. This helps us to theorise the key concern of this book: to understand the consequence of digital technologies for

populations in China. The point is analogous to the analysis of LinkedIn by Ilana Gershon (2022), in which a digital platform is focused almost entirely on the crafting of a unique individual to serve the development of neo-liberal capitalism.

In this chapter the digital is shown also to facilitate the ability of WeChat businesswomen simultaneously to craft both individualism and normative conformity. This point is further enhanced by the example of Xiaomei, in which the digital facilitates normative processes such as total commitment to the ideals of learning and hard work. Examples included all these female agents who went beyond the nominal requirements of the company, attending still more training meetings and working still longer hours. As such, the argument in this chapter aligns with that describing the findings of Xiang Kunyu (Chapter 2 of this book) in revealing the capacity of social media to foster public normativity.

These examples also demonstrate a specific characteristic of digital technologies. Such technologies provide new possibilities for social bonding that are direct but do not require face-to-face encounters (Dong 2022; Zhang, Sun and Ding 2023). All three main groups engaged in WeChat business – university students, housewives and ordinary white-collar workers – see particular benefits in this new form of sociality beyond the confines of their immediate social circles. For instance, housewives were drawn to this online interaction as one of the few avenues available to connect with the outside world. As in China and many other patriarchal societies (Yu and Cui 2019; Zhu et al. 2022; Hailemariam et al. 2022; Sakai and Fauzia 2022), women often find their personal lives subsumed firstly by family duties. They therefore appreciate how WeChat business enables them to earn income for the benefit of themselves and their families while remaining connected to the broader world. Some mothers specifically appreciated the inclusion of professionals such as teachers or doctors in their WeChat groups – individuals unlikely to be part of their daily friendship circles.

This new form of socialisation builds upon other forms of sociality. These include studying together as a cohort, providing mutual encouragement and even sharing daily grievances around topics such as irresponsible husbands, challenging relationships with mothers-in-law, the struggles of their children's studies and the emotional toll of losing former friends who disapprove of their decision to work in WeChat business. Due to the social stigma associated with this sector, some women have experienced the loss of friendships and social connections. Some people feel it is inappropriate for friends and relatives to exploit those connections for commercial purposes, although other

research participants stress that even if WeChat business serves to test friendships, it can also be beneficial. Perhaps reflecting a more individualistic outlook, they suggest that one should not expect friendships to remain permanent, immutable fixtures throughout their lives. Instead, as individuals progress along their respective life journeys, gathering and shedding friends are natural occurrences. These sentiments echo the importance these women now give to striving for fulfilment and prioritising self-improvement as foundational pursuits in their lives.

To conclude, a limitation of many popular accounts of the consequences of digital technologies is their tendency to assume they foster specific trajectories. Yet this chapter, along with others, suggests that typically they facilitate quite contrasting tendencies at the same time. WeChat business is found to create both emerging forms of individualism and forms of online collectivity, a paradox also stressed by other scholars (Zhang, Sun and Ding 2023). With digital technologies, people become simultaneously more individual and more socially bonded. This is because the digital, unlike older forms of capitalism, works within much more public spaces of open visualisation, enabling many more people to ‘see’ what each person is engaged in. Such conclusions develop our understanding not only of digital technologies, but also the anthropology of China itself.

These arguments differ somewhat from Yan’s (2009, 2010) conceptualisation and explication of China’s individualisation in two primary regards. (Note that Yan’s conceptualisation is further discussed in this book’s concluding chapter by Daniel Miller and Wang Xinyuan.) Firstly, this chapter shows how digital technology enhances this process of individualisation by integrating self-interested individuality within institutional (state and corporate) collectivism; it thereby engenders new normative ideals. Secondly, it builds upon Yan’s previous work, hinting at the evolving roles and empowerment of women within family structures by showing how they also advance entrepreneurial activities such as WeChat business – workplaces that both hide and reveal aspects of the structural and economic challenges faced by grass-roots women. Both these findings align with Liu Chun’s comparison of how different e-commerce practices challenge (or substitute) the collectivist values of her Tibetan village (Chapter 3); they also correlate with what the China anthropologist Stevan Harrell describes as the ‘long-term anthropological research interest’ of how communities manage the larger social and structural forces that bear down upon them (Harrell 2001, 142–4; cited in the conclusion of this volume by Daniel Miller and Wang Xinyuan).

The final surprising result of this chapter is that the demographic group of female agents, consisting of students and ordinary white-collar

clerks, largely comprises those who did not gain admission to top universities. This point has been noted by many scholars who studied schooling and the *gaokao* examination in China (Yang 2020; Cockain 2020). These studies have highlighted that although students themselves, their families and relevant third-parties actively strive for students' academic progress, and thereby their upward class mobility, through access to greater educational resources and individual diligence, these efforts are often undermined by the deeply entrenched social and economic inequalities embedded in the institutional structure of the *gaokao* itself (Cai et al. 2019; Yiu 2020; Cockain 2020). Similarly, it remains difficult, if not impossible, for ordinary women to achieve upward mobility through the other private sector, digital entrepreneurship, a situation that clearly requires urgent attention and response.

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Rethinking data in healthcare: data work in an elderly care institute in Shanghai

Xinyuan Wang and Yuling Sun

Introduction

This chapter will use the example of healthcare in Shanghai to demonstrate the approach of Digital Anthropology to one of the most conspicuous developments of digital technology in recent decades: datafication. In particular it will focus on the tension between top-down datafication driven processes and ‘smart-from-below’ (Hawkins, Awondo and Miller 2024) examples of vernacular digital practices.

China houses the world’s largest and fastest-growing ageing population, with individuals in their seventies and eighties enjoying a life expectancy twice that of their parents’ generation (Wang 2023). Simultaneously, China has rapidly embraced digitalisation over the past two decades, demonstrating a strong commitment to becoming a global digital superpower. Shanghai holds a prominent position in both the ageing demographic and the digital revolution within China. For more than three decades it has been recognised as the ‘oldest’ city in China. Shanghai was also among the first to be labelled as super-ageing (Shanghai Civil Affairs Bureau 2010), with an average life expectancy of 82 years for men and 87 years for women in 2022.¹

In 2014 and 2015 China experienced a rapid expansion in the field of internet-based healthcare, driven by increased involvement from investors and medical professionals. This growth was fuelled by the government-backed ‘Internet Plus’ initiative, introduced by the prime minister, Li Keqiang, in the 2015 Government Work Report. At its core, ‘Internet Plus’ aims for comprehensive integration; it seeks to revolutionise industries, enhance governance and elevate citizens’ overall quality of life. The policy advocates for the seamless fusion of

cutting-edge technologies with traditional sectors such as manufacturing, healthcare, agriculture and others. It also intends to bolster economic restructuring, encourage innovation and foster sustainable development (Wang et al. 2016). The significance of 'Internet Plus Healthcare' (IPHC) gained recognition, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Yang, Shu and Zhang 2021).

Simultaneously, the widespread adoption of smartphones in China has transcended demographic boundaries. Smartphones have provided mobile internet access even to traditionally underserved populations, commonly referred to as the 'information have-less' population (Qiu 2009). This demographic includes older individuals and migrant workers, as noted in studies by Wang (2016; 2023). Such a surge in smartphone usage occurs against the backdrop of challenges posed by an ageing society and an underdeveloped healthcare system in mainland China. Consequently there is a pressing need for the emergence of mHealth (mobile health) initiatives to address these challenges.

mHealth has gained considerable attention for its potential effectively to tackle regional disparities in medical resources, enhance patient engagement, bridge information divides, reduce healthcare expenses, optimise care delivery efficiency and ultimately improve overall health outcomes (Hawkins and Miller 2024; Sama et al. 2014; Yu et al. 2016). Concurrently there has been a notable surge in the acknowledgement and adoption of datafication within China's healthcare services landscape, aligning with the concept of 'data-driven care'. This approach has gained recognition due to its ability to elevate care standards, address rising expenses and streamline administrative procedures (Ni et al. 2019; Zhou, Sun and He 2018).

The research presented in this chapter is based on two ethnographic studies. The first is Wang's 16-month fieldwork in Shanghai, undertaken between 2018 and 2019. This primarily aimed to gain insights into the ageing experience and smartphone usage among ordinary individuals after their retirement (Wang 2023). The second is ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2019 at an elderly care institute in Shanghai by Sun Yuling and Wang Xinyuan. Our methodological approach encompassed a multifaceted strategy, including in-depth interviews with care workers, participant observations during Wang's visits, overnight stays at the care centre and accompanying care workers on home service visits to households, as facilitated by Sun Yuling. The in-depth analysis of the digital data collection process by frontline care workers, specifically the Electronic Care Record (ECR), was undertaken by Sun Yuling's research team and colleagues. This qualitative study,

akin to ethnography, involved 19 frontline care workers from the same care institute (Sun et al. 2023).

Literature review: datafication, data work and narrative medicine

In the last decade worldwide, data-driven approaches have significantly impacted various aspects of modern life, spanning marketing, entertainment, healthcare and education. This pervasive influence showcases ‘datafication’, a process in which qualitative aspects of life are transformed into quantifiable data (Ruckenstein and Schüll 2017). Today, ‘dataism’ is sometimes revered almost like a religion, with Silicon Valley ideals fronted by charismatic figures akin to Weberian religious leaders (Ames 2019). Across various sectors, a growing demand has emerged for more extensive and superior data to serve diverse purposes. This rising ‘data promise’ envisions a healthcare future in which statisticians and robots could replace traditional medical professionals, to the extent that medical governance becomes entirely data-driven (Hoeyer 2023).

A data-driven healthcare approach involves using quantitative data to make decisions, in order to enhance patient experience, medical research and financial management. Big data opens new opportunities for healthcare practices, but the gathering of vast, often unstructured data requires innovative methods and questioning approaches (Grossglauser and Saner 2014). In broad terms, the ‘data work’ in datafication encompasses multifaceted practices involving creating, collecting, recording, managing, curating, analysing, interpreting, contextualising and communicating data (Bossen et al. 2019). The application of datafication in healthcare operates across multiple levels and forms, encompassing public health infrastructure, medical research, clinical healthcare and self-care (Ruckenstein and Schüll 2017). In the fields of healthcare, researchers have examined data work in a variety of healthcare contexts, such as hospitals, community healthcare and emergency medical services (Møller et al. 2020; Verdezoto et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2021).

However, recent studies have raised a critical concern: achieving ‘data-driven’ healthcare goes beyond relying solely on specific data systems, technologies or platforms (e.g. Sambasivan et al. 2021; Møller et al. 2020). The reality is that data work is intricately woven into specific contexts and timelines, requiring substantial human engagement and interaction. Anthropologists (Ruckenstein and Schüll 2017) had urged

scholars to pay closer attention to how datafication is unfolding on the 'other side' of various digital divides (e.g., financial, technological, geographic), to experiment with applied forms of research and data activism, and to probe links to areas of datafication not explicitly related to health.

Researchers (Bossen et al. 2019) have shown how people with traditional caregiving roles (e.g. doctor and nurse) quickly find themselves involved in data work that goes far beyond their previous experiences and expectations. New occupations (e.g. medical scribes, medical secretaries, data analysts and data scientists) have also emerged in order to conduct data work in healthcare. Verdezoto et al. (2021), for instance, examine the invisible data work in community health in South India. They consider data work as a kind of articulation project that helps to bring together discontinuous elements in community health and to manage the actions necessary to maintain community health infrastructures. Another study of hospitals in Denmark and US (Møller et al. 2020) found that despite the emergence of occupations such as data analyst and data scientist, much of the work that makes data analysis, interpretation and responsible use possible takes place in general administrative or clerical jobs.

Halpern's (2015) work offers an insightful historical perspective on how our modern society came to worship 'beautiful data'. She traces this transformation back to the era following the Second World War and examines the intricate relationship between cybernetics, vision, knowledge and power, culminating in contemporary biopolitical concerns. According to Halpern, this historical redefinition of rationality played a vital role in propelling society toward a 'data-driven' mechanism. In this context, data is regarded as the benchmark of truth with 'a moral and democratic virtue' (2015, 148).

Scholars such as Kitchin (2014) and Sullivan (2017) emphasise the paradoxical nature of datafication processes. These can in fact reveal certain aspects of the phenomena they aim to capture even as they obscure or conceal other elements. Additionally, scholars such as Wadmann, Holm-Petersen and Levay (2019) note that different health professionals, motivated by their distinct objectives and roles, may unintentionally become part of a vicious cycle in which performance evaluation leads to ever higher formal standards that mainly just complicate actual work processes. Chapter 7 by Zheng Ken echoes this appreciation of the conflicts that arise between groups of digital workers, depending upon their place in the overall process.

In an ethnography of Denmark's data-driven healthcare sector, Hoeyer and Wadmann (2020) noted a concerning trend among frontline

clinical staff: a growing dissatisfaction with their data-driven responsibilities, often labelled as ‘meaningless work’. Their study explores the varying implications of ‘meaningless work’ for different stakeholders. They highlight the dual pressures that come with standardisation. On one hand, this promotes a demand for localised data collection to showcase individual contributions; on the other, it fosters an upsurge of this ‘meaningless work’, carried out to accord with external evaluation standards. As our study also illustrates, excessive dependence on data in datafication may cause considerable harm by undermining the significance of individual judgement in healthcare practices.

In his latest book *Data Paradoxes: The politics of intensified data sourcing in contemporary healthcare* (2023), Hoeyer skilfully articulates the reasons why healthcare should not rely solely on data-driven methodologies, despite the enticing promises of intensified data sourcing. He focuses on the gap that emerges between ‘data promises’ and their real-world implementation. Stakeholders often expect transformative changes in healthcare through increased data usage, envisioning high-tech solutions. However, data remains mainly used for relatively mundane tasks such as patient questionnaires and monitoring devices. Hoeyer challenges the idea of reducing healthcare complexities to data, which potentially ignores the need to care for intricate, embodied individuals.

An alternative, known as the ‘narrative medicine approach’, presents a powerful counterbalance to data-driven healthcare discourse. The seminal contributions of Charon (2001, 2008) lay the groundwork for appreciating the indispensable role of narratives in medical practice. He champions a human-centric approach, acknowledging patients not merely as data points but also as complex beings with unique stories and nuanced narratives. Narrative medicine complements numerical data by trying to capture the entirety of a patient’s experience of illness, recovery or overall wellbeing. In placing importance on the understanding of patients’ experiences, emotions and broader contexts, narrative medicine builds on the earlier contributions of anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1980, 1997, 2020).

In her 2015 book *Narrative Medicine: Bridging the gap between evidence-based care and medical humanities*, Maria Marini takes this concept further. She eloquently integrates insights from mythology, literature, personal anecdotes and diverse research experiences that reveal the pivotal role of narratives in understanding patients’ vulnerabilities. These points are also underscored by Dohan et al. (2016). These works collectively call for a re-evaluation of statistical data in healthcare.

Together they urge for the inclusion of patients' stories, emotions and lived experiences within healthcare decision-making processes, fostering more empathetic and informed medical practice based on rigorous qualitative research on narrative.

Over the last decade, narrative medicine has gained traction in China, championed by scholars such as Guo Liping and Yang Xiaolin (Guo 2023; Gui 2023). They have also drawn parallels with what they regard as an otherwise lost tradition of narrative case histories that formed part of an enduring tradition of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), embodied by 'Yi'an' (medical case), which integrates healthcare and literature (Gui 2023). They show how this approach resonates with a TCM cosmology deeply ingrained in Chinese culture, which emphasises the harmony between body and mind – extending healthcare beyond numerical data to encompass experiences, narratives, emotions and feelings (Li 2010; Ots 1990). This chapter seeks to use a case study of the context of elderly care within the Chinese health system to demonstrate the limitations of quantitative data noted by this prior literature.

Data-driven healthcare by design

Adorning the corridor wall of the care centre is a slogan:

With data, decisions should follow data's lead. When ideas lack data support, the CEO's decisions take precedence.

This slogan encapsulates the ethos of data-driven healthcare, emphasising the priority of decisions rooted in data. It also illuminates the hierarchical and authoritarian culture that exists within the institute.

At the care institute's headquarters, electronic screens showcase employees' schedules and progress charts, creating an impression of professionalism. Their advertising booklet proudly showcases the care centre's robust digital infrastructure, emphasising both their remote care system and the utilisation of AI + big data technology. According to their claims, the care centre has implemented a hybrid digital infrastructure that incorporates a spectrum of functionalities, from health data collecting, tracking and storage to computing devices, communication tools and management systems. In the daily caregiving routine an overwhelming volume of health and behavioural data was continuously sensed and captured by diverse data-sensing devices, integrated

into intelligent workstations. This collective array of user data formed the backbone of the seniors' Electronic Care Records (ECR). Within the ECR system AI algorithms were coded to analyse and process the data, facilitating and supporting various facets of caregiving work. These encompassed real-time emergency alerts for care staff, remote monitoring and management tools for care managers and families.

Seniors' information was recorded upon their arrival in a digital Electronic Care Record (ECR) which was then continuously updated. This detailed ECR contained over 300 data points categorised into three main groups:

- 1) Historical health and wellbeing data encompassed individual profiles, preferences, social relationships, disease histories and health conditions. This information was collaboratively managed by nurses and frontline care workers and updated monthly.
- 2) Daily health and behavioural data included vital signs, daily activities, medical records and incidents of poor or irregular health. Frontline care workers recorded this data daily.
- 3) Care planning and execution data involved creating personalised care plans based on comprehensive health details. Nurses, doctors and smart algorithms contributed to these plans, which were implemented by frontline care workers. They also recorded any unexpected events during the execution process.

The data-driven caretaking process then involves three main stages:

- 1) Initial assessment and onboarding: A nurse assesses the senior's suitability for the care centre, creating a personal ECR account upon approval. Health assessments are conducted and data is recorded into the ECR.
- 2) Care programme generation: Health data triggers embedded algorithms to devise a specific care programme. This plan is reviewed and refined by doctors and families using their ECR client app. Frontline care workers execute the programme.
- 3) Ongoing care and monitoring: Daily health data is collaboratively collected and logged into the senior's ECR by care workers and sensors. Medical professionals and families access this information remotely for timely interventions or adjustments to care programmes.

The data-driven approach also extends to management practices. Monthly evaluations within the ECR leverage recorded data to reassess

seniors' health and evaluate care workers' performance. Managers depend on data to oversee the caretaking process and evaluate the performance of individual workers. This evaluation involves assessing caretaking records (such as care plan execution, response times to alerts, accident rates caused by humans and complaints), task completion numbers and attendance records.

Frontline care workers, stationed at the facilities, are active users of various data technologies. Medical professionals, including doctors, nurses and therapists, visit weekly to assess seniors' conditions, devise care plans and offer basic medical services. When off site they monitor seniors' health remotely via the ECR's medical clients, providing on-site care when necessary. Patients' families or guardians engage with the ECR's family interface to keep informed about seniors' conditions, arrange visits to them and provide essential personal and emotional care when required.

The data-driven process as described appeared feasible, with the data-intensive ECR system expected to be the linchpin guiding operations. However, our ethnography reveals a rather different reality. The 'big data' touted in advertisements translates into an additional burden for care workers as the seemingly automatic, data-driven healthcare requires a remarkable amount of manual labour. Moreover, the data supplied by the ECR system fell significantly short of what is actually needed in caregiving practice. Care workers thus see data work mainly as meeting the requirements of evaluation rather than offering practical help or guidance in actual caregiving. The following sections serve to reveal the data-work practice in diverse real-life contexts.

'Hands busy, feet disorderly': data work in reality

Elderly care may be of extremely long duration and is often of a complex and fragmented nature (Chen, Ngo and Park 2013; Norton 2000). As such, it represents a challenging context for data work. Despite the promise of advanced sensors, those most used, such as devices integrated into beds, serve only a basic function: alerting night shift caregivers when patients attempt to access the toilet. This is in fact something that was adequately catered for by pre-digital methods, such as pressing a button. Much of the crucial data required by the ECR system is not automatically gathered by any sensor; instead, it requires manual entry by frontline care workers. Every day these care workers are tasked

with recording over 60 types of health and life-related data. They first record extensive data on various paper forms daily, then transfer this information manually onto digital platforms. The additional demand for frequent updates only adds to the labour involved. Many caregivers end up dedicating extra hours during night shifts to the completion of these digital forms. A considerable part of data cannot therefore be gathered and recorded in real time.

For example, the data recording requirements for eating are incredibly detailed. They require data about meal content (staples, soup, meat and vegetables), eating duration, time and behaviour (whether the meal is eaten independently, etc.). With each care worker tending to a dozen seniors during meals, capturing this extensive data in real-time becomes practically impossible. Furthermore, these requirements arise within a context that was already very difficult to cope with. For example, Wu, a care worker in her late forties, was assisting one senior with toileting when another accidentally spilled water, requiring immediate action to dry the floor. In this whirlwind moment Wu described the situation as *'shou mang jiao luan'* – which literally translates as 'hands busy, feet disorderly'. She clearly expressed her frustration:

Every day is just like this; even if I had four hands and four feet, it would still be chaos. Where can I find an extra hand to record data the system needs?

Another care worker Ling, in her fifties, was also frustrated with the system's demands. She observed:

We are required to record so much data. But how can this happen? ... If we record this data immediately when it happens, we can't do any other things.

In an effort to cope with the pressure of data work, Wu and her colleagues adopted a strategy. For critical or time-sensitive data, they quickly recorded key information and figures in their personal notebooks, then transcribed them on to paper forms and into the ECR system during their off-hours. However, for everyday routine data, such as toileting and meals, instead of jotting down most data as events unfolded, they consolidated their daily routine data and entered them as a group during shifts. As a result, the entries remained nearly identical: the sleep quality was categorised as 'general', the senior's meal consumption was noted

as ‘eating everything provided in three meals’ and the recorded water intake remained unchanged. When questioned about their concerns regarding data quality, Ling says:

No one would really check these data carefully, it’s just for ‘looking good’ on the system. We have to do so to keep the system and our boss happy. If not, they will dock my pay.

The care workers’ job performance was evaluated and calculated based on data, including attendance time, and the timeliness of their response to alerts, accident rates, etc. While some of these data could be collected through sensing technologies (e.g. collecting attendance time through workers’ network signals), most of them depended on manual recording by the care workers. For instance, they were required to clock in manually at specific times or locations to ensure the completion of designated tasks. When an alarm was triggered, care workers had a five-minute window to address it, otherwise the system would mark it as red. In practice, the priority was more about silencing the alarm quickly than effectively addressing practical caregiving issues. A similar phenomenon was also observed in other ‘data-driven’ healthcare situations, vividly described as ‘data massage’ (see Hoeyer and Wadmann 2020). Accurately gathering health-related data via sensory technologies has long been challenging, especially with the diverse needs of seniors, individual physiological variations and the generally unpredictable nature of care work. This often results in data that is unavoidably incomplete or inaccurate.

Another example is the institute’s smart beds. Equipped with various sensors such as pressure, sleep monitoring and bedsores detection devices embedded in the mattress, these collect data on seniors’ sleep patterns, analysing it in real-time and triggering alerts for anomalies. For instance, if the pressure sensor detected a senior’s absence during sleeping hours, an alert would be sent to a receiving terminal (nicknamed ‘little mouse’ by the care workers), prompting an immediate check on the senior. Simultaneously, the ECR system and data visual dashboard recorded and displayed the alert, allowing care managers and families to access this information through their own ECR terminal interfaces. Unfortunately this data-driven system often encountered errors, leading to mistaken alerts triggered by a lighter-weight senior shifting positions, for example, or accidentally setting off the alarm. Care workers had to rectify these errors manually and provide context details when presenting the data to stakeholders.

For instance, the daughter of Grandma Ma, who suffered from severe dementia and had been at the institute for over two years, encountered a ‘data accident’. She recalled what happened:

One night, the alarm from my mother’s bed was unusually high. The next morning, checking the app, I was terrified and had no idea about what had happened to her. I immediately reached out to Jia, the care worker on duty that night. Surprisingly, she told me that my mum had mistaken the call button for a new toy and had been pressing it for fun.

The following day Jia rectified the data errors and reset the system. Beyond dealing with incorrect data, the uncertain nature of long-term care often resulted in incomplete data. However, within the structured, data-driven context of the institution, such incompleteness was not acceptable: frontline care workers had to supplement any missing data. For instance, in enhancing night-time care management night-shift workers were required to patrol every two hours (at 10 p.m., 12 a.m., 2 a.m. and 4 a.m.). The sensors in the seniors’ smart beds collected patrol data by measuring the distance from the bed to the care workers’ monitoring device (‘little mouse’). However, this seemingly effective data-driven process often failed in practice, for example if seniors got up before the scheduled check-in times, leading to data gaps. Care workers then had to flag and explain these gaps in the data.

Care workers also often find themselves in the middle of constant communications with families and managers, negotiating new plans and updating the system – despite the fact that the whole system is supposed to be (and is clearly claimed to be) ‘data-driven’. For example, familial opinions wield significant impact over the care process. When doctors propose certain care plans, families frequently seek adjustments due to financial constraints or perceived necessity.

Liu, a care worker at the institution, recounts the constant adaptations prompted by family requests. Initially the senior’s daughter insisted on cancelling several rehabilitation sessions as her father had complained of feeling fatigued. She later requested that these sessions be reinstated after noticing her father’s subsequent lack of activity. Just days later the daughter sought another review of the care plan, asking to switch certain activities after consulting with other families. On each occasion it was Liu’s responsibility to address these requests, negotiating and updating the senior’s situation while also communicating with medical professionals and managers.

Yet despite the widely recognised limitations and perceived shortcomings of the standard data process, no one dared to avoid such data work due to its link with workplace evaluations. A manager of the care institute once remarked to Wang:

It seems that your anthropologists always say it is complicated. However, in decision-making and evaluation, we need a clear and simple answer. Data is neat and clear, and doesn't make things complicated.

This manager's perspective echoes a common opinion shared by numerous clinical administrative staff and managers encountered during fieldwork. It also mirrors a broader trend favouring quantitative data, driven by the entrenched 'evaluation culture' (Dahler-Larsen 2011). As Ling previously mentioned, this evaluation has a direct impact on her monthly income. Instead of receiving additional pay for their extra, data-related efforts, dedicating more time to such data work is the only way that care workers can ensure their pay remains intact, with no deductions. These features of data work notably influenced care workers' morale and their attitudes toward data work, subsequently impacting the quality of the data recorded. Data functioned as crucial indicators with no direct connection to external 'reality'. What the organisation considered 'real' was determined solely by the data (Hoeyer 2023). The failure of pre-design data standards to capture local diversity resulted in a situation where data work often concealed as much as it revealed (also see Adams 2016; Merry 2016).

Knowledge hierarchy: who knows better?

Despite being at the forefront of caregiving, care workers find themselves in a delicate position, caught between the demands of various stakeholders. They are tasked with managing complex requests from families and navigating the expectations of doctors and managers, all while holding the least authoritative position among these parties. This underscores the power dynamics at play within the caregiving ecosystem. Consider the example of Liu, the carer mentioned above, who needed to adjust seniors' care plans constantly to meet various requests. As Liu remarks:

I can't afford to upset (*de zui*) either side, you know? Sometimes doctors blame me for not understanding their plan and wanting

changes in the plan. I have to explain it's what the family wants. Then the manager wonders why can't I be more assertive and explain things more clearly. I can't just answer it's their job to do that, not mine. As for the families, they are the clients and, like they always say, 'clients are gods'.

Despite Liu playing an essential role in the process, in terms of hierarchy she holds the lowest position among all the stakeholders involved. Liu's situation showcases the dilemma that frontline care workers often face.

It is also common to find care workers who believe that they know the seniors far better than the data does. Chen, a care worker in his early fifties, declares:

We know their (the seniors') needs very well, way better than those numbers ever could. Sure, we might not be good at dealing with data, but when it comes to the nitty-gritty of caring, that is where we do well, and that's what matters most to our seniors.

Another experienced care worker, Feng, observes:

We spend the entire day with seniors and we already understand their daily conditions very well. We don't need data to tell us about seniors' conditions.

Often people who need long-term care services are frail; they may have both physical and cognitive impairments or disabilities. Their daily lives rely almost entirely on the services of care providers, including not only medical and healthcare, but also personal, social and emotional requirements (Norton 2000). The 'real' data that might have been useful for care workers ranges far beyond the physiological data found in a general electronic health record system. What care workers actually need to know has more to do with socio-psychological, emotional and ecological data – most of which is personalised, situated, unstructured and hard to collect and format (Ruckenstein and Schüll 2017). We can best describe this as 'narrative data', in contrast to the formal standard data found in these quantitative data recordings.

Care workers generally acknowledge the paramount importance of a person's emotional and social wellbeing in relation to their physical health. They consider seniors' personal, socio-psychological, emotional and contextual data – typically embedded in comprehensive

narratives – as more valuable for supporting their day-to-day care work. As noted above, this belief resonates with the deeply rooted TCM cosmology ingrained in the perspectives of ordinary Chinese people. It emphasises the profound, inseparable connection between body and mind (Wang 2023). In essence, even though the term ‘narrative medicine’ may not be familiar to care workers, their practices inherently align with its principles, as they intuitively recognise and incorporate the value of narratives in holistic patient care.

Nearly all carers actively seek ‘narrative data’ about the seniors for whom they are responsible. They find this useful both for informing the seniors’ families and exchanging in notes among themselves. Such informal data practices are more effective in providing better care for seniors, some of whom could engage in discussions proactively. For example, Chen discussed the case of Grandma Chu, who suffered from severe dementia:

When Grandma Chu refuses to eat, the data won’t provide the answer on how to deal with the problem. No doctor can instruct you on how to make a senior eat.

However, Chen leverages his knowledge of Grandma Chu’s loving grandson, who is in elementary school, to coaxing her to eat. He usually says something like, ‘After you’ve eaten, your grandson will be overjoyed and will love you even more’. This personalised approach usually works well. Another carer, Hui, enhances the atmosphere during the daily rehabilitation exercises of her patient, Grandpa Xia, by playing spirited army music on her personal smartphone. Knowing that Grandpa Xia served in the army and takes immense pride in that experience, Hui hoped that army music might boost his morale, especially when he appears reluctant to do more exercises. She discovered that this method works like magic – Grandpa Xia not only extends the duration of his exercises, but also approaches them with heightened passion.

These daily care challenges, such as seniors’ refusal to eat or being in a bad mood, were frequent occurrences. Finding ways around them are among the most crucial aspects of caring for frail seniors. Like Chen and Hui, care workers commonly tackle these challenges by engaging in various narrative data practices. When a senior first arrived at the facility, care workers would usually have a conversation with family members. Such informal data exchange practices continue if possible as voluntary, regular occurrences throughout the seniors’ residence at the institute.

Formal data works as a rigid hierarchy which demotes these valuable insights or expertise that cannot be fitted within a framework based on quantitative data. Furthermore, this data hierarchy demeans and dismisses the contributions of frontline care workers. All of this also prevents incorporation of frontline workers' experiences and judgements into the decision-making processes. By marginalising their perspectives, the company misses out on the first-hand, nuanced understanding these workers possess about the needs and conditions of those they care for.

Hui, for example, shared an instance where she noticed abnormalities in the behaviour of an old lady for whom she had been caring over six months. Despite her attempts to alert the doctor to the unusual changes in the lady's morning routine and responses, her warnings were dismissed since they lacked data-based evidence. Sadly the old lady suffered a severe stroke that night and had to be transferred to the ICU. Hui lamented:

I had this connection with her, so my gut feeling told me that something serious was wrong. But no data indicated danger, and I can't articulate it like doctors ... so they ignored it. If they had paid more attention to my concerns, this could have been avoided.

Care workers frequently encounter similar situations where their hands-on expertise is overlooked by medical professionals. This disregard is often attributed to the perception of care workers as lacking formal medical training, along with their lower standing in the knowledge hierarchy due to their educational backgrounds and limited proficiency in using professional medical terminology.

Such a situation is consistent with the institute's slogan mentioned above: 'With data, decisions should follow data's lead. When ideas lack data support, the CEO's decisions take precedence'. This assertion highlights a top-down approach to decision-making that misses out on a potentially invaluable asset: the knowledge held by their own workers. Such asymmetric relations (Crawford, Gray and Miltner 2014; Van Dijk 2014) between those who collect and store data (frontline care workers) and those whom data collection target (families, managers and professional workers) have been frequently observed. Even more exasperating and humiliating is the fact that the care workers' nurturing is then supposed to be 'guided' by these poor data, despite that fact that they already possess a rich pool of data themselves.

'Chicken rib': breakdowns and failure of data from a family perspective

Huiming, the daughter of an elderly lady with dementia, found that the polished appearance of the 'data-driven care' was a compelling factor in choosing the care institute for her mother. She explained:

When you go to the hospital doctors rely on medical tests, and nowadays we all believe in advanced technologies. They promise to care for my mum with comprehensive data support and it looks reassuring.

However, Huiming candidly admitted that her active engagement with the daily data provided on the ECR app waned after the first week of her mother's move into the care centre. Many participants had only a vague understanding of data, other than a general perception that it conveys a sense of professionalism and reliability. The data in ECR also lacked crucial contextual information, leaving families hanging in the air. 'Sure, it shows figures,' remarked Ms Fu, a puzzled family member, 'but what's the story behind them? What should I do with these numbers?' Families wanted tailored and specific information, not a generic run-down of conditions with which they were already well acquainted. They sought relevant information, such as blood sugar levels, presently clearly, not bundled in a multitude of irrelevant routine data. For families dealing with Alzheimer's patients, primary concerns were their loved ones' emotional wellbeing.

Diving into the sea of numbers and daily routine reports, most families find themselves lost in translation and unable to extract meaningful insights. As a result, the majority of families in our study reported that they hardly ever engaged with the ECR app provided by the institute; some even avoided opening it altogether. When healthcare is presented as heavily reliant on a huge amount of data, it appears to pose a distinct challenge rather than helping people to understand the situation. As Huiming comments:

In the end I found those figures [in ECR] are bit like 'chicken rib' (*ji lei*).

'Chicken rib' is a Chinese term suggesting something that is tasteless to eat but still a waste and pity to throw away. The ECR system is analogous in that it transmits all the data, including that which has

no ‘taste’. The actionability of data may suffer from the huge quantity of data involved (Fiore-Gartland and Neff 2015): when people had just some key data, they could judge the situation, predict the risk and intervene precisely and timely. Now, overwhelmed by the quantity of data available, they no longer know what it means.

Families often remark that ‘we’re not doctors; this data just doesn’t speak our language!’ However, even for medical professionals the situation is little better. Concerned doctors have also voiced their frustration over the ECR data. For example, according to Dr Ma, the doctor at the care centre, the ECR data is actually too broad and too condensed to be useful:

The term ‘mobility difficulty’ encompasses a spectrum, such as ‘can stand but is unable to walk unaided’ or ‘can walk but requires assistance for using the toilet’. These nuances are pivotal for caregiving decision-making ... However, in the ECR it was often oversimplified to a general term – ‘mobility difficulty’.

The invisible data and the use of WeChat

The ECR data not only fails to convey the actual condition of the patients; it also fails to document the actual care process. Due to the intricate and unpredictable nature of caregiving, a substantial part of care workers’ daily tasks remains unseen; these are also challenging to quantify accurately within the standardised ECR system. As Chen remarks, ‘The everyday data we input doesn’t really reflect the actual care we provide to seniors’. The absence of such details in the ECR system was widely perceived as ‘a pity’ or even ‘unreasonable’ among the care workers. One of them, Chu, agreed, observing that:

Focusing solely on medical data will never yield positive results. Given the advanced age of our seniors, their physical conditions are expected to deteriorate continuously despite the quality of care they receive. Many seniors here exhibit improvements, which doctors recognise as medical miracles. However, the current data system focuses solely on their physical health metrics, disregarding these noteworthy improvements.

Evaluating a frail individual differs significantly from assessing a patient with a specific disease; the latter often has clear evaluation indicators

while the former does not. This poses a significant challenge to the effectiveness and efficiency of data-driven health management. Although the ECR system stored a substantial amount of senior-centric data, our ethnography suggests that these failed to provide a clear picture of an individual, limiting their efficacy in guiding care and decisions. As a result care workers frequently employed their own methods to document what they deemed to be meaningful and valuable data. These methods varied widely, ranging from taking photographs and shooting videos to maintaining detailed diaries. This narrative data was often then brought into formal settings such as morning and weekly conferences to present seniors' conditions.

This lack of visibility often leads to a misunderstanding of care workers' actual workload. To address this issue, care workers frequently resort to using their personal smartphones to maintain communication logs, take photos and videos; there they document their caregiving activities and sometimes urgent situations. These visual records serve as a means of tracking their workload, providing tangible evidence of their efforts. Care workers sometimes share these materials with managers, aiming to provide evidence of the work they undertake.

For instance, care worker Liu, with over four years of experience at the institute, occasionally displays several screen-lengths of WeChat communications between herself and the senior's family to explain changes in the care plan based on the family's requests. Liu also recorded the rehabilitation activities that she oversees to clarify the additional preparation work she undertook, explaining why certain paperwork was not promptly completed.

These WeChat groups, initiated voluntarily by care workers, can accumulate a hundred members; they usually comprise fellow caregivers and the primary family members of the resident patients. The group sees a daily exchange of over 30 messages, predominantly featuring short videos capturing the day's activities and individual patient moments. These videos act as an important source of solace for the families involved. Witnessing their parents' everyday experiences brings significant reassurance, as one family member explained: 'I feel so relieved when I see my mother's smile on video'.

While ECR provides daily health data for all families to access, many never opened it; even if they did, none of them checked the ECR actively. In contrast, any lapse in the routine videos by care workers prompts immediate queries from concerned family members. Feng's observation encapsulates this sentiment:

Data is cold, but we are warm. Families will see our affection (*xiao xin*) immediately through these videos.

In the book *Care at a Distance: On the closeness of technology*, Pols (2012, 26) asks an essential question: what (un)makes a human in the context of telecare? It is common to see people hold a deep fear that the warm human touch will be replaced by such 'cold' technology. The way care workers use WeChat to express their humanity offers a revealing example of how technology can retain warmth in caregiving.

While entering the figures remains a mandatory task decreed by the institute, the act of capturing and sharing caregiving moments via personal smartphones is voluntary. Yet care workers readily undertake this additional effort, partly because it embodies the essence of a caring individual, a sentiment acknowledged and appreciated by the families under their care. This act of showcasing their care through these videos reflects an inherent 'activism' in defining their roles beyond institutional constraints.

Despite substantial investment in the bespoke ECR system, it is WeChat that has emerged as the primary medium for information and data sharing in the care process. Information exchange via WeChat was treated as an official channel, evident in the long-standing use of an official WeChat group comprising care workers, doctors, care managers and families at the care centre. This WeChat group serves as a platform for daily updates on seniors' activities, incorporating photos, videos and texts.

However, the use of WeChat for work also poses challenges for care workers. The WeChat group has also transformed into an incessant arena where care workers are expected to handle inquiries promptly. Through WeChat, families constantly express concerns about their seniors' wellbeing, questioning why they appear less cheerful or have missed morning exercises. Simultaneously doctors request specific data, such as medication records from the past week. This continuous interaction places a significant burden on care workers, encroaching on their personal space and time. The ubiquitous data work conducted 'any time and anywhere' has led many to describe their current state as having 'no personal life'.

Recognising this facet of WeChat's use and consequences is crucial, particularly given the context of this chapter within a book about digital anthropology. As other chapters within this volume have shown, digital platforms such as WeChat can actually accentuate and grow social connections, foster empathy and understanding. However, for care

workers, the challenge with WeChat lies in its exceptional effectiveness at facilitating human connections, leading families and doctors to seek even more engagement. A parallel can be drawn with [Chapter 4](#), in which Wang Haichao describes WeChat's role in developing small enterprises based on social connections. Sometimes WeChat seems to be just 'too' effective.

Conclusion

The central narrative of this chapter has been about the de-humanising, even humiliating consequences of a distinct form of digital enterprise embodied by data. What this shows is that the problem of decontextualising, as also explored in [Chapter 3](#) by Liu Chun, is not an inherent trait of generic 'digital'; it is rather specific to the particular genre of digital in focus. As previously noted, scholars have discussed how data creates an impression of 'things under control', even if this might prove to be an illusion. In this case, WeChat builds upon qualitative relationships while the worshipping of abstract data creates a hierarchy – one in which only quantitative forms of representation are invested with any kind of authority.

Levin (2018) introduces the term 'data bind' to highlight the challenge of neatly organising and simplifying complex and unpredictable aspects of the world – be it the human body or global inequality – into numerical data. The issue with the 'data bind' is that many aspects of the real world cannot be quantified. Consequently, as complex phenomena are turned into data, their nuanced and intricate nature often eludes accurate representation, remaining slippery and exclusive. Consequently, echoing Levin's (2018) advocacy for an 'anthropology of data' in seeking to uncover the politics embedded within seemingly objective datasets, this ethnography is dedicated to revealing the underlying power dynamics that shape the extensive collections of data in healthcare.

Certainly numerical data can be fitted conveniently and easily into standardised evaluations. However, evaluation based solely on quantitative data runs the risk of ignoring the reality faced by both patients and carers. Ethnography also shows that the weight of managing data added considerable strain to care workers' workloads, contributing to the already overwhelming and stressful responsibilities of caregiving. In the context of data-driven enforcement within care institutes, the significant labour of care workers often seems obscured and sidelined. However,

care workers often turn to their personal smartphones, surpassing the usage of specialised digital devices provided by the institute. The problem is thus not the rise of digital devices per se. It is using them to ‘perform’ an abstract ideal of digital data, rather than recognising their value in deepening our social encounters and communications. This underscores the underexplored domain of vernacular digital practices in healthcare, described elsewhere as ‘smart from below’ (Hawkins and Miller 2024). In such practices the personal smartphone becomes a pivotal tool, providing avenues for care workers to showcase their efforts and establish their social visibility.

Hoeyer (2023) argues compellingly that data is far more intricate and frequently contradictory than commonly perceived. Appreciating the limitations of data is crucial for effective data use in healthcare. It is essential to integrate diverse knowledge types, such as tactile and associative skills, alongside data analysis, in order to make informed healthcare decisions. The concept of evidence in healthcare should expand to include various knowledge forms, including big data methodologies, but it should also appreciate the social dynamics surrounding data use, which we call ‘narrative data’. These dynamics are what come to be revealed through long-term ethnography, the foundation for digital anthropology. We are able to present the contexts and practices that are frequently neglected and insufficiently documented, despite their substantial value in delivering quality care. Encouraging a more inclusive approach that integrates both data-driven insights and the practical wisdom of frontline workers could significantly enhance the quality and effectiveness of healthcare practices within the facility.

Note

- 1 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1081645/china-life-expectancy-of-registered-population-in-shanghai/>.

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From Hunan TV to Mango Supermedia: building futures and pasts

Xinru Li

Introduction

One Friday night Jie, an intern of Mango TV, was watching ‘My Little One’ (*wojia naxiaozi*) on the Mango TV App. After a while she turned to me and said, ‘I cried yesterday when I watched the clip from “Happy Boys” in 2010’. I was a bit confused about what she was referring to. She then showed me the video, which featured a 2010 ‘Happy Boys’ candidate named Wu Yi participating in the programme ‘My Little One’ in 2019. The producers had included a scene of all the candidates singing the theme song ten years previously and another scene of them singing it together to evoke shared memories. After watching the scene again Jie rolled up her sleeves, saying, ‘Look, I have goosebumps all over!’ She continued, ‘Ten years, this is my youth’.

The digital television platform Mango TV, supported by its parent Hunan Stateline TV, is regarded as the most popular television station among young Chinese on the mainland (Leung 2008; Lin 2022; Zhu, Y. 2012). This article explores the transformation of the traditional TV station Hunan TV into the innovative ‘Mango Supermedia’ – a technology-driven, comprehensive media ecosystem. By effectively incorporating technological advancements while preserving the assets of rich tradition and nostalgia, Mango Supermedia has achieved a swift and profound transition. In so doing it has embodied the concepts of ‘youth’ and ‘happiness’ to create a unique media landscape that resonates with its young viewers.

Like their peers in the West, young people in China exhibit a diverse range of preferences regarding entertainment content, from mainstream

pop culture to niche programming. However, international platforms and Western satellite channels, including the BBC and CNN, as well as streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Prime Video, are banned in mainland China, limiting access to foreign television content (Lin 2022). Instead Chinese television is predominantly controlled by the national-level television station CCTV (China Central Television), provincial-level stations such as Hunan TV (a pioneer among them) and digital conglomerates and platform operators such as Tencent Video and iQiyi.

Since 1997, under the leadership of Ouyang Changlin, Hunan TV has embraced 'Entertaining China' as its slogan for both its production culture and channel identity (Keane 2015, 17), attracting a vast audience of young viewers in China. It ranks as the second most-watched TV channel in China, trailing only behind CCTV-1 (Sohu 2024). In 2020 the national coverage of Hunan TV was 1.29 billion, or 96.8 per cent of the population (Exclusive Radio and Television 2020). By 2022 Mango TV's revenue was 10,418 billion *yuan*. A subscription channel, its membership grew from 36.13 million in 2020 to 59.16 million in 2022. Membership fees contributed 3.915 billion *yuan* to the channel (*Dazhong Daily* 2023).

Today, although China's young people have increasingly shifted their attention to social media platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, nearly all of them also watch programmes on Hunan TV/Mango TV via various devices and platforms. Many of its programmes retain a prominent place in young adults' memories of their 'youth'. As shown by the initial vignette Jie, an intern of Mango TV in Changsha, regard them as 'imprints of youth' (*qingchun yinji*). Another intern, Yueyue, habitually watches the station's classic show 'Happy Camp' (*kuaile dabenyi*). The term 'imprints of youth' comes from 1997, being both the year in which she was born and that in which 'Happy Camp' was created. Mango TV is well aware that nearly 80 per cent of viewers are young people under 30 (QuestMobile 2020).

At Hunan TV interns are required to pay 500 *yuan* (around £550) per month as 'maintenance fees', while Mango TV interns work without payment. Despite these conditions many young people eagerly apply, due to their enthusiasm for Hunan TV/Mango TV and the opportunity to meet celebrities involved in the programmes. Through a combination of personal connections and a formal application process, I secured a 12-month internship at Hunan TV/Mango TV to conduct fieldwork in Changsha city, the capital city of Hunan Province, located in central China. With a 2022 population of 10.51 million, Changsha is renowned as an innovation hub that invests extensively in cultural and creative

industries, which constitute the largest share of its local economy (Red and Black Demographic Database 2024). Back in 1904 Changsha was opened to foreign trade; large numbers of Europeans and Americans settled there, making it an early inland city exposed to a more cosmopolitan world. Significantly Mao Zedong (1893–1976) began his political career in Changsha. Now Mao's 105-foot-tall, massive granite head sculpture stands on Changsha's river-bound Orange Island. Portraying the leader in the full blush of his youth, the sculpture attracts thousands of young tourists as a landmark and symbol of Changsha. Hunan Province itself has become a nostalgic representation of China's identity, youth and fate (China Youth Net 2009).

During the fieldwork period, I participated in three production teams, two for entertainment programmes and one for a documentary. I also worked as an intern at the Human Resource Centre of Mango TV to gather comprehensive data. In this role I could interact closely with other interns, observing their daily lives and experiencing first-hand the organisational dynamics. My internship allowed me to move flexibly between different production teams and departments, greatly enhancing my understanding of the workplace environment. I also spent a further three months at an additional fieldsite. Here I studied the consumption of these programmes by audiences, as well as ways of demonstrating how an anthropological approach can reveal linkages between the intentions of cultural producers and their consumers. However, this is not the focus of this chapter.

Several studies relevant to an understanding of the platform economy within China are discussed in Chapter 8 (e.g. Lv, P. 2021; Sun, X. and Gan 2020; Shao 2019). So are a number of studies that focus on the societal changes wrought by digital technology, acknowledging the importance of governance and algorithmic management (e.g. Liang and Zhang 2022; Qiu 2022; Lai 2023; Lai 2022a, 2022b and 2022c). Despite these significant advances, research on the transformation of television as a platform, as well as studies conducted from the production side, remains relatively limited.

The anthropologist Anna Cristina Pertierra has noted how contemporary television 'exists across multiple platforms and devices; it is accessed in multiple ways, sometimes concurrently, at a wider range of times and across a greater proportion of the world than ever before' (2016, 123). The transitioning of Hunan TV provides an opportunity to examine how broadcast television is adapting to these digital and multi-platform environments (Pertierra 2016 and 2018) in the specific context of China, where media also plays a role as the 'mouthpiece' for

disseminating the voice of China's Communist Party (CCP) (Lull 1991; Zhu and Berry 2009). It has been argued that this seeks to express the ideal of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' – that is, the 'dual modernity' of economic neoliberalism and political socialism (Zhao, Y. 2007; Rofel 2007; Liu, F. 2011). Based on 15 months of fieldwork, this chapter examines how Mango TV connects to young people technologically and emotionally by reconfiguring the concept of 'youth' and 'happiness', in a manner that also conveys the ideals of the state.

'Youth' in the Chinese context

Before delving further into the ethnography, it is necessary to take a moment to examine the specific role and associations of 'youth' in the Chinese context. The concept of youth in China encompasses an older segment of the population compared to that of most nations. The China Communist Youth League defines it as between 14 and 28 years old, for example, while for most of my interlocutors youth can include people up to 35. Based on 2021 figures, this would include approximately 360 million individuals or 26 per cent of the country's total population (Zhang 2022). The term for 'youth' in Chinese is '*qingnian*', which translates literally as 'the green years', carrying positive connotations of hope, dynamism and courage. In some instances it is also referred to as '*qingchun*', meaning 'green spring', which similarly evokes associations with hope and a promising future.

It is important to note that at the start of the twentieth century (the time of the late Qing dynasty), the concept of youth (*qingnian*) emerged in China as a distinct category closely associated with national modernity. This term's newfound prominence coincided with a generation of educated young people who recognised their role as agents of social change. Despite China's traditional emphasis on respecting elders, during that turbulent late Qing era hopes for national revitalisation were pinned on young people (Mei 2001). 'Discovering youth' and 'imagining China' were pivotal in late Qing cultural movements. These elements significantly shaped modern China's cultural and political landscape (Mei 2001).

The 1919 May Fourth Movement, the first student movement in Chinese history, protested against Japanese imperialism, showcasing the political agency of the educated younger generation. It was considered a revolutionary predecessor of the Communist movement. During the civil war young people played pivotal roles in establishing the People's

Republic of China in 1949. The Party considers itself to be the inheritor of this discourse, with the ‘youth of China’ and the concept of the ‘new man’ emerging as central to Communist revolutions (Cheng 2008; Wang 2023). Mao Zedong himself famously addressed Chinese youth:

You are like the sun at eight or nine in the morning. The world is yours as well as ours, but it will eventually be yours. (Mao 1966, 30)

The current leadership of the CCP continues this legacy, emphasising the symbolic significance of youth in the nation’s development and modernisation (Graziani 2021). However, they are also concerned about the emergence of new values and ideals among young people. Ideological and political education is extensively organised at universities and deeply integrated into the curricula (Svensson 2023). Furthermore, youth entertainment is expected to align with the Party’s overall agenda. For example, Lisa Lin’s *Convergent Chinese Television Industries: An ethnography of Chinese production cultures* (2022) highlights the convergence strategy of Hunan TV. She points out that Hunan TV’s approach illustrates the tension between the need for technological innovation and adherence to stringent political and ideological policies.

To explain how Mango TV achieves its goals of engaging with youth within the framework of the Party’s agenda, I will first review the developmental trajectory of Hunan TV over the past 30 years. This journey has led to the creation of its digital platform, Mango TV, and ultimately to a comprehensive ecological media matrix that both bridges the past and points to the future. I will then examine two of Mango TV’s strategies. Firstly, despite the rapid changes brought about by new technological developments, Mango TV appropriates nostalgia for youth as a commercial object, resonating with the anxiety faced by young people in contemporary China. Secondly, Mango TV identifies itself as a mainstream media outlet conveying ‘positive energy’ and ‘socialist values’ through the development of metaphors such as ‘body and clothes’ (explained below). These metaphors reframe nostalgic ideals such as ‘youth’ and ‘happiness’ in the current language of youth, narrated by young actors.

An important caveat is a recognition that Chinese youth do not comprise a homogeneous group (Liu 2011). Class, gender, geographical origins, family backgrounds and other social and cultural aspects generate heterogeneity. De Kloet and Fung (2016) warn against making generalisations about young people; they may come from the nouveau riche classes or from a grass-roots background, they may be traditionally-minded

or young entrepreneurs, and they may have Han Chinese origins or be members of ethnic minorities. In a short chapter such as this, however, the emphasis, will by necessity be more on certain commonalities.

The trajectory of rapid development over three decades

From Hunan TV to Mango TV

For most Chinese audiences Mango TV and Hunan TV are identical. In reality, however, the two are parallel segments within the Hunan Broadcast System. Hunan TV typically refers to the traditional satellite television aspect while Mango TV serves as the digital branch, mainly encompassing the Mango TV app and its IPTV (Internet Protocol Television) service. In recent years Mango TV has expanded its operations by establishing its own production teams to create and broadcast programmes on its digital platform. In addition, Mango TV has begun to sell its programmes to other platforms such as Tencent, the largest video platform in China (Lü, H. 2019).

Back in 1994, Hunan Radio and Television Development Centre was a large, state-owned enterprise. It made history by becoming the first television station to issue 50 million social shares through the Shenzhen Stock Exchange and was subsequently renamed Hunan Broadcasting Limited Company in December 1998. In 2004 it was prompted by its official website, Golden Eagle Networks, to embrace the internet world. Subsequently, in May 2011, Mango Internet TV was officially launched, along with its digital platform, the Mango TV app, which started in 2014.

Mango TV has undertaken three key steps in constructing a platform: resource accumulation, relationship conversion and improvement of user experience. Hunan TV has many loyal fans and owns rich copyright resources, but it had an unsystematic structure before the Mango TV platform was established. Mango TV achieves resource accumulation by relying on Hunan TV's resources, yet making these more systematic. It classified, reorganised and integrated Hunan TV's content resources to form what has now become its characteristic channel.

Furthermore, Mango TV has repackaged this content in a more appealing form; it now pushes these resources to users through various services such as high-definition video-on-demand. From the perspective of its executives, the aim of this resource aggregation and parallel resource distribution through collaboration, commodification and

attention to audience demand is to grow its share of the market through its transformation into an internet platform and live streaming.

The second means of achieving further growth was the promotion of relationship conversion – that is, converting casual viewers into those with a longer-term relationship to the company, mainly through subsidising new audiences to engage with the platform. Mango TV established a department called ‘Big Membership Center’ (*dahuiyuan zhongxin*) to manage and expand its members. It provides member services, discounts or subsidies to attract users, such as student discounts for registration and benefits through its staff. Gaining new viewers is merely the first step; Mango TV nurtures users’ sense of belonging through a process of constant engagement. Users can get a free 15- or 30-day membership trial by accomplishing tasks such as watching 30 minutes of Mango TV and building a virtual ‘Mango City’. A virtual ‘Mango City’ was created offline for an offline festival celebrating their development; this then accrued its own membership community and dedicated fan columns to enable users to support their favourite stars and communicate with one another.

Thirdly, Mango TV tries to provide a better viewing and participatory experience. This includes deploying Artificial Reality (AR) to give users a stronger sense of immersion, Artificial Intelligence (AI) to analyse personal needs, and improved screen resolution to provide a better viewing experience. All of these are based on constant monitoring, surveying and analysing user experience. In the reception hall of Mango TV a big screen continuously displays the audience rate and data analysis of all their programmes. Chen Wan, a new director of Hunan TV born in 1995, noted that:

We monitor data on various platforms because now is an era of big data. Through data analysis, in the end, we know how acceptable and popular our programmes are ... You have to accept that young users’ tastes change quickly. You need to know what programmes they will potentially like by relying on the platform’s algorithm. In the media industry, the ability to make such predictions is essential.

Crucially, Chen Wan pointed out the users’ self-dissemination ability:

If you want to spread your content, you need a large audience base to help you do so autonomously because audiences themselves are a medium. Simply relying on the publicity of a programme is far from enough.

In all this Mango TV is following the use of big data analytics, now found in other major digital corporations such as Facebook (Mosco 2021). These aim to produce learning algorithms or a set of rules that specify decisions to be drawn or actions to be taken under specific conditions. Mango TV does a similar thing by monitoring its audience rates and creating users' profiles based on searches and participation on its platform. The main difference from big data companies is that, as a 'content provider', it uses this data itself for programme production rather than selling it to marketers. It earns its profits directly from increasing users on the platform rather than by selling data.

Central to all this is the idea of 'relationship conversion', building on the company's identity as long video producers. Mango TV believes that long-form TV content fosters a deeper emotional connection with consumers, in contrast with the fleeting engagement offered by the fast-paced short videos that dominate on social media. This stance is particularly significant in the current landscape, in which short video competitors, fuelled by grass-roots participation and technological advancements, pose unprecedented challenges (Lai 2023). Mango TV needed to develop something distinctive, a requirement that pushed it towards further development into what it calls a Supermedia – a comprehensive ecological media matrix connecting its past and pointing to the future. This is also what led to an equal emphasis on incorporating its past content through appealing to nostalgia. This emotional bond is strengthened by connecting audiences with classic programmes that have resonated deeply with them.

From Mango TV to Mango Supermedia

Mango TV combines different traditional types of platforms, with seven subsidiaries in total: HappyGo, EE-Media, Mango Fun, *Kuaile Tongbao*, Mango Studio and Mango Mutual Entertainment. Through these it considers itself as having been reconstituted as 'Mango Supermedia' (*mangguo chaomei*) (Interface News 2016). The new business layout of the Supermedia ecosystem was unveiled in June 2019, during my fieldwork. A national flag fluttered in the wind above the gateway to a pink building. The main gateway was opened and the branding of 'Mango Supermedia' proclaimed, including seven pillars separately printed with the logos of the seven subcompanies.

Ar' yao, who was born in 1995 and works in the Human Resource Center of Mango TV, explained:

We (Mango TV) belong to Mango Supermedia. HappyGo officially changed its name from Mango Supermedia in June 2018. Mango Supermedia is another nuclear driver of Hunan Television and Radio Industry. It is a listed company and a state-controlled listed company. There are seven subcompanies in total that integrated together as this Supermedia. Its main body is our Mango TV.

‘Mango Supermedia’ has evolved into the ultimate embodiment of Mango TV’s platformisation (Srnicek 2017; Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018; Helmond 2015; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Lin, J. and de Kloet 2019), assimilating its component parts to construct a comprehensive ecological matrix (Fig. 6.1). Each module aggregates specific elements to forge the Mango Supermedia industry chain, which operates as an integrated service provider (Pan 2019), encompassing functions such as e-commerce, social media, brokerage, gaming and more. This transcends Mango TV’s original role as a mere television app for showcasing programmes.

This integration strategy represented by ‘Mango Supermedia’ reflects the dedication of Hunan TV/ Mango TV to leveraging platform traffic and content advantages, as well as exploring e-commerce monetisation opportunities. The comprehensive nature of this strategy

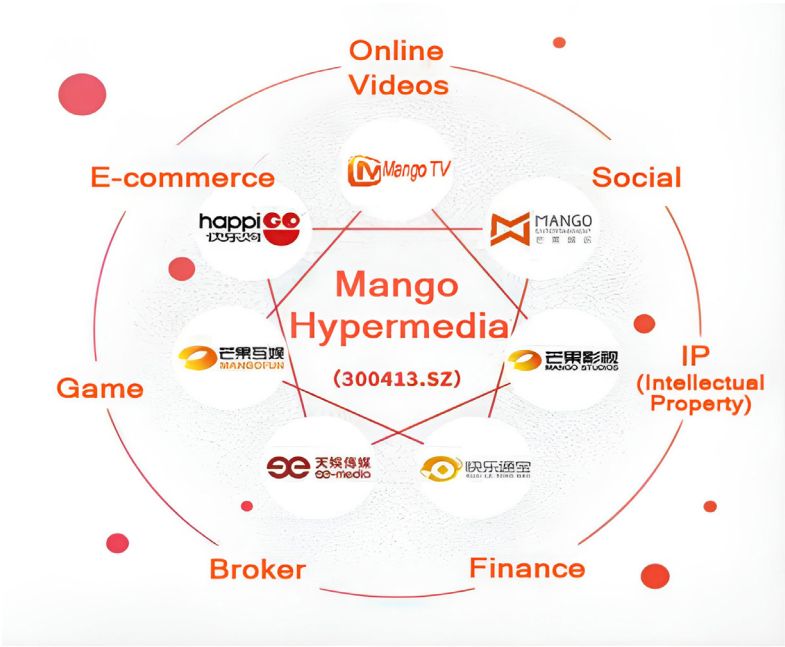


Figure 6.1 The Supermedia Ecological System. Source: the author.

demonstrates a strong compatibility with financial capital and technological advances, evident in the launch in 2020 of 'Small Mango e-Commerce' (*xiaomang dianshang*) – a new content e-commerce model integrating 'video+content+e-commerce', followed by the introduction of the first domestic metaverse social platform, 'Mango Fantasy City', in 2022, and the exploration of combining AIGC with its existing content in 2023 (Future Think Tank 2023).

On 27 July 2019 the second 'Youth Mango Festival' created by Mango TV was launched simultaneously in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Changsha. The station thereby promotes itself as integrating the latest technology. In the 'Youth Mango City', Mango TV used 5G technology to create a 4,000 m + N squared '5G/AR space-time gate' (teleportation device) for virtual world experiences. A total of 2,000 members' smiley 'moments' online were selected to create an 'Illusion Art' installation and real-time interaction with well-known global artists. Simultaneously Mango TV restored some of its classic TV programmes ('Happy Camp', 'Wild Kitchen', 'Star Detective', 'Brave World', etc.), to allow users to experience the popular games that had appeared in those programmes.

Mango Supermedia's description, with its emphasis on leveraging platform traffic and content advantages to explore e-commerce monetisation opportunities, showcases a forward-thinking approach that aligns with the transformative potential of new digital capabilities and platformisation. The visual components and new integration models introduced by Mango Supermedia, such as 'Small Mango E-commerce' in 2020 and 'Mango Fantasy City' in 2022, are not merely extensions of existing practices; they also represent a bold step towards presenting an unprecedented vision of the future. As Miyazaki (2004) discusses, people's actions are profoundly influenced by their conceptions of the future, which reimagine the present from the perspective of an envisioned end. In the case of Mango Supermedia, the strategy seems to be driven by a similar vision, where the present is being reshaped and redefined in the light of future possibilities enabled by technological advances and platformisation.

Furthermore, Ssorin-Chaikov's exploration of the meanings of time in global modernity offers a useful framework to understand the teleological dimension of Mango Supermedia's approach. By emphasising the teleology of socialism and reading the present from the point of view of the future, Ssorin-Chaikov highlights how future-oriented imagination can shape current practices and strategies (2006, 358). Mango Supermedia's strategy, with its emphasis on integrating new technologies and platforms to create a new content e-commerce model

and exploring the potential of AIGC, aligns with this teleological perspective. It aims both to redefine the present and to pave the way for a future-oriented vision of media and commerce. In this sense Mango Supermedia's approach is not just about adapting to current trends, but also actively shaping the future of the media and e-commerce landscape.

While such an abstract and innovative project may impress audiences, it may not necessarily foster the long-term emotional relationship that Mango TV desires. To address this, Mango TV also revived nostalgic TV programmes such as 'Happy Camp' during the festival. Such deliberate fostering of nostalgia, in which the reproduction of past experiences triggers deep emotional responses, aligns with the company's broader strategy to shape presents and pasts through the ends for which they strive.

In the technoscape of the 'Youth Mango Festival', the mention of these 'classic TV programmes' transcends mere cultural artefacts; they represent shared cultural phenomena deeply ingrained in the collective memory of young people. As noted at the start of this chapter, the intern Jie nostalgically expressed how these classic TV programmes formed the cornerstone of her youth, intertwining with the 'imprints' of that time. As a result, the revival of such programmes not only triggers nostalgia but also fosters a sense of collective belonging and shared cultural identity. By tapping into this collective nostalgia, Mango TV forges an emotional connection with its audience and establishes itself as an usher and custodian of youth and youth culture, a role we will explore further in the next section.

Svetlana Boym (2002) argued in her monograph *The Future of Nostalgia* that nostalgia is not exclusively retrospective; it can also be forward-looking, impacting the future through the writing of nostalgia stories. These narratives not only reflect personal memory but also recall, reflect and reconstruct collective memory. Following this perspective, Niemeyer and Uhl (2021) introduced the concept of 'nostalgia of the future' through their '1000 Postcards for 2042' project. In doing so they extended the meaning of nostalgia beyond a longing for the past into a way of reinterpreting the past to imagine new possibilities. Consequently, nostalgia can serve as a lens for envisioning alternative futures (Niemeyer and Siebert 2023). This trajectory of theoretical discussion aligns quite closely with the trajectory of commercial thinking that lies behind the success of Mango TV.

For this special event, the 'Youth Mango Festival' created an imaged 'Mango planet' as the space for a 'future production space station' (Mango TV 2019a), associating it with new technologies such as 5G



Figure 6.2 The future stage of the ‘Youth Mango Festival’. Source: the author.

and AR/VR (Fig. 6.2). The appropriation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is often described as a technology that constantly oscillates between the boundaries of reality and visions of the future (Elish and boyd 2018). Discussions about industrial AI frequently evoke a sense of nostalgia for a potential future – not only through the lens of individually remembered past experiences via mental time travel (Batcho and Shikh 2016; Cheung 2023), but also as a shared, organisational dream of shaping the future (Natale 2021).

How a nostalgia of youth serves as a commercial object

For the company executives, every aspect of the production and platform reconfiguration is considered in relation to Supermedia’s wider commercial goals. One of the slogans of Mango TV is ‘infinite youth’. The phrase is imprinted on the thoughts of the company staff such as director

Ming, born in 1996, who dreams of building his own media empire. The idea of being young steps out of any time frame; it can remain part of one's mindset regardless of age limitations and crosses the past, present and future. Hunan TV and Mango TV advocate an 'infinite youth' for stimulating producers' endless creativity and including as many consumers as possible, while also leveraging the various commercial benefits that come with connotations of youth.

As highlighted earlier in the introduction, 'youth' has consistently been portrayed as representing revolutionary figures in China. It has been viewed by CCP leaders, from chairman Mao Zedong onwards, as a political force upon which they can draw to achieve national objectives (Liu 2011; Ngai, Cheung and Li 2001). This idea of youth's revolutionary potential of youth has by now also become a trope of romanticised nostalgia.

Threadgold (2020) shows that 'one's own youth' is a permanent and affective 'absent presence' in our lives. The nostalgic term of youth in Mango TV encapsulates far more than a mere sense of loss for the past. Fears and anxieties have also emerged, out of concern with the individual and collective experiences of contemporary Chinese youth. Zhou Shan (2019), the vice CEO of Mango TV, concluded in the internal forum 'Youth Speak' (*qingnianshuo*) of Mango TV:

If we were to use three words to describe today's youth, these would be 'arrogance' (*kuang*), 'mania' (*zao*) and 'syndrome' (*zheng*). *Kuang* represents an unprecedented self-awareness and self-trust; *zao* means struggling with life, but never giving up hope during crises; *zheng* refers to the affliction of modern diseases, resulting in symptoms such as social fears.

This aligns with a general concern about the growth of individualism (Moore 2005; Sima and Pugsley 2010; Yan 2006), alluded to through the term 'arrogance' (*kuang*). Zhou's terms 'mania' (*zao*) and 'syndrome' (*zheng*) underscore what is perceived as the anxiety and restlessness of youth. In Zhang Li's book *Anxious China* (2020), she notes that the two words most frequently used to describe the affective experiences of middle-class individuals are *fuzao* (meaning impetuous or restless) and *jiaolü* (meaning anxious). Both terms imply a strong sense of uncertainty, precariousness and unease regarding reality and the future. It is often suggested that young people commonly grapple with feelings of confusion, emptiness and uncertainty, despite leading materially comfortable lives (Liu 2011; Zhang 2020).

For Zhou (2019), however, this is a commercial opportunity:

We can boldly speculate the two killers that ‘conquer’ young people: targeting the anxieties and fears in the hearts of modern youth and fulfilling their emotional desires. Problems do not necessarily have to be solved; rather, they need to be shared. Generalising personal anxiety into a corresponding point within the common anxiety of the public is crucial. As content providers, our starting point for our content creation should be to address the deep emotional desires of young people.

Zhang Li indicates that ‘it is this anxious and precarious urban environment that gives rise to the popular desire to search for personal happiness and wellbeing’ (2020, 38). This sentiment precisely echoes Zhoushan’s idea of ‘satisfying the deep emotional appeal of young people ... to make Mango TV not only the content output, but also a value leader and spiritual companion on the path of user growth’ (Mango TV 2019b). The CEO of Mango TV, Cai Huaijun, has identified Mango TV’s role as being a ‘spiritual companion’ for youth.

More broadly this aspiration emerged in relation to a background full of dangers and within which companionship is desperately sought. With fears about fake foodstuffs (Klein 2013), environmental pollution (Li and Tilt 2018) and swindlers (Sun 2010) inundating China’s ‘risk society’, it is thought that many Chinese retreat to their ‘safe refuge’ to protect themselves from the hazards of the outside world (Tan, Liu and Gao 2021). Furthermore, since the 1980s, China’s rapid economic growth has spurred significant social and cultural changes, leading to widespread anxiety over issues such as social mobility and status, corruption, income inequality, unemployment and materialism (Faure 2008; Sun, J. 2021; Xiong 2015; Yan, F. 2013). In this fast-paced society many individuals yearn for the stability and simplicity of their youth, with nostalgia evoking memories of carefree days and youthful aspirations (Gu 2023; Li and Yan 2020). Nostalgia for youth often evokes memories of simpler times, carefree days and youthful aspirations.

In China nostalgia appears as a multifaceted phenomenon that serves as a form of cultural resistance, helping to maintain identity and continuity (e.g. Zeng 2009; Zhong and Wu 2023). This is particularly evident among the *zhiqing* generation (educated youth) of the 1960s, who experienced the Cultural Revolution and later returned to urban areas (Yang 2003). Nostalgia, especially through Cultural Revolution songs, evokes powerful emotional responses and fosters solidarity.

It reflects an ambivalent attitude toward modernity, embracing economic progress while lamenting the loss of meaning and human connections (Bryant 2005; Li and Yan 2020). Nostalgia thus serves as a coping mechanism for the *zhiqing* generation, helping them to navigate present disillusionment.

Nostalgia is also a tool for cultural legitimization, crafting a favourable perception of China's modernity while diverting attention from profound political and historical issues (Dai 1997). Ferry (2003) concurs, emphasising that nostalgia serves both cultural and commercial ends, harmonising tradition with modernity and Chinese national identity with globalisation. Ultimately, nostalgia reconnects individuals with their historical and cultural roots in a constructive manner, aligning with China's drive for modernisation and openness (Dai 1997; Barmé 1999; Bryant 2005; Tian et al. 2024). This reflects a post-socialist consciousness that looks beyond the past and present, aspiring to a better future (Lu 2002).

This complex nostalgic sentiment is often reflected in Mango TV's content. Appropriating Paul Grainge's (2002) concepts of a nostalgia mood (the emotional and affective patterns of nostalgia) and a nostalgia mode (a commodified and aesthetic style) relating to the two types of nostalgia, modernist (temporal and melancholic) and postmodernist (atemporal and celebratory), Gu Zhun (2023) identifies a culture of nostalgia emerging in China over the past three decades across various media forms. This culture has engaged with the country's post-socialist conditions and social changes such as urbanisation, commercialisation, and youth experiences. The mood of nostalgia is evoked through symbols and film language, constructing warm memories of university life, enhancing group cohesiveness and self-esteem, particularly for the post-1980s generation facing commercialisation-induced anxiety (Liu 2011).

In contrast, nostalgia mode recycles old belongings and retro artefacts to target specific demographics, connecting the past with materialities such as clothing, furnishings, and music (Davies 2005; Zhu 2020). This mode commercially recreates retro culture, promoting media advertising, film, fashion and popular culture without idealising a 'golden age', but rather positioning commodities within niche markets.

Nostalgia mode and nostalgia mood often overlap in the positioning from Hunan TV to Mango TV and then Mango Supermedia, offering a sense of pleasure, stability, security and continuity to those facing anxiety from discontinuity in the society in which they grew up. As Grainge (2002) suggests, in commercial terms, nostalgia does not rely

on a specific idea of the past, but can refer to anything culturally recycled that appeals to a market valuing 'pastness'. In this sense, the term 'youth' has become a cultural symbol that encapsulates the values, aspirations and challenges faced by young people today.

Urban young people embrace consumerism as part of their identity. They display a preference for products that remind them of a simpler past (Featherstone 1991), perfectly matching the aims of the technological reconfiguration of Mango TV. As Katharina Niemeyer has argued:

media do not only produce nostalgic narratives, but ... they can be, in themselves, the creative projection spaces for nostalgia, as well as acting as the symptoms or triggers of nostalgia. (2014, 11)

To nostalgise 'happiness': A 24-year classic programme permanently discontinued

The sudden suspension of the reality show 'Happy Camp', which had influenced young people for 24 years since its creation in 1997 by Hunan TV, further illustrates the tension between the rapid changes at the station and nostalgia. Nearly every young person can recall its classic slogan: 'If you are happy, you need to watch "Happy Camp"; if you are not happy, the more you need to watch "Happy Camp"'. Many of them view this programme as an 'imprint of their youth' (*qingchun yinji*) and 'the source of happiness'. Yueyue, now an intern at Mango TV, is one of them.

Every week watching 'Happy Camp' has become a cherished routine for her. Born in 1997, the year in which 'Happy Camp' first aired, Yueyue perceives the term 'imprint of her youth' (*qingchun yinji*) as deeply personal. For her the show is more than entertainment; it has grown up alongside her, symbolising her journey from childhood to adulthood. Although she enjoys other entertainment programmes, 'Happy Camp' is the only one with which she feels a strong personal bond. In Yueyue's own words:

Watching 'Happy Camp' has become such a habit and routine for me. If, for whatever reason, I miss an episode, I will try my best to catch up.

Yueyue's experience is representative of many young Mango TV viewers who express a deep sense of companionship and nostalgia with regards to 'Happy Camp'. Online reviews on the Mango TV app of the first

episode of ‘Happy Camp’, originally broadcast in 1997, reveal that most reviewers mentioned their age; in noting they were born in the late 1990s, they reveal a shared generational connection to the show. Within the framework of the concept of happiness, a plethora of programmes focusing on this theme have emerged (Fig. 6.3) – exemplified by productions such as the programme ‘Happy Boys’ (*kuaile nansheng*), shown in the opening of this chapter.

On 9 October 2021, however, ‘Happy Camp’ was suddenly taken off air. Hunan TV announced that it would be ‘upgrading and renewing’ the show with the aim of innovation (Song 2021). According to the official response, the suspension of ‘Happy Camp’ is part of Hunan TV/Mango TV’s effort to explore the construction of the Mango metaverse platform (a three-dimensional version of Mango TV in space) and actively to participate in the competition of future communication formats to provide power guarantees for sustainable development. Nevertheless, the sudden interruption of transmission with no prior notice left many young people shocked – an unsurprising outcome, considering the influence of such a classic programme. So it was that this programme, which had consistently dominated the ratings, ‘came to an end quietly without any farewell, marking the conclusion of many people’s youth and happiness’, an anonymous tabloid concluded.



Figure 6.3 ‘Be Happy’, the slogan of Hunan TV. Source: the author.

This proved to be the harbinger of change. In early November of that year Zhang Huali, Chairman of Hunan Broadcasting and Television Group Co. Ltd., and Chairman of Mango Supermedia, announced the launch of the digital host 'Xiao Yang' by Hunan TV. 'Xiao Yang' is set to join the revamped 'Happy Camp' called 'Hello, Saturday' (*nihao, xinqingliu*) as China's first virtual host for a variety show. This virtual host is expected to undergo personalised cultivation in subsequent programme scenarios, constantly iterating and evolving to help her develop into an approachable and endearing girl-next-door for youth. In private, the leaders declared that 'Xiao Yang' was one of their current strategies to cope with the challenges of today's media environment.

This suggests that the most nostalgic component in terms of content is going to be matched by the most futuristic 'virtual' form of hosting. Just as the future vision needed nostalgia, so the past also needs a new sense of the future. This is because in the fiercely competitive media landscape, 'Happy Camp' faces significant external competition and pressures. As more and more reality shows emerge on other platforms, viewers are presented with a vast array of options to choose from. These new shows often feature cutting-edge production techniques, innovative formats and popular celebrities, ingredients that easily capture the attention of audiences. Consequently, the audience figures of 'Happy Camp' have gradually declined as viewers are drawn to these newer, more exciting alternatives.

The challenge then for 'Happy Camp' is about staying relevant and engaging with its target audience. This approach fits with Mango TV's vision of fostering a 'dual engine' comprising content and technology, aiming to become the most technologically adept cultural company and the most culturally perceptive technology company (China Business Daily Net 2024).

Despite this, no other television show has generated as much attention as 'Happy Camp' over such a prolonged period – a fact that also speaks to the long-term alignment between the programme and the aspirations of the state. The continuous focus on the concept of happiness, coupled with the nostalgic angle, have combined to form a cornerstone in Hunan TV/Mango TV strategic development, enabling it to carve out a distinctive niche in the rapidly evolving digital media landscape.

This aligns with the nationalist goal mandated by the Party (Wu 2014). Since the late 1990s the Party has initiated a series of policies to consolidate the scattered media organisations into media conglomerates (Hu 2003; Zhao 2000). These conglomerates are expected to achieve greater economies of scale and scope, while also facilitating the

Party's control over these key players (Meng 2009). By pairing 'Happy' and 'China', Hunan TV/Mango TV communicates its dedication to this political objective. Hunan TV/Mango TV efficiently emulsifies these sentiments through its business slogan by juxtaposing the terms 'happy' and 'China'. Introduced in 2003, 'Happy China' acted as the brand and identification of Hunan TV, intimating that Hunan TV/Mango TV are not only responsible for young people being 'happy' but also for achieving China's political purposes.

Cabanas and Illouz (2019) discuss how the pursuit of happiness is intertwined with power in neoliberal societies, where happiness is constructed as an ideal citizen trait. In the Chinese context, the discourse of 'be happy' serves to integrate market values within a socialist framework, easing ideological tensions and aligning with the state's narrative (Li, X. 2022). This discourse, to a large extent, not only shapes individual perceptions of happiness but also reinforces the state's control over media and culture, ensuring that entertainment serves both commercial and political purposes. These linkages to futures and pasts serve what Cai Huaijun, Mango TV's CEO and Mango Supermedia's general manager, has identified as the platform's central aim: to upgrade the potential benefits for core members and to convert the relationship between the platform and the user, eventually establishing an emotional connection with young people while also conveying 'socialist values' (Mango TV 2019b).

Simultaneously, the suspension of the classic reality show 'Happy Camp' demonstrates the destructive power inherent in the nostalgic happiness felt by young people. In her book *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Sara Ahmed elucidates the connections between affect and its revolutionary potential.

The complexity of this dual aim, of increasing both popularity and political responsibility, was evident in the success of Hunan TV's talent show 'Super Girl' (*chaoji nüsheng*), which promised to bring happiness to its audience in 2005. Aside from the high audience ratings, it sparked a debate on its political implications. 'Super Girl' marked the first instance in Chinese television history of emphasising and incorporating mass voting, raising questions about whether the programme could be a sign of democracy (Huang 2014; Meng 2009; Wu, J. C. 2014; Yang, G, 2009). The surge in reality shows influenced by 'Super Girl' that appeared on Chinese television in the mid-2000s ultimately elicited state intervention. In September 2007 the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) announced regulations regarding the authorisation, production, broadcasting and content of reality shows. As with so many

other instances, it has become clear that market and technological forces must never undermine the Party's political control of the media, nor its primary responsibility: to reinforce the role of the ideological state apparatus by offering more forms and options (Li 2013).

One facet of this approach involves the constant caution exercised by executives regarding topics that might offend and potentially harm their careers. Those topics include not only aspects of gossiping about sexual behaviour within Hunan TV/Mango TV and among superstars, a trend referred to as '*chigua*' (meaning 'eat melon seeds', a metaphor for observing excitement without speaking), but also caution concerning issues related to ethnicity and political events. Instead executives focus media attention on what are perceived as positive national events. For instance, during the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, they produced the documentary 'Flowering Pomegranate' (*shiliu huakai*). In the following year they created a documentary titled 'The Party's Daughter' (*dang de nü'er*) to commemorate the centenary of the Party's founding. Such programmes have earned prizes, awarded by national bureaus, and have been highly praised by the senior executives of Hunan TV/Mango TV.

'Socialist values' embedded in the platform

How does Mango TV negotiate the political imperatives of the central state while simultaneously resolving the tension between its rapid technological development and nostalgia? I would discern two key facets of Hunan TV/Mango TV strategies. The first is the way in which Hunan TV/Mango TV identifies itself as mainstream media aiming to convey 'positive energy' and 'socialist values', carrying on the essential role of being a 'mouthpiece' of the Party. The nostalgic moniker of Hunan TV, 'Hunan's TV Soldier' (*dianshi xiangjun*) (Tao 2011; Yang 2015), echoes and reveals the tribute to nationalism and patriotism in the historical victory of repressing the Taiping rebellion, led by Hunan leader Zeng Guofang. Nowadays the role of digital technologies in encouraging outbursts of popular and consumer nationalism, especially in China, has received considerable scholarly attention (Jiang 2012; Schneider 2018; Wu 2007).

Cai Huaijun, the head of Mango TV, has addressed these issues by stating that although China does not have Netflix nor Disney, establishing the 'correct' values will enable Mango TV to create an even greater platform. By 'correct values', Cai refers to Mango TV's social responsibility to 'lead youth culture', and its associated commitment to

‘mainstream values’ that align with the ‘core socialist values’ promoted at the 18th National Congress of the CCP in 2012. These values, expressed in 24 Chinese characters, include the national values of ‘prosperity’, ‘democracy’, ‘civility’ and ‘harmony’; the social values of ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘justice’ and the ‘rule of law’; and the individual values of ‘patriotism’, ‘dedication’, ‘integrity’ and ‘friendship’ (Pieke 2016).

As reiterated on numerous occasions, Mango TV asserts its dedication to ‘being the value leader of youth culture’, through which it builds up its legitimacy among young people (Cover News 2019). More specifically, core socialist values are encapsulated in the ideal of ‘positive energy’ (*zhengnengliang*) – a popular expression that was appropriated and promoted by the CCP as an intervention into public discourse in China, especially online (Yang and Tang 2018).

Director Ming explained how political ideas are implemented in their productions:

‘Positive energy’ is something internal. You might have various external attributes that define your look. For instance, you might look good in a suit, but young people may not resonate with it. So you adapt by wearing sportswear or a trendy brand. We convey formal things in a manner that is more appealing and acceptable to young people.

Director Ming’s metaphor of the ‘body and clothes’ strategy elucidates the rationale for integrating political ideas into practices, presenting formal concepts through forms that resonate with young people. Within Mango TV it is common sense that as long as they appear to align with the core ‘socialist values’, political concepts can be expressed in diverse ways. In the production process, the primary focus is always on engaging more successfully with the young audience. My ethnographic research has frequently observed how producers adeptly navigate the playful space between abstract core values and a wide array of entertainment forms, such as ‘playful patriotism’ (Chen, Valdovinos Kaye and Zeng 2021).

In practice, production teams have developed specific methods to unpack ‘correct values’ and make these more appealing to a young audience. For instance, consider ‘Chinese Restaurant’ (*Zhongcanti*), a show that Mango TV claims promotes Chinese cuisine and enhances China’s international image. Producers understand that a typical propaganda show directly praising China and promoting its image might not be as popular with the audience. So they spice it up by inviting popular stars such as singers, idols and actors to run a Chinese restaurant

overseas, where ordinary people and foreigners can dine and interact with the celebrities. This turns an ordinary restaurant show into a highly entertaining experience, particularly appealing to younger audiences.

This 'body and clothes' strategy is connected to the concept of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', or what some scholars refer to as the 'dual modernity' of economic neoliberalism and political socialism (Liu 2011; Rofel 2007; Zhao 2007).

The challenge arises from the necessity to uphold this core commitment to political values, even when the funding of Chinese media organisations increasingly stems from the market rather than the state (Rofel 2007; Shirk 2011). This dual modernity shapes the position of Mango TV, as it must navigate the delicate balance between satisfying state and market interests throughout its three-decade development trajectory.

Schurmann's insights into the CCP's nature explain the 'body and clothes' strategy. In his 1966 book *Ideology and Organization in Communist China*, Schurmann analysed the CCP's revolutionary construction of 'New China'. He emphasised two points: ideology and organisation complement each other and, in communist China, they differ from 'culture', 'ethos' or 'social system' by being action-oriented. During the revolution they were destructive tools, but they have subsequently become productive tools in creating a new society, culture and elite.

Pieke (2023) notes that ideology and organisation are key to the CCP's legitimacy. The CCP continues to view itself, 75 years after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, as working on a grand project requiring ideology and organisation as power tools. They define the CCP's domination of Chinese society, China's path and its destination. The CCP's claims to legitimacy transcend socialism, nationalism, developmentalism or good governance; its primary mission is the pursuit of a blissful future.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the transition of Hunan TV/Mango TV from a traditional broadcast platform to a digital media conglomerate, and then to a Mango Supermedia matrix. Various new media practices are emerging in China amid the tensions and contradictions of the government's aim both to expand digital media technologies to promote the party's political agenda and to regulate perceived 'harmful' influences (Wallis 2011). The reason why this case study of Hunan TV/ Mango

TV matters is that this radical series of changes has been immensely successful in commercial and other terms. So there is potentially a great deal to be learned – especially as this turns out to have used some quite unexpected resources in order to secure this level of success. We might have thought that the evolution of Hunan TV into Mango Supermedia mirrors some intrinsic dichotomy between the swift technological advances propelling media evolution and the nostalgia embedded in the ‘old’ media landscape, which might have represented a drag and impediment to these new ambitions.

Certainly things could not simply stay as they were. As Mango Supermedia strives to innovate and adopt novel technologies, such as the digital host ‘Xiao Yang’ and the Mango metaverse platform, it is inevitable that certain programmes and formats will either be discontinued or undergo significant revamps. In fact it turned out to be a failure when ‘Xiao Yang’ exited the stage of ‘Hello, Saturday’ in 2022, as the audience did not accept her – or, more precisely, they did not accept this entertainment format of hosting a programme by both humans and digital humans.

The sudden suspension of ‘Happy Camp’, a programme that resonated profoundly with generations of young people, serves as a stark example of this possibility. The programme’s abrupt termination, with minimal explanation, not only signalled a strategic pivot towards newer technologies and communication modalities but also underscores the company’s commitment to the core projects of the contemporary Chinese state. In this case, the project involves shaping cultural memories tied to programmes that have become synonymous with youth culture.

At the same time this chapter has shown that the legacy of older media was to become one of the key contributions to the continued success of Hunan TV, thanks to linking this platform reconfiguration, programming and content with the emotional appeal that is foundational to nostalgia. For example, the platform uses state-of-the-art technology to deliver high-quality programming while incorporating nostalgic themes and references to engage young people, as in the Youth Mango shows. The ‘Youth Mango Festival’ exemplifies how Mango TV utilises futuristic concepts such as the ‘Mango planet’ as a ‘future production space station’, associated with new technologies such as 5G and AR/VR. This forward-looking approach showcases Mango TV’s embrace of technological advances in order to remain commercially competitive. However, it was often through nostalgia that Hunan TV/Mango TV continued to foster a sense of connection and belonging among its target audience: youth.

Furthermore, through this combination and balancing of rapid innovation with its own tradition, Mango TV managed to secure three crucial ambitions: adherence to the political imperatives of the state, commercial viability and cultural relevance. More specifically Mango TV has successfully balanced its role as a mainstream media outlet, carrying the political message of ‘positive energy’ and ‘socialist values’ while also adapting to technological development and futuristic images that clearly also appeal to youthful audiences. The use of the ‘body and clothes’ metaphor, which involves communicating formal concepts through more popular and acceptable forms, has been particularly effective in bridging the gap between political aims and popular media. All of this has enabled Mango TV to reinforce its political message that the media should create an association between youth and happiness.

To study youth necessitates an understanding of loss (Brabazon 2005, 144). Young people are therefore inculcated to possess what the novelist Douglas Coupland (1991, 41) has referred to as ‘legislated nostalgia’, in which they are forced to have memories, knowledge and respect for ‘Boomer’ icons (The Beatles, Elvis Presley, The Rolling Stones) or Generation X icons (Madonna, Buffy, Kurt Cobain) (see Davis 1999). The concept of ‘youth’ constructed by Hunan TV/Mango TV could be infinite, showing that Mango TV continuously constructs youth as a self-aware age group, targeting them as creative producers and including potential consumers as widely as possible. The nostalgic term of youth in Mango TV represents a complex and multifaceted concept that encapsulates both individual and collective experiences of contemporary Chinese society. This cultivated youth nostalgia outlet offers a respite from the fast-paced, constantly changing technological landscape they otherwise inhabit. The concept of youth is consequently implicit in these connections.

Nostalgia implies an affective relationship with other people, things, places and times. As Brabazon (2005) points out in her work on popular memory studies, texts, places and spaces all change meaning over time, constructing different ways of relating to them for people of different ages. Facilitated by the affordance of digital technology, nostalgia has become embedded in media production, content and usage on an unprecedented scale (Niemeyer and Siebert 2023). Media has long been closely related to nostalgia (Hutcheon 2000) or ‘retromania’ (Reynolds 2011), and nostalgic cycles (Higson 2003; Marcus 2004). Schrey (2010) has observed that media provides virtual access to the past, serving as a resource for cultural memory.

Media and media practices thus render different temporal experiences, time layers or ‘timescapes’ (Keightley 2012) possible.

By addressing the fact that the reinvention of media is not simply a matter of globalising markets or adopting technological changes, the multimodal and adaptable structures of creative industries, with their use of visual, audial and other types of sensory communication, allow for the re-creation of an authentic sense of the past and the repetition of the nostalgic experience (Turner 2016).

At the same time, outlets for news and fictional media play a pivotal role in fostering and activating these collective visions of the future (Niemeyer and Uhl 2021). Media culture, media technology and media content consequently reside collectively at the centre of contemporary media nostalgia practices (Menke 2017). Mango TV's emphasis on long-form content, its strategic use of technological development and nostalgia of 'youth' and 'happiness', along with its role as a guide and custodian of youth culture, demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the intersection and tension between media content production, technological innovation and nostalgia. Such insights are particularly relevant in today's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

The contribution of this chapter, alongside other chapters of this volume, has been to reject approaches to digital technologies based on the idea of new digital contrasted with old analogue. Or, in this case, the common opposition between 'new media' and 'old media', often based on the flawed assumption that equates 'old media' with 'backwardness'. The degree to which it was Mango TV's repackaging of its older programmes as a form of nostalgia that helped it to deliver on its aim to represent the future of the media should encourage us to reconsider the concept and value implications of 'old media'. Simultaneously Hunan TV's transition to Mango Supermedia echoes Sara Pink's (2021, 2022) 'anthropology of the future', revealing how technological advances, cultural nostalgia and state influence interplay in shaping the future of media and cultural practices.

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The ghosts inside the algorithmic recommendation system

Ken Zheng

Introduction

In 1769 Wolfgang von Kempelen, an inventor and royal advisor, promised Empress Maria Theresa of Austria-Hungary a mechanical creation that would captivate her court. Given time to bring his vision to life, he returned months later with the ‘Mechanical Turk’ – a device that appeared to play chess autonomously, outmatching human challengers. Audiences were mesmerised by its apparent display of mechanical intelligence. But the automaton concealed a simple truth: a human operator, hidden within, who directed every move. The ‘Mechanical Turk’ became an enduring metaphor for ‘the human lurking behind the facade of seemingly advanced technology and its ability to deceive us about the way it works’ (Chayka 2024). It still persists today, exemplified by Amazon’s ‘Mechanical Turk’ workers: outsourced data taggers whose labour drives systems that often appear automated (Irani 2015).

As digital technologies such as platforms and algorithmic recommendation systems become ever more significant in our lives, there is a growing interest in understanding how these are made. Different disciplines have tended to be dominated by two main approaches. The first highlights how platforms and recommendation systems have become passively entangled in a new phase of the globalised division of expanded ICT labour (Fuchs 2014; Gray and Suri 2019; Roberts 2019), while their socio-cultural traditions have been creatively reconfigured to help them adapt to the demands of these new roles. For instance, Xiang Biao discusses how the dowry system in India has evolved to meet the requirements of the unstable IT industry, which often demands highly mobile IT workers (2007). Similarly, Carla Freeman discusses

Afro-Caribbean women working in call centres, illustrating how these women have mobilised both local and global discourses to construct their own 'pink-collar' identities (2000). The second approach has been more concerned with the technological affordances of these systems. Anthropologist Nick Seaver has published a book about the creation of a music recommendation system in which he revealed the difficulty of separating human and technological factors in the production of such systems (2022). As such, the focus often falls on either humans or machines, reflecting a persistent challenge in social science: the effort to avoid treating social and technical domains as entirely separate. Yet, in practice, we frequently discuss these processes as if the social and technical were distinct realms (Pfaffenberger 1992).

The originality of this chapter is based on an observation regarding a still deeper level that is missing in most such discussion. As well as examining the role of people in technological processes, we also need to understand what makes them into these people – which may in fact include the impact of technological processes on them. Here we consider a more dialectical relationship between people and technology that constantly work to transform one another. As such, the chapter has built on disciplines such as Science and Technology Studies (STS), Feminist Studies of Technology (FTS) and New Materialism, which have increasingly recognised that neither humans nor technology are the sole or most significant actants within assemblages. Instead, they are enmeshed in a web of interlocking systems and forces (Coole and Frost 2010). Consequently, the human must be understood in relation to their interconnectedness with technical, social and material factors. The phrase 'ghosts in the system' refers not only to hidden humans, as in the case of the mechanical Turk, but also to heterogeneous actants implicated in the system's functioning, extending beyond merely humans and technology.

This chapter argues that the people who create the digital are, in turn, iteratively shaped by it. The issue is not simply that people build digital systems; rather, the emergence of digital worlds has transformed who these people are, as well as the ways in which they think and act. By detailing how these IT professionals describe and legitimise their designs exclusively in technical terms, the chapter presents the prevailing 'computational thinking' in the design and development of the recommendation system, which stems from a broader trend that digitalisation is not only technology but also a discourse.

This discourse not only promotes turning everything into bits; it also bears a moral standard that everything should be addressed as a technical problem. Swayed by its normative force, IT professionals

tend to present their choices as purely technical decisions, while the ethnography in turn recovers the human factors that this discourse obscures. These include their positionality within the company, the cultural values they bring to their work and their responses to broader concerns, such as the relationship between the company and the state. This ethnography extends the lineage of studies that investigate the formation of social classes and the production of subjectivities within the expanding of ICT industry (Amrute 2016; Bialski 2024; Lindtner 2020; Neff 2012; Padios 2018).

These arguments will be exemplified by exploring the design processes of a cohort of Chinese IT professionals. The platform they developed facilitates the large-scale distribution of user-generated content (social media platforms, by contrast, display only a small fraction of all user-generated content) (Burgess and Baym 2022). The workplace is inundated with ‘informatic cosmology’ (Seaver 2022): the work of these IT professionals revolves around managing the storage, circulation and visibility of user-generated content. Their design of technical systems, such as recommendation algorithms, is primarily focused on optimising how content is delivered to users in the most effective way. As far as they were concerned, these were technical problems that required technical solutions.

In contrast, I will unveil the social and cultural aspects of this system and the way in which they have been hidden behind a shift toward purely computational thinking. These IT professionals claim to improve the diversity of short videos. However, in practice they often end up imposing the cultural tastes of a metropolitan cohort onto the broader public. They believe that this group of users should serve as the ‘dictators of taste’ due to their own background. In the second case, they may seek a more accurate definition of ‘trending’ in platform design, but various roles within the organisation leverage this design as a tool for making decisions on behalf of users, under the guise of care. The third case shows that a product manager aiming to improve the accuracy of content recommendations based on similarity may conflate the goal of achieving numerical success with their personal desire for self-development. These dynamics are further illustrated by the way in which cultural traditions in contemporary China, such as elitism, paternalism and entrepreneurship, intersect with and become woven into what is otherwise seen as a purely technical system.

This chapter is set against the broader backdrop of the rise of new informational labour along with the expansion of the internet industry in China (Gu and Wen 2022; Liang 2014, 2019; Sun 2019; Tong and

Liang 2015; Yan 2020). With the largest internet user base in the world (Negro 2017), safeguarding social media has become a labour-intensive industry. Following the urbanisation and modernisation processes of the 1990s, which demanded higher levels of information, software development and online platforms, there arose a series of home-grown internet giants in the late 1990s that experienced rapid growth within 20 years. This growth was facilitated by the expanding domestic market and the expulsion of international internet multinationals such as Google and Facebook. Domestic internet companies now have exclusive access to the world's largest internet market. The Xi government introduced the concept of cyber sovereignty; it also established the Great Firewall of China to filter information from the outside world and block social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Shirky 2015).

Due to the strict censorship system, the internet in China has not fully served its potential role as a platform for fostering a civic society and nurturing democratic discourse, as observed by scholars such as Zhou (2006), Yang (2009) and Negro (2017). However, China's digital civilisation project enables the government to acquire and analyse personal data for surveillance purposes on a new scale (Filimowicz 2023). China's internet giants are often referred to as 'big factories' (Chinese: 大厂, Dachang), a metaphor that reflects the scale of labour employment. Companies such as Alibaba employ 251,462 full-time employees, Tencent 85,858, ByteDance 110,000 and Baidu 42,267 respectively. Entering the internet industry has become a common and desirable career choice for graduates. It is perceived to offer creative, high-tech work with good salaries and to serve as a stepping stone to membership of the middle class.

The ethnographic data is drawn from fieldwork I conducted for my PhD project between 2020 and 2021. The empirical concern of the larger project is to document how Chinese IT professionals design, maintain and operate the new digital systems, such as social media, that we use on a daily basis. However, the broader questions that underlie this project concern the 'social life of concepts' (Benoist et al. 2021; Hacking 1990). Such questions inquire how different tech jargons, marketing analysis, models, quantification, attempts to reduce or increase the diversity of users or ideals of agile development, collectively condition, constitute and constrain IT professionals' ways of thinking and engaging with the social media platform they nurture. By leveraging my Peking University alumni network as well as my background in anthropology, I was fortunate enough to gain access for fieldwork to an internationally renowned tech giant in Zhongguancun, Beijing – the district generally

considered to be the Chinese equivalent of Silicon Valley. I was then assigned the position of ‘product manager intern’, a role that gave me access to mundane but critical operations, largely behind the screen, as well as the chance to communicate with people occupying different roles along the production line. They included, but were not limited to, product manager, developers, data scientist, operation specialist, content moderators, etc.

Curating taste: the ‘social filtering’ of short video and elitism

The digital products inevitably bear the imprint of the labour that creates them. To illustrate this, I will examine how a cohort of developers designed an algorithmic recommendation system that effectively imposed their elite cultural tastes on the broader users. By unpacking the technical design process, I will demonstrate how the algorithm reflects the developers’ highly homogenised, elite socio-cultural status.

During my fieldwork I met Yuting, a former product manager who had worked on designing the algorithmic infrastructure for a short video platform. After leaving her position, she reflected on the social ramifications of the striking homogeneity in the socio-economic demographics of her team. She also admitted that ‘after being away from Tencent for a while, I’ve become more aware of how arbitrarily we filtered short videos’.

Yuting then gave a specific example of such arbitrariness in filtering short videos:

If I stick around here long enough, you won’t catch sight of any short videos featuring livestock’s feet, like chickens’ feet. I just can’t handle being exposed to images like that. But I get it, visual preferences are personal. But when you’re in my shoes, you just can’t help but delete that stuff.

Her concern arises from the dramatic transition of her social role. Currently, as a local civil servant in her hometown, she holds a temporary leading post in a secluded and underdeveloped village, which exposes her to the texture of an idyllic life. During her sojourn in that rugged town, she has come to witness what she perceives as the raw beauty of rural living, tending livestock, sharing laughter with neighbours, and mending fences at twilight. Before entering the civil service, however,

she had worked at a short video technology company in central Beijing, where, in a cruel twist of fate, she was tasked with deleting from the platform precisely those rustic scenes she now cherishes.

Although Yuting's shift in attitude toward rural life may seem like an abrupt, individual change, her experience is largely shaped by broader social forces. In China many civil servants and white-collar employees are selected from elite university graduates. For these individuals, pursuing careers in either the civil service or private sector has long been viewed as the most reliable, mainstream pathway to achieving middle-class status. This trend has intensified in recent years as the internet industry has become one of the fastest growing and most lucrative sectors. As a result it has naturally attracted a significant number of elite talents, offering them a chance to achieve both financial success and professional prestige.

The elite graduates filling the corridors of internet companies predominantly come from urban, one-child, middle-class families and grew up surrounded by metropolitan culture. By the time they enter adulthood and secure positions in prominent internet companies, many of these professionals find themselves trapped in high-rise office buildings. Here they are overworked and removed from the texture of daily life beyond their corporate environments, let alone from rural life. Yuting's exposure to rural life occurred because she shifted to another mainstream passage, working as a civil servant, to maintain her social-economic status. She was selected as the reserve of high-level officials in Fuzhou, the capital city of a southeastern province in China. This opportunity came through the 'temporary official assignment' (挂职, *Guàzhí*) system, a distinctive practice in China designed to train government cadres. The practice has deep historical roots, originating from the Yan'an period during the 1930s and 1940s, when intellectuals and Communist Party officials were sent to rural areas to gain practical experience in governance and to help promote local development (Edin 2003; Zhou 2004).

A detailed examination of the design process is crucial for understanding how these developers' cultural biases become embedded in, and perpetuate, the algorithmic systems they create. Technically, personalised content recommendation involves two main steps: recalling and sorting. Recalling in this case is a relatively manual and subjective process of selecting various segments of content from the vast ocean of user-generated content and compiling them into different 'content pools'. Sorting, on the other hand, is a more algorithmic process that matches users' interests with content from these pools. Personalised content

recommendations on platforms such as Douyin/TikTok are frequently depicted as entirely algorithmic in public or academic discussions (Herrman 2019). However, this portrayal is inaccurate; it overlooks the role of human intervention in the recalling process. The process was in fact carried out by a team led by Yuting, whose background will be discussed later in this chapter.

There were four main steps in this process of recalling (Figs 7.1 and 7.2).

Step 1: Devise a user group as the arbiter of taste

First, a user group was selected by these developers to act as the ultimate arbiter of cultural taste in short videos. This group consisted of individual users aged between 20 and 30, predominantly residing in major top-tier cities such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. These individuals were socially affiliated with esteemed universities or prominent companies and possessed a decent disposable income, as judged by an evaluation of their mobile phone.

Step 2: Compile a content pool

Second, these developers established a content pool derived from the viewing history of this user group. Any short video that had been fully viewed by members of this group would automatically be included in this content pool. These selected users thus became arbiters of taste,

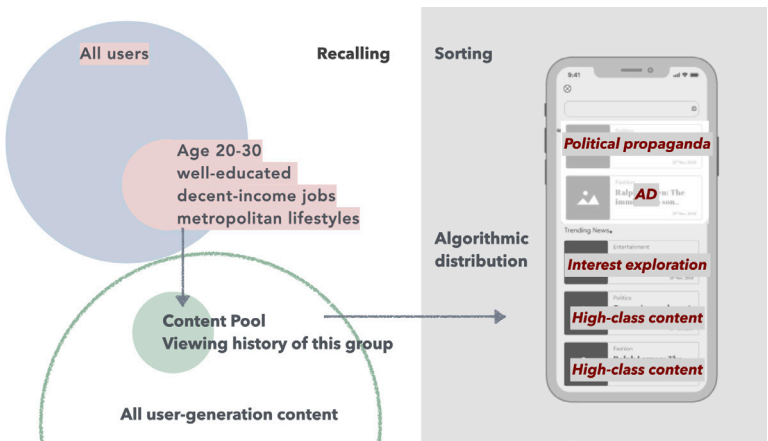


Figure 7.1 The screening process of the short video content pool. Source: the author.

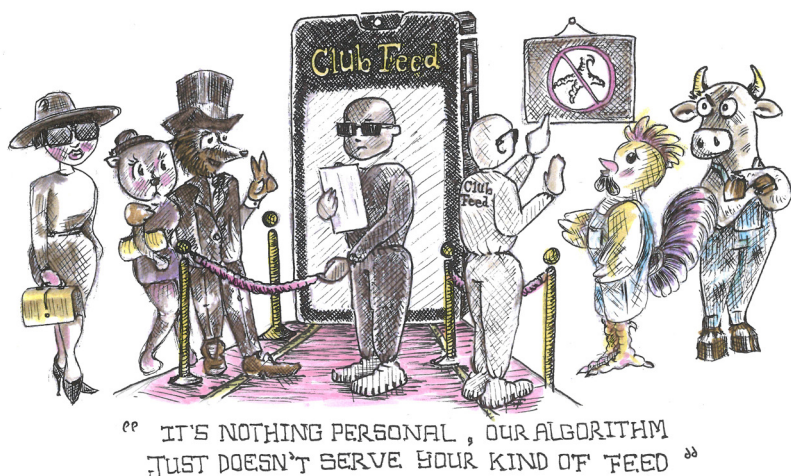


Figure 7.2 An illustration depicting a short video platform's algorithm. The algorithm prefers content that reflects urban middle-class lifestyles and rejects rural 'vulgar' content. © Wimpiesnek.

unwittingly extracted from the wider population to become the manual filter of content.

Step 3: Manually delete any vulgar content

Following that, the project team conducted regular meetings dedicated to content sampling. During these sessions they randomly selected several users from this arbiter group and meticulously analysed their viewing histories. In one such session attention was drawn to a user who had consumed 700 pieces of short video content. Upon scrutiny, the team discovered that 20 per cent of the content did not align with their expectations. They deemed this 20 per cent to be characterised by recurring themes, vulgarity, rural settings or unsavoury scenery. As a result, these pieces of content were expunged manually from the content pool.

Step 4: Insert the content created by high-level creators

The content creators were categorised into different levels based on their engagement with the platform, determined by factors such as the quantity of their content and the metrics of views, comments, likes and social shares. Content from creators whose level fell below 2¹ in these metrics would be removed from the content pool. Ultimately the project

team curated a content pool that represented the intersection of the most popular content among urban, well-educated, affluent young people and the content created by so-called ‘engaged’ content creators.

After establishing the content pool, the team needed to design a system to *distribute* it – a process that aligns more closely with the public’s perception of personalised recommendation. Each time a user opened the platform, they would encounter a sequence of eight short videos, automatically uploaded. Subsequently, based on the user’s reactions (such as likes, comments, shares, viewing duration, etc.) to the previous set of eight videos, another set of eight pieces of content would be reloaded. Eventually the team opted to integrate two pieces from their content pool into each sequence. However, user groups tagged as ‘urban’ or ‘youth’ would have recommended more than two pieces from this content pool for every eight pieces, because they are more culturally intimate with this content pool.

Within this technical process, there are parts where the effects inherently counterbalance each other. The project team also employed ‘exploration’, an approach widely used in the recommendation system design (Chen et al. 2021), by incorporating a video statistically irrelevant to the user’s recorded interests into their feeds. This method aims to reveal potential new interests or introduce users to unfamiliar topics.² For example, a middle-class housewife might find herself spending hours watching videos about oyster collection techniques on the Australian coast, a subject she did not know existed. This challenges the prevailing notion of the algorithmic effect as an ‘information cocoon’ in academic and public discourse.

The process described by Yuting is not a stand-alone innovation; rather, it is deeply rooted in the tradition of ‘social filtering’ that has shaped the development of recommendation systems. Early experiments with recommendation systems emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, such as Tapestry, developed at Xerox PARC. Tapestry allowed users collaboratively to filter and recommend messages primarily through annotations, relying on collaborative filtering. Collaborative filtering, sometimes referred to as ‘social information filtering’ in early MIT research, has since evolved into mathematically sophisticated forms and has been widely integrated into platforms such as Netflix, Spotify and Twitter (Chayka 2024). The fundamental idea of social filtering is that users’ explicit or implicit feedback, such as ratings, clicks or likes, can assist others in discovering relevant content.

Ironically, these developers in practical algorithmic design have narrowed down the more inclusive technical definition of ‘social filter’.

Effectively this now means ‘a filter that was designed for the public but only appreciated middle-class elite taste’. Selected users are unconsciously participating in this nearly invisible, large-scale, cross-geographical collaboration of content selection, efficiently organised and technically facilitated by algorithms, merely by scrolling their fingertips up and down.

The decision to choose exclusively middle-class users as human filters in these systems reflects the background of the development team. In these tech companies the corridors were often filled with like-minded elite graduates from homogenous backgrounds – primarily from urban, middle-class, one-child families. These individuals, such as Yuting, have become the architects of filtering systems. Their rise is intertwined with China’s education system which elevates individuals from specific socio-economic backgrounds into positions of power. Specifically, it has channelled members of the ‘only hope’ generation into elite universities and subsequently directed them into prominent tech companies and government.

Terms such as ‘only hope’ (Fong 2004), ‘little emperors’ (Jing 2000), ‘the pampered generation’ (Bregnbæk 2016) describe the cohort of China’s one-child policy generation. These young elites, typically only children from urban, middle-class families, have been overinvested with their parents’ care and social capital, as they are the ‘only hope’ for their family’s future success and upward mobility.

Yuting’s path, as part of the ‘only hope’ generation, embodies this elite trajectory. Her urban upbringing in a middle-class family had distanced her from rural life, but gave her access to the cultural capital and consequently a competitive edge to succeed within China’s education system. In the summer of 2020 she followed the mainstream career path of her peers into the internet industry, reflecting the uneven distribution of educational resources between urban and rural areas. For these young Chinese elite graduates the prospect of working at a renowned internet company is an attractive career path. This opportunity, alongside other aspirations such as volunteering for an NGO or pursuing further education (e.g., studying for an MBA), is shaped by their access to elite resources, reinforcing their position within China’s elitist social structure.

Even within highly homogeneous cohorts, navigating the cultural sensitivities of content remains a significant challenge. This challenge has become manifested as organisational friction between management and ordinary employees, as they have differing views on what content should be classified as culturally vulgar. Despite multiple rounds of adjustments aimed at reducing such content, their manager remained

dissatisfied with the results. In a pragmatic move, the team sought to understand precisely what types of content their managers perceived as vulgar. In order to achieve this they inputted their managers' mobile phone numbers into the backstage system, allowing the team to access details such as login/logout times, duration times and the types of content viewed. Days were spent in a spacious conference room, with the team meticulously reviewing each video that their managers had browsed or left unfinished. They analysed what content their managers had engaged with (or not) by clicking the 'like' button or scrolling past without completing the viewing.

For these managers, a video depicting a farmer arguing with a neighbour would be considered vulgar; one about scientific grain cultivation would not. When their managers evaluated the adjusted algorithm again they commented critically on the platform's inundation with homogenised content. So Yuting's team once again delved into their managers' browsing history in order to try and find out what actually they meant by this. Following the process described above they discovered that 200 out of 700 pieces in their managers' viewing history were short videos adapted from screenshots of social media posts. In this context, 'homogenised content' referred specifically to videos composed solely of screenshots.

Months after Yuting's resignation, rumours began to circulate among her former colleagues that a few high-level managers had considered laying off entire departments due to the perception that the retention of vulgar content had weakened the platform's competition in the app market. Thousands of professionals employed to develop and maintain the platform around the clock found themselves on the brink of unemployment. This led many employees to question the true nature of their work:

Are we putting together a news feed to shift those senior execs' mindset, so they don't end up downsizing our team?

Essentially the issue focused on whether this initiative was to 'diversify' content genuinely aimed at satisfying every user, or merely a guise to cater to the cultural tastes of a select group of high-level managers.

These doubts lingered in those developers' minds. Ironically after the adjustments, this programme notably transformed the newsfeeds of executives who have the authority to dismiss entire teams, while relatively fewer changes were observed in the information flow of ordinary users. This is because the demographic attributes of executives

closely correspond to the meticulously curated content pool in computational terms.

This internal conflict also reflected larger structural forces that framed the context within which the company operated. The management's demand to delete vulgar videos was a response to external competition, and to growing social anxiety about how these platforms might shape cultural dynamics and people's attention spans. During that period Sun Zhonghuai, Vice President of Tencent, publicly berated vulgar short video content for eroding users' cultural taste, comparing personalised short video content to pig feed.

Douyin, developed by the tech company ByteDance, saw this comment as stigmatising the entire short video industry. The platform counter-claimed that short videos, as a new form of communication:

have helped countless ordinary people record and share their lives, allowing more people to see the bigger world. There are also many artists, university professors and science workers in the world who use short videos to convey knowledge and culture.

This goes beyond a war of words flaring up between two Chinese domestic internet giants. It rather serves to epitomise the questionable role of the platform company as an institution. Should they be legitimated to define the cultural norm of 'good content', or simply remain the gatekeeper of creative cultural expression? Senior executives in this company expressed concern that they might lose their competitive edge due to the inundation of vulgar and rural content – especially when compared to their main competitor platform, Douyin, which featured more content centred around metropolitan lifestyles. Of course not every IT professional totally dislikes videos with rural content. In fact 'rural flavour' short videos do enjoy popularity even among urban elites in China (Wu 2021). Nor does it mean that every short video platform is attempting to showcase urbanised content. This reflects a strategic differentiation by platforms such as Kuaishou (which targets the rural market) and Douyin and Tencent (which target the urban market).

Albeit given the fact that the structure of such recommendation systems has been largely influenced by developers' own cultural tastes, we can also see how various actants intertwine to produce an algorithmic effect that is not always coherent. These actants include organisational culture, pressure from competitor platforms, the technological tradition for creating social filters and the types of data and situational

strategies employed by users to domesticate the recommendation system (Simpson, Hamann and Semaan 2022).

This case reveals the social origins of the inevitable ‘gentrification of the internet’ (Lingel 2021), in which digital space becomes inundated with the bustling glamour of bourgeois culture while the everyday life of third-tier cities and rural areas remains under-represented. Algorithmic bias does not solely stem from pre-existing biases in datasets, but also from the social attributes of an expert community. The result corresponds closely to the findings of Bourdieu’s classic work *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Bourdieu demonstrated how class reproduces itself in French society through the dominance of aesthetic taste (1984). As digital platforms have become central to social life in China, this case highlights how elitism, once rooted in the bureaucratic system, has shifted to the tech designers and companies that control digital infrastructure. Political power in China has traditionally been concentrated within the Communist Party elite, especially at the central level. This elite is made up of a small group of individuals responsible for important decisions about policy, governance and national direction (Shambaugh 2008). As this chapter demonstrates, a new form of elitism has emerged among those who design, control and govern digital platforms. Entrepreneurs, designers and engineers at companies such as Alibaba, Tencent and ByteDance now wield significant influence over how cultural taste is shaped.

Manufacturing trends: positionality, technical reasoning and paternalism

Beyond being defined by their original social class, the second case demonstrates how individuals are transformed by the roles assigned to them within the company. They adopt the values, logics and practices that are inherent to such roles, as exemplified by the process of iterating a ‘trending’ list.

In contrast to personalised newsfeeds tailored to individual preferences, trending contents give users a sense of what has captured public interest at this moment. Technically trending content is putatively calculated based on the current activity around every post, image or hashtag by combining some measure of each item’s popularity, novelty and timeliness (Gillespie 2018). Yet, as the following case demonstrates, the designers’ own positionality leads them to conclude that a degree of human intervention is necessary or not.

On a typical Wednesday afternoon, the atmosphere in the small conference room crackled with anticipation as a mix of product managers, interns, user specialists, developers and content specialists gathered for their scheduled meeting. Yang took the lead in organising this product review session. Aged in her twenties, with a background in finance, she is well-known among her colleagues for revitalising a struggling bubble tea shop through innovative internet marketing tactics. Yang's recent transition from marketing to the product group had aroused curiosity about her potential contributions. Dressed in a vibrant red sweater that sharply contrasted with the room's neutral tones, she exuded confidence as she positioned herself before the sleek monitor at the head of the table. With a click, she projected her meticulously crafted design onto the screen. As Yang began to articulate the intricacies of her product proposal, her typically soft-spoken voice took on new-found assertiveness.

Based on our competitive analysis, it's obvious that the trending list ought to pull in a ton of traffic. However, the low engagement we're seeing may be attributed to the current UI design. I think if we just spruce up our interface a bit, make it more eye-catching and user-friendly, we could see a measurable increase in user engagements.

Each slide transition was accompanied by a subtle click, punctuating her persuasive argument. Choosing the trending list as her initial foray into product design was not a whim, but a calculated move. These product managers tend opportunistically to claim a stake on features, modules or webpages as their territories. They expected to draw in traffic by changing how this user-generated content was algorithmically organised and visually structured. The influx of traffic, manifested in the form of numerical increases in engagement metrics, would serve as tangible validation of their expertise. For Yang, the trending list represented a promising opportunity – an unexplored territory with significant untapped 'data potential'.

However, colleagues in the room raised the point that the low usage might be more attributable to the underlying algorithm that ranks trends, rather than the visual design of the feature. The algorithm ranking trending topics was then projected onto the screen (Fig. 7.3). It scores content based on factors such as views, shares, comments, engagement rate and time decay, with the flexibility to adjust the weight of each factor (Fig. 7.4). Although the algorithm effectively prioritised

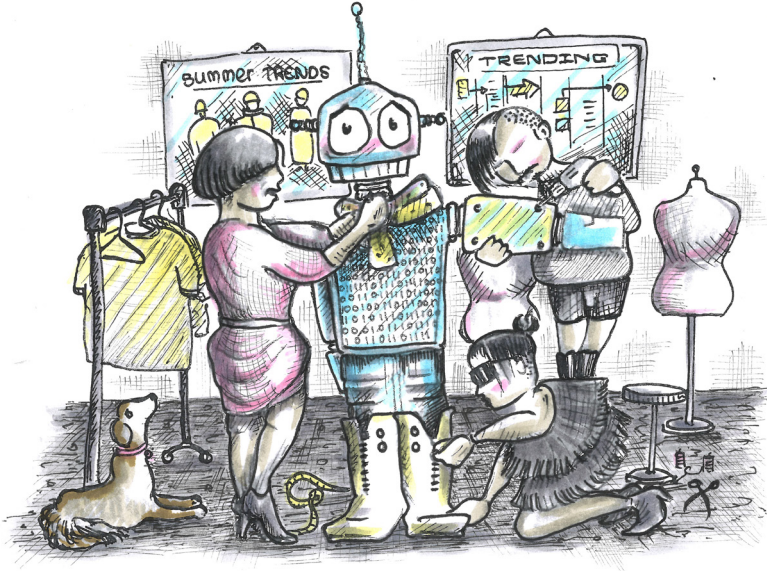
Trending List Algorithm:

$$TS_i = \left(\sum_{k=1}^n w_k \cdot E_{i,k} \right) \cdot \left(\frac{1}{1 + e^{-\alpha(t-t_i)}} \right) \cdot \left(\prod_{j=1}^m (1 + \gamma_j \cdot F_{i,j}) \right) + w_0 \cdot M_i$$

Where:

1. $E_{i,k}$: The value of the k -th engagement metric for content i , such as likes, shares, comments, and views. Each type of engagement has a different weight w_k , indicating its importance in the trending score.
2. t, t_i : The current time (t) and the timestamp of when content i was posted (t_i). The time decay is applied to ensure newer content is favored, with the logistic function adjusting for recency.
3. $F_{i,j}$: The value of the j -th external factor (e.g., geographic relevance, seasonal trends, or topic popularity) for content i , with each factor weighted by γ_j . These factors modify the score to reflect contextual influences.
4. M_i : The manual intervention score for content i , controlled by human moderators. This factor adjusts the final score based on cultural relevance, events, or other non-algorithmic influences, weighted by w_0 .

Figure 7.3 The simulated underlying algorithm that ranks trending content.
Source: the author.



“... JUST A LITTLE HELP TO ALLOW YOU
TO EXPRESS YOUR ALGORITHMIC SELF ”

Figure 7.4 A cartoon showing the ‘trending list’ feature. The illustration emphasises that the list is not solely driven by algorithms, but is also the result of human intervention. © Wimpiesnek.

popular content, it prompted team members to discuss potential biases that went unnoticed in this seemingly neutral ranking system, starting with concerns over the diversity of topics on the trending list. Content specialist Wang Ming expressed concerns about the lack of diversity in the topics featured on the trending list:

Maybe we should consider manually increasing the amount of content related to Art or Technology to make our list more diverse and balanced?

Wang's observation highlighted the significant risk that the current ranking algorithm might reinforce the existing imbalance in content genres. For instance, lifestyle content currently accounts for 80 per cent of the database, while categories such as art or technology represent less than 5 per cent. Such disparity could result in the trending list being dominated by homogeneous content, limiting exposure to a broader range of topics. It is common 'backstage' practice for content specialists like her to adjust algorithmically curated feeds manually to ensure content quality. They remove anything that violates content regulations, insert sponsored content or change the visibility of certain content, prioritising handpicked material that they believe reflects good cultural taste to enhance the user experience.

However, one of the developers frowned at this, worried that such intervention might compromise the accuracy of the trending list.

Well, imagine users clicking into a blog that's listed as trending, only to find out that its actual likes and views weren't as high as they expected. That could be a bit disappointing, don't you think?

As a developer, he advocated the utilitarianisation of algorithms as intermediaries – implicitly positioning the ranking algorithms as impartial, independent agents, capable of objectively dictating what's trending for users.

The dispute between algorithmic curation and human intervention, as well as the tension between accuracy and comprehension, can be situated within the broader transformation of platform governance. The involvement of human intervention in what appear to be algorithmically curated feeds is a longstanding practice in major platforms. In 2006 it was revealed that Facebook had employed journalism graduates to adjust algorithmically generated trending topics. This revelation sparked public distrust. Concerns arose about the potential bias introduced by

these employees' left-leaning political tendencies and their impact on the feature, potentially serving to mislead the public (Bucher 2018). However, Facebook is not alone in this. For instance, Netflix employs 'taggers' to assess the taste and genre of films, while both Apple Music and Spotify rely on human curators to enhance their recommendation systems (Bucher 2018, 53).

The division between algorithmic curation and human editorial intervention has created a culturally constructed association (Bucher 2018; Bonini and Gandini 2019; Gillespie 2014, 192). Algorithmic curation is often portrayed as embodying a sense of mechanical neutrality that aligns with the image platforms seek to present to the public. On the other hand human operators are often linked with subjective biases, political inclinations and other intentional traits. As a result, algorithms are inevitably also human:

whether as end-users, providing the data input from which algorithms learn, or the human experts employed to help algorithms compute things. (Bucher 2018, 54)

As the discussion progressed, the focus shifted from content to people. Initially, the disagreement between content specialists and developers revolved around determining the most rational and scientific way to present content. However, the subsequent conflict between product manager and user specialist moved beyond technical efficiency. These IT professionals leveraged their monopoly on design as a tool to perform care, uphold fairness and impose their interventions on the user community, ultimately solidifying their role as paternalistic designers. As Tao, another product manager, remarked:

While the trending list gives more exposure to popular content, it seems that newly posted content might be getting overshadowed. Isn't it important to strike a balance and ensure that fresh, newly posted content also gets its fair share of visibility?

In response Qi, a user specialist, reflected that this 'depends on who we're designing the trending list for'. She went on:

Here's the dilemma: Should we prioritise content that gains popularity in the last few days, or articles that accumulate comments and likes over the long term? On one hand, focusing on recent popularity could incentivise emerging creators, giving

them a chance to shine. On the other hand, prioritising content with higher long-term engagement metrics could benefit more established creators. It's a bit of a balancing act, isn't it?

Qi had been handling creator complaints, 90 per cent of which stemmed from users who felt that the algorithm was unfair. Projecting a user composition graph onto the screen, Tao mused:

Should we prioritise content creators or content consumers in our design, considering that consumers make up 90 per cent of our user base?

The design process has subtly shifted the positionality of designers. No longer are platform designers merely neutral technical architects; they have elevated themselves to paternalistic figures with a moral duty to decide what is in the best interests of their user community on their behalf. This includes protecting users from harmful content, promoting active content production and maintaining a harmonious community. In doing so, designers must balance conflicting decisions, such as whether to ensure new content creators feel incentivised and included in the community or to provide established creators with adequate exposure. They must also decide whether to prioritise the interests of viewers, who make up the bulk of the user base, or the creator minority, whose contributions sustain the platform's ecosystem. The tendency is to imagine users as fragile, governed subjects, lacking the agency to benefit from user-generated content on their own.

This meeting is not an isolated case of paternalism in platform governance. Rather, it represents a general example of how paternalism has transcended the boundaries of the Chinese 'family', extending across various hierarchical systems in China and other parts of Asia. Paternalism in China can be traced back to the cultural tradition of Confucianism, in which the father-son relationship is considered paramount and supersedes all other social relations. By virtue of his role, the father holds legitimate authority over his children and all other family members. Paternalism in China is distinct in that its legitimacy is derived from the performance of benevolence toward subordinates, drawing on moral principles and fostering harmonious relationships between those who govern and those who are governed. These IT professionals consciously distinguish their identity as designers from that of the ordinary user, a difference rooted in daily practices and class distinctions.

In the office colleagues often complain that ordinary users lack the digital literacy to understand the intentions behind the design. This is particularly the case since backend data reveals that most users are ordinary people living in third-tier cities. At the same time they defend their designs as flawless, arguing that these products are the result of the collective expertise and intelligence of the *'crème de la crème'* among the young elite workforce. Their identity as designers is also shaped by the asymmetry of information: professional designers have access to vast amounts of backend data, granting them a 'divine perspective' in scale and scope, while individual users can only speak from their personal experiences.

The notable absence of users in the design process reflects a shift away from platform design being animated by ideas of participatory culture and user-led innovation, as seen in features such as the '@' function (Burgess and Baym 2022), to a situation in which it is largely monopolised by platform designers. Unlike previous studies that treat platform paternalism as a rhetoric manifested in user regulations, press materials, etc. to mask commercial interests (Petre, Duffy and Hund 2019), here we observe that these professionals consciously internalise and adopt a paternalistic stance within their design practices. Such a position is not determined by profitability and capitalist accumulation.

Different occupational positions have resulted in a diverse range of views on how to 'curate' the 'trending'. The iteration of the trending feature was initiated by the product manager, who focused primarily on changing the interface design; product managers often do make adjustments based on competitor analysis. Content specialists, representing the human element in tweaking algorithmic feeds, have long been tasked with roles such as removing inappropriate content from the home page. Meanwhile, developers tend to delegate the judgement of trending content to the algorithm, as their work primarily revolves around efficiently storing, distributing and presenting user-generated content. As the discussion shifted toward users, we saw these IT professionals emerging more generally as platform designers. These designers leverage the trending list as a site to perform care for their users.

In the end, this meeting became just one of many instances in which consensus could not be reached and participants naturally turned to data, treating it as the ultimate authority that guides the daily operation of IT workplace. It is common for disputes to remain unresolved through oral discussions alone, as platform designers struggle to determine which elements are more important to users or – arguably more important – which designs have the potential to attract more traffic. However, the

work ethos of ‘data over argument’ and ‘experimentation’ can ultimately resolve these disputes. By employing techniques such as ‘A/B testing’, various versions of the designs can be tested out by small-scale user groups (Burgess and Baym 2022, 25; Gomez-Uribe and Hunt 2015; Neff and Stark 2004). Designers ultimately select the design that gets the highest scores in engagement metrics. Data metrics have become an absolute authority, surpassing human rational judgement.

The first case illustrates how individuals imprint their inherently homogeneous socio-cultural backgrounds onto the platforms they design. In contrast, the second case highlights how individuals are shaped by their assigned positions. Positioned differently within the organisational structure, these individuals are subjected to distinct regimes of reasoning, grounded in the division of labour. However, when this different rationality conflicts, they generally see data as superior to human decision-making; this ideal of a dominant technology then becomes itself the reality. This situation resonates with Daniel Miller’s concept of ‘virtualism’, which emphasises how the discipline of Economics reproduced the world it depicted (Miller 2003, 2020).

This is consequently a shift in these IT professionals’ practice as well as in their perception. As noted by anthropologists (Douglas-Jones, Walford and Seaver 2021; Walford 2017), an anthropology of data extends beyond the recognition that data is always created; it is never inherently ‘raw’, ‘objective’ or ‘natural’. An anthropology of data is ethnographically specific, politically important and conceptually generative. This chapter showcases how specific data practices exert reality-producing effects. In so doing it delivers a case for the necessity of ethnographic studies to comprehend the social ramifications of data.

Calculating relevance: product, self and entrepreneurship

The third case will reinforce the argument of the second: the production of digital technology is not a neutral process, but actively participates in the construction of subjectivity. The third case also extrapolates what has been discussed in the second. Not only does the demographic background of these individuals influence the platform, but these demographic features also help to maintain the type of person perfectly suited for the digital technology production line.

By the end of the third quarter, Haoran keyed in his quarterly OKR report, a summary of his performance at work through quantifiable objectives and key results:

No matter how big or tiny is the portion of cake assigned to me, it is important to sense the opportunities that are hidden with it and augment it.

Assuming an assertive tone, he continued:

In sprint 3, I have refashioned the content recommendation section of the detailed page, which has brought 25 per cent increase in page views.³

The figure of 25 per cent, repeatedly invoked in Haoran's seasonal work report (an annual self-evaluation paper, highlighted in his current CV), is presented as symbolic capital for long-term career development.

For Haoran, a 25 per cent increase in traffic is not simply a natural growth, but rather a meticulously calculated achievement. It is a quantifiable monument to his work, the consequence of a series of strategic manoeuvres employed to manage the resources at his disposal to reach that number. Even after leaving his job, Haoran kept his concise mantra, 'developing myself as a product', on his social profile, signalling how profoundly it continued to influence the way he conceived of himself and his future path.

Claiming a territory

In Haoran's accounts, the visual chaos of a website's interface powerfully echoed the micro-politics prevalent within IT offices. Similar to a contested kingdom, each product manager endeavours to carve out their own territory on the platform. As the home page garners the highest traffic and serves as the gateway to other pages, features and modules, product managers often vie for prime space there. This may sometimes result in a visually cluttered, disjointed interface:

When you open a website and find its home page dazzling but disorganised, it's a sign of the behind-the-scenes competition among several product managers, all competing for traffic and ownership.

The internal competition and individual desire for territory are emotionally induced and institutionally legitimised by the 'agile development model'. This model emphasises incremental changes and short iterative cycles designed quickly to test market responses. Office floors and glass panels are decorated with slogans that reflect the company's ownership culture – such as 'TA⁴ became a leader because TA took initiative' – which encourage employees to take on new initiatives and position themselves as their 'owners'. In internet workplaces, where organisational structures are typically flat and managerial layers minimal, the owner of a specific task often becomes the temporary, informal leader of those working on the same task. Product managers are generally the designated owners of features and, under the Agile model, can freely assemble small squads to develop the features they 'own'. These squads typically comprise user-interface designers, front-end and back-end developers, data scientists and operations specialists. As a result, product managers are motivated to claim ownership of features that can generate measurable increases in user engagement. As Haoran put it, the feature he owned had 'brought a 25 per cent increase in page views'.

Coming relatively late to the project team placed Haoran at a disadvantage. He felt compelled to claim ownership of some features, but existing team members had already secured the most promising features for development. So he considered the possibility of revitalising an untapped 'growth valley' by updating its visual design or optimising its structure, in the hope of attracting more visitors. The term 'growth valley' metaphorically refers to features, webpages and modules with untapped potential for numerical growth in terms of click counts and other engagement metrics.

Haoran then identified a 'gap' within the 'You may be interested in' section (see Figs 7.5 and 7.6). This section, commonly found across various platforms and websites, suggests content similar to that users have previously browsed. Its inclusion aims to encourage users to delve deeper into the vast information landscape, thereby prolonging their engagement with the platform or website. Haoran's analysis was based on two key factors: the underperforming matching system may have been responsible for the current low traffic, as the recommendations failed to pique users' interest, yet the section's location was promising for potential traffic growth.

Under the Agile development model, product managers enjoy considerable discretion in deciding which features to develop. Because of this freedom they must constantly evaluate and compare potential features, prioritising those most likely to yield measurable outcomes,

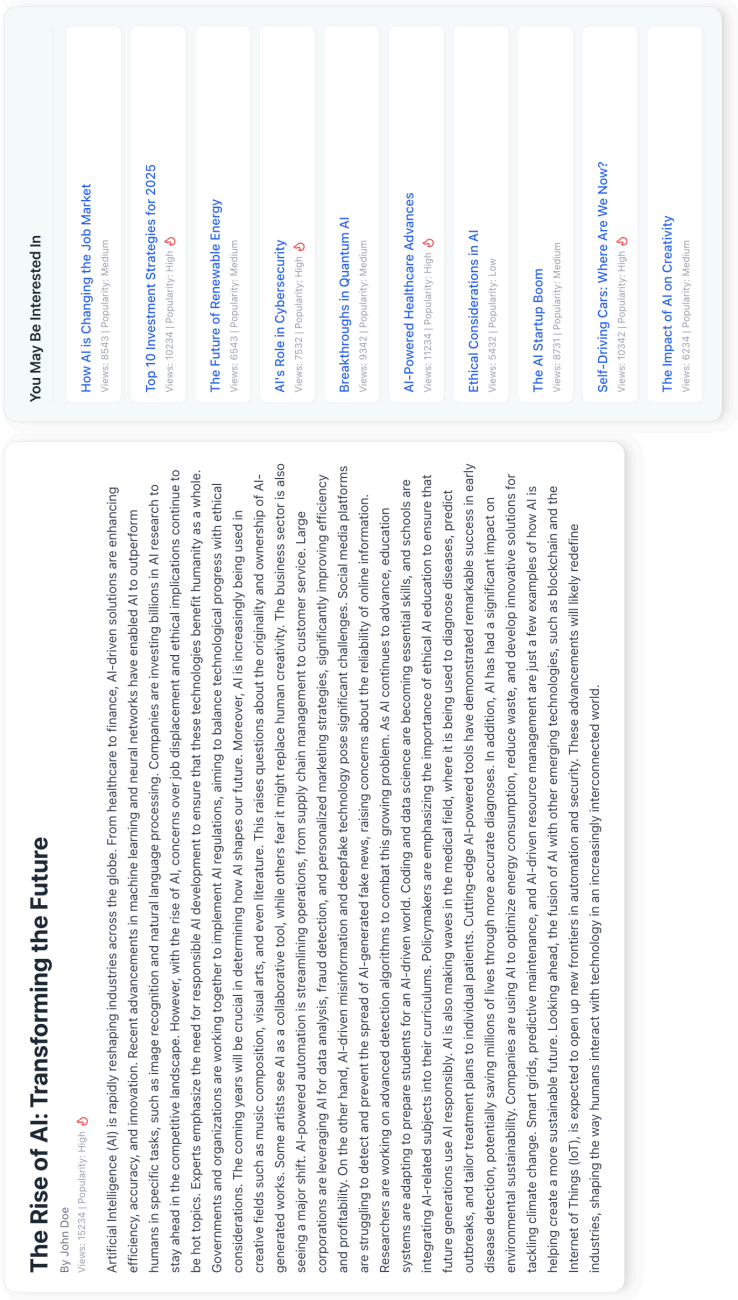




Figure 7.6 A cartoon depicting product managers competing for features.
© Wimpiesnek.

such as increases in user growth, engagement metrics or revenue, that contribute directly to career advancement. Consequently the selection of high-impact features becomes a central focus of their decision-making.

Navigating uncertainty

The success of a feature's actual development depends on whether the product manager can effectively allocate resources, such as pre-existing technical solutions. One day Haoran came to me in a state of noticeable excitement:

Oh, you can't imagine, they could even prioritise female comments at the top of the comment section, or sequence comments based on the demographic features of those making the comments.

Haoran was amazed by the generic technical solutions that the middle office could provide for each project team. Within the company, the middle office acts as a supplier of modular LEGO components; each project team is a consumer of these building blocks. The middle station provides various general features and services (such as illustrative painting, data analysis, interactive design, login systems and online transaction modules) for different project teams. Each project has only to assemble these components, utilising the existing, already-built toolkit to construct various digital platforms creatively, avoiding the technical barriers and R&D labour required to rebuild those infrastructures from scratch. For Haoran the LEGO components serve as a fertiliser to nourish his schemes, offering the potential to revitalise the territory and unlock its possibilities for growth.

As noted above, similarly-based content recommendation involves two processes: recall and sorting. Recall entails retrieving all contents in the database that are similar to what the user has previously browsed, forming a content pool. This pool may contain hundreds or thousands of similar pieces of content, but typically only between 5 and 10 can be displayed on the webpage. Sorting then entails ranking the ocean of contents in the content pool, with only the highest-ranked content being displayed on the webpage. Initially Haoran suspected that the core issue behind the original recommendations' underperformance lay in the recalling stage. He proposed a solution focused on creating a more relevant content pool. It matched keywords from the titles of the content to users' interests, rather than relying on a content pool generated from vague, author-assigned tags.

However, Xiao Tian, an AI engineer from the middle station, proposed a counterintuitive way of optimising sorting. 'Imagine that you're browsing an article on "high street fashion",' he explained. 'Now, when it comes to recommending related content, we have a choice. We could suggest something highly relevant, like "Nordic high street brands", which directly aligns with your current interest. Alternatively, we might opt for something slightly less relevant but more popular, such as "2024 Trend Colour Predictions"'. From my experience, popular content tends to attract more clicks'. In the end they devised a hybrid model that combined CTR sorting and a deep learning approach. This model resembles a black box in that its inner workings are largely hidden. Users' clicks feed back into the system, dynamically recalibrating the weights of different ranking factors, though the precise logic of this adjustment is visible to neither users nor designers. The essence of algorithm remains in a constant state of flux with each click (Andrejevic 2020; Cheney-Lippold 2017; Kitchin 2019; Steiner 2012).

The success of a feature depends not only on its technical mechanism, but also on the timing of its development and release. The fact that Haoran's design was prioritised in product development could be attributed to pure luck. It happened because of a vacant slot in the development schedule due to another product manager delaying the delivery of her product requirement document. Coincidentally the research and development (R&D) engineers had completed the previous feature ahead of schedule, creating an opportunity for Haoran's design to move forward. The IT industry has long been troubled by balancing the ratio between product managers and R&D personnel. During a sprint (see note 3), they aim to expedite the release of their features to gather more data to support their work metrics. Product managers compete not only for ownership of specific features, but also for the allocation of R&D human resources. Due to a lack of R&D support, many low-priority product designs remain in the 'product backlog', unable to be implemented or released to the public.

In the end, it is nearly impossible to determine the exact contribution of Haoran's design to the success of this feature. The release of this updated feature happened to coincide with a period when the project team had invested significantly in improving search engine optimisation. This approach undeniably led to higher rankings in relevant searches and to increased website traffic.

* * *

The success of feature development in the IT industry hinges on product managers strategically navigating the complexities of collaborative work. This involves effectively utilising existing technical solutions, managing the constant pressure to deliver features within tight timelines and balancing competing priorities successfully. Furthermore, product managers must recognise the potential for serendipitous opportunities that can significantly influence project outcomes. Haoran's experience bears similarities to Burawoy's depiction of factory workers (1979). It has been argued that productivity often results from workers strategically engaging with the constraints imposed upon them. Many studies of ICT knowledge workers have shown that their agency is reshaped, sometimes even expanded, by the neoliberal principles underpinning organisational culture (Liang 2019; Xia 2021; Neff 2012). However, these studies often overlook how workers' social and cultural backgrounds contribute to the internalisation and perpetuation of such principles. This is the reason why we also need to consider their background.

Developing the self as a product

High-tech jobs are characterised by proactive risk-taking, strategic appropriation of various resources and a relentless pursuit of optimisation. As such, the organisational culture of IT companies is designed to foster highly ambitious, competitive, neoliberal subjects who are well-suited to the demands of these positions, especially manifested in ‘ownership culture’. However, an IT company alone cannot seamlessly produce such individuals. What truly motivated Haoran strategically to leverage available resources to achieve personal career success was not the culture of ownership. It was rather an internal desire for self-development fostered by his prior educational experience and wider ideologies within contemporary China.

Haoran’s mantra, ‘developing myself as a product’, is a vernacular commonly used among tech professionals. It neatly expresses the parallel between personal development and the creation of digital products or algorithms. The IT workplace offers a particular space and discourse for experimenting with such practice. The company functions as an internal labour market, where success is often achieved by those who bet their human capital on the right platforms and develop significant, traffic-pulling features. This is similar to how a product’s success is often evaluated based on its performance metrics. Such quantifiable achievements act as indicators of both personal and professional advancement. Haoran’s milestone of a ‘25 per cent increase in page views’ serves as a concrete representation of successful career development.

However, the desire of tech professionals for self-development has a long history of transformed moral landscape in China, drawn upon in the present. This elite IT professional grew up amid the rise of individualism that characterised the later years of China’s reform and opening-up period. By the mid-1990s, as state-owned enterprises began to shrink and the government retreated from its role in the welfare system, many people who had previously relied on the ‘iron rice bowl’ for guaranteed employment and social benefits were thrust into a competitive labour market. What accompanied this change is the concept of an ‘enterprising self’: people are encouraged to become rational, calculative, competitive, and to take responsibility for their own welfare (Zhang and Ong 2008).

These elite IT professionals, mostly born after the 1990s, are the first generation in Chinese history to have experienced a relatively comfortable material life from childhood, and to have grown up in an environment filled with evolving digital gadgets. They are almost permanently haunted by the re-emerging question of how strategically to

invest their social and human capital in the right places (Bregnbæk 2016). Public culture also plays a great role in justifying various kind of personal desire, material or sexual, which has previously been stigmatised as improper (Rofel 2007).

These IT professionals' faith in meritocracy – the belief that elites are selected solely through individual merit – is reinforced by their educational achievements, even though factors such as access to quality education, family support and socio-economic status, which significantly affect performance, remain largely invisible in this narrative (Howlett 2021). The 985 universities league becomes the tenet for these devotees of self-improvement. The internet's 'super factory' has drawn in graduates from prestigious universities such as the '985', thus forming a community that emphasises competition and personal growth. Such an environment has cultivated a culture marked by continuous competition, asceticism, delayed gratification and self-improvement, fostering individualism. Haoran's story exemplifies how individuals like him embody the ideal neoliberal subject; they strive to turn their lives into 'enterprises' by investing in their human capital and enhancing their employment prospects (Hoffman 2010; Zhang and Ong 2008). These professionals navigate and adapt to the evolving economic and social landscape of contemporary China, driven by the widespread belief in upward mobility through hard work, frugality and talent (Pieke 2014), a conviction that aligns with the themes discussed above.

Haoran is representative in this sense, as he embodies the way in which these individuals conflate work requirements with their desire for an idea of self-improvement that derives from both prior educational experience and wider ideologies within contemporary China. These are the demographic features that help to maintain and cement the type of person ideally suited for work on a digital technology production line.

Conclusion: how the digital makes the people who make the digital

If we want to understand how people working in IT corporations make digital technologies, we have to pay attention to the processes that make them into those people and the forces that make them think exclusively in terms of technological solutionism. We have to consider the social mechanisms that make them into representatives of a particular aesthetic taste, that position them in relation to people with different jobs in the company and that give them this particular opportunity to improve

their status, salary and situation. While this chapter has demonstrated that these factors contribute to the formation of individuals, it has also shown that they explain equally why these individuals go on to create the specific forms of digital intervention that we, as users, ultimately experience.

The various case studies have provided several examples of these forces. In the first case these developers are shown to be people defined in China by their own elite socio-cultural status. They have come from particular backgrounds and are encouraged to refine their elite status still further by focusing on posted content that they themselves believe exemplifies the highest taste. The second case shows that these people behave in different ways, depending on the role assigned to them by the company. Different team members tend to focus on diverse aspects of content circulation. The third case demonstrate that these people's demographic background helps to maintain the roles they have been assigned by the company. Specifically, Haoran's working experience illustrates how his background plays a role in shaping a neoliberal subject well-suited to the digital technology production line.

The ethnographic evidence presented in this chapter reveals an interesting twist: when individuals describe their work to me as the ethnographer, they frame it entirely as a technological task, using terms such as CTR sorting or machine learning – yet they rarely acknowledge the human contribution or the role that they themselves play in it. A wider ethnography is required if we are to account for the prevalence of computational thinking and technological solutionism in this context. A cluster of terms has been coined to denote this way of thinking: techno-solutionism, informatic cosmology, algorithmic culture, social media logics (Striphas 2015; Van Dijck and Poell 2013) and more. These terminologies are symptomatic of an age in which social issues tend to be represented as computational steps and algorithms. There has also been a tide of self-reflection among these engineers, encapsulated in this well-circulated saying:

The sophisticated internet jargon was invented to hide the fact that there is no real innovation happening.

This sentiment peaked on ByteDance's ninth anniversary, when the CEO Zhang Yiming criticised the excessive use of internet jargon. His claims that it hampered work efficiency made headlines across major Chinese media outlets news outlets. It is noteworthy that, due to the vast commercial success of these tech companies, this internet terminology

has escaped the bounds of its original institutional use and spilled over into different realms of social life (Van Dijck and Poell 2013; Zheng 2024). Another example of how such thinking becomes more influential is the rise of informal disciplines such as prompt engineering or computational thinking, which have flourished in the US and elsewhere. They teach people how better to frame issues in a way that machines can understand and manage. Furthermore, the digital is a discourse that stands for the modernisation of China and its possibilities of becoming the vanguard in global terms. As such it now holds a privileged position in the way that people think and talk – a development discussed further in the conclusion of this volume.

This chapter contends that new approaches are needed to uncover the social dimensions often overshadowed by the dominance of technical discourses and ideologies. It exemplifies how approaches such as ‘infrastructural inversion’ (Bowker and Star 1999; Plantin and Punathambekar 2019; Star and Ruhleder 1996) can expose the social in the technical. This involves examining the role of invisible labour, the arbitrary decisions involved in creating standards, the paths abandoned during development and the unique stories behind the features that ultimately made it to release. All of these aspects help us to understand why digital platforms appear as they now do. The recommendation system, as heterogeneous as any other socio-technical system, has imbued the cultural preference of engineers, organisational culture and structure friction – as well as characteristics of local society, including the entrenched tradition of elitism, paternalism and individualism that exists in China.

By taking advantage of these approaches, this chapter also illustrates the complex interplay of heterogeneous actants within the socio-technical system. This perspective follows the reconsideration of technical artefacts as immanent to, and enacted through, the ecology, entanglement or assembly (Bauer 2019; Borgman 2015; Lowrie 2018; Schinkel 2023; Seaver 2017, 2019), rather than being viewed in isolation. As the first case has demonstrated, the exploration approach had a counterproductive effect on another technical module they designed. The optimisation of SEO, for example, played a significant role in the success of Haoran’s product. Thus it has become increasingly difficult to impute agency to any particular factor or agent – not only because these heterogeneous elements are orchestrally at play in algorithmic systems, but also because these technical systems are always in a state of becoming. It is not possible to assign determining agency conclusively to singular or multiple actants (Bennet 2005, 2010).

The image of Wolfgang von Kempelen's 'Mechanical Turk' thus remains a powerful metaphor to illustrate the complex interplay between people and digital systems. Just as the automaton's movements concealed the hidden work of a human operator, so digital technologies also mask the broader social web that shapes, directs and gives form to their processes.

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Notes

- 1 The user level of short video content creators is calculated based on their engagement metrics, such as views, likes, comments, shares, watch time, number of followers and overall audience interaction with their content.
- 2 The concept of the 'exploration–exploitation trade-off' has long been central to the design of recommender systems. Exploitation refers to recommending items that the user has already shown a preference for, leveraging existing knowledge to maximise immediate satisfaction. Exploration, in contrast, involves introducing users to new, diverse or unexpected content, which can create a sense of serendipity and potentially uncover latent preferences. The trade-off lies in balancing these two approaches: relying too heavily on exploitation may limit discovery and long-term engagement, while excessive exploration can risk user dissatisfaction due to irrelevant or unfamiliar recommendations. While computer science research has extensively studied strategies to manage this balance, social science research on recommender systems has paid relatively little attention to the role of exploration. This neglect has contributed to ongoing discussions about how recommender systems can create 'filter bubbles' or echo chambers, in which users are predominantly exposed to content that reinforces their existing preferences.
- 3 A sprint is a fixed-length development cycle in Agile or Scrum during which a team completes specific tasks or features.
- 4 'Ta' is a gender-neutral pronoun in the IT workplace of China.

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Digital anthropology studies in China: a literature review

Chuyao Lai, Guangxu Ji, Linliang Qian, Lingyu Zhou, Shiyu Lu, Xinru Sun, Xinyuan Wang, Yong Hu and Zeqi Qiu

This chapter aims to elucidate the development and current state of digital anthropology studies in China, as undertaken by Chinese scholars and predominantly published in Chinese. Its purpose is twofold: firstly, to provide non-Chinese-speaking scholars with a broad overview of the scholarly endeavours within Chinese academia, and secondly, to offer lay readers a glimpse into the diverse array of research conducted in China. As Herold and de Seta (2015) have pointed out, non-Chinese scholars are often unaware of the work being carried out by local Chinese researchers.

The co-authors of this chapter comprise a mix of prominent figures and promising young scholars in the field. Their backgrounds range from pioneering researchers who have examined the social transformations brought about by digital technology for decades to anthropologists who have extended their focus to the digital as it became deeply embedded in the lives of those they study. The group also includes media scholars who have integrated ethnographic approaches into their studies of contemporary cultural phenomena in China, as well as a researcher from Tencent, China's digital giant, offering first-hand insights into the industry's eagerness to understand the everyday lives of ordinary people through ethnographic research.

In mainland China's university system, anthropology is classified as a second-tier discipline under the broader first-tier sociology discipline. While hundreds of universities have sociology departments, only a handful offer dedicated anthropology departments; many researchers in this field are affiliated with various social science disciplines.

Digital anthropology research in China is often carried out by scholars from fields such as media studies, internet studies, communication and other branches of the humanities and social sciences. However, the Chinese academic community has yet to establish a unified terminology. Terms such as virtual ethnography, online ethnography, internet anthropology, media anthropology and digital anthropology are currently used across different disciplines. Most research in this field comes from sociology and communication studies, while anthropological studies remain nascent; there is no dedicated journal for the topic. Sun Yat-sen University hosts annual national conferences on the subject.

In this context, our approach takes a broad perspective, incorporating research from various related disciplines rather than limiting itself to research that has been carried out within the discipline of anthropology. Please note that all the references with Chinese characters are from publications available only in Chinese. A key feature of this literature review is its inclusion of over 140 directly quoted academic publications and more than 400 indirectly quoted (i.e., related literature cited within the works reviewed here) publications in the Chinese language.

We have prioritised mapping out key topics and research trends rather than providing in-depth discussions of individual studies – an approach dictated by both the sheer volume of literature and word limit constraints. By offering this conceptual ‘map’, we aim to lay the groundwork for deeper engagement with these studies. As the Chinese idiom ‘cast a brick to attract jade’ (*pao zhuan yin yu*) suggests, we hope this contribution will inspire further and richer exploration and dialogue.

Early studies of China’s digital landscape

The year 1997 saw the beginning of the internet in mainland China. It was heralded by the launch of internet access services by a company in Zhongguancun, Beijing and an invitation from the Chinese government to the architect and computer scientist Nicholas Negroponte to visit, following the success of his bestselling book *Being Digital* (Negroponte 1995). This book predicted how society’s core structures would be reshaped by bits, envisioning an interactive world in which entertainment and information would merge.

The potential of this was largely unrecognised in China, where hardly anyone had as yet engaged with digital technology. Sociologist Hu Yong was one of the few Chinese scholars who recognised the

potential of the internet at that time. He translated *Being Digital* into Chinese (Negroponte 1996) and published the book *Internet: The king who rules* (1997). In so doing Hu offered the first comprehensive introduction in Chinese to the internet's origins, development and future trends to a domestic audience in China.

In 1998 Qiu Zeqi, another pioneering scholar sociologist, began to examine large Chinese enterprises that were adopting Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems from the US to improve efficiency by reorganising information flows. Qiu saw how products from American and European markets had been appropriated into a dynamic landscape characterised by competition in digital technology innovation and application. He focused on the emergence of networked phenomena (Qiu 1999) and proposed the theory of the mutual construction of technology and organisation, drawing upon Anglo-American theories of sociological organisational research, to explain how enterprises balanced pressure for efficiency with the need for organisational legitimacy (Qiu 2005). Qiu's work laid the foundation for related studies that explored the impact of ERP systems on organisational power structures (Liu, Z. 2004), the ways in which enterprises responded to departmental resistance to ERP (Xie, Z. 2007) and the shifting dynamics that developed between departments as a result of ERP adoption (Zhang, Y. 2009).

While this first wave of studies comprised sociological research on the application of digital technologies to organisational innovation such as ERP systems, alongside the emergence of major portals such as NetEase, Sina and Sohu, most people in China remained passive recipients of digital technologies. The emphasis was on the 'information society', a term borrowed from Manuel Castells (Xie, J. 2002; Qiu, J. L. 2009, 2010) and 'information sociology' (Fu 1999), rather than on 'digital society'. However, sociologists were actively adopting Western research approaches to explore the underlying connotations and logic of this information society (Hu, Liao and Chen 1999; Fu 1999; Luo, Y. 2001; Jing and Wu 2004). During this period most ordinary Chinese remained on the disadvantaged side of the 'digital divide', with little or no access to the internet. As a result no ethnographic research was conducted on how digital technologies influenced everyday life.

When everyone embraces the internet

The digital landscape in China shifted significantly with the launch of QQ in 1999, stemming from ICQ, one of the first internet instant

messaging programmes, after which ordinary Chinese people assumed centre stage in digital technology innovation and application. The introduction of Taobao in 2003 further broadened public engagement with the internet, extending from elite social interactions to encompassing mass business transactions and payments. The advent of mobile internet in 2011 marked another milestone; the entry of WeChat was followed by the establishment of Weibo as a platform for public opinion in 2012. The first anthropological study of this new digital society conducted by a Chinese scholar was probably *Tianya Virtual Community*, published in 2005 (Liu, H.-Q. 2005). This study employed ethnographic methods to examine text-based social interactions within the ‘Tianya’ BBS community during the Web 1.0 era.

The anthropologist Ji Guangxu traces the evolution of digital technology in China (Ji 2020a). Mastering the internet was viewed initially as an extension of human capabilities, enhancing communication, cognition and memory. Around 2010 the advent of 3G networks and the increasing affordability of smartphones deepened the relationship between people and technology. This period saw growing interest in various digital platforms, focusing on their roles in social interactions, commerce and information exchange. Research followed from 2017 and proliferated between 2019 and 2022, incorporating the cultural complexities of contemporary China and the evolution of methodological approaches through critical introspection (Ji 2020a). Ji emphasises a shift towards the exploration of how technology shapes meaning-making and relationships, advocating for approaches that reach beyond traditional causal explanations for online phenomena (Ji 2019, 2020a).

Since the translation of *Digital Anthropology* by Heather Horst and Daniel Miller (Horst and Miller 2012, 2014) Chinese scholars have taken increasing note of the approach of digital anthropology (Miller 2019; Chang and Tian 2020). According to the anthropologist Sun Xinru, this has led not only to greater use of traditional ethnographic approaches, but also to a focus on understanding the self, cultural diversity and the deepening integration of humans and technology – as seen, for example, in the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). Chinese anthropologists are actively expanding their research horizons, drawing upon topics such as fan communities, subcultures, media empowerment, marginalised groups, identity and subjectivity construction, media and memory, materiality, bodily practices, platforms and digital labour.

The paper ‘New explorations in a complex society: A decade of research and development of internet anthropology in China’ (Sun, X. and Wang, Z. 2023) reviews the past decade of internet anthropology.

It is based mainly on Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) journal articles, as well as a number of academic monographs. Covering the period from late 2012 to late 2022, the review includes 311 articles from 55 journals, along with relevant academic monographs.

The authors of the review discern three significant changes. First, the quantity of research. Second, the greater range of disciplines, which now might include education, management, arts, geography and others. Third, a methodological shift from 'groping in the dark' to 'methodological awareness', which consists of a blend of ethnographic methods with surveys, text analysis, focus groups and interviews. Sun Xinru and Wang Zhiyong (2023) identify eight key areas of focus within the field. Building on the analytical framework developed by Sun Xinru and Wang Zhiyong, we have selected a set of recommended readings for readers interested in exploring this topic further:

- 1) Fan communities and online subcultures (e.g. Chen, Y. 2013; Chu 2019; Huang and Zhou 2016; Li, M. and Zhou, M. 2018; Liu, H.-L. 2017), including online gaming communities, online literature, virtual pet raising and ACG (anime, comic, game) enthusiast groups.
- 2) Media empowerment and marginalised groups research (e.g. Bu 2015; Feng, Q. and Ma, Z. 2019; Li, Y. 2016; Qiu, Z. 2018; Qiao, T. and Qiu, Z. 2020; Zhang, X. 2012), including community collective actions, virtual mobilisation, digital media use among migrant workers, media empowerment and identity of marginalised groups, rural media mobilisation during the pandemic, digital livelihoods of people with disabilities, use of short videos by the elderly, smartphones and left-behind children, etc.
- 3) Identity and subjectivity construction research (e.g. Deng 2019; Yang, G. and Zhou, H. 2022; Shao, F. 2020; Sun, X. and Zhao, J. 2018; Wang, C. 2015; Wang, Y.-W. and Huang, S. 2021; Zhou, J. and Mao, Z. 2012), based on topics such as self-construction in social media circles, ethnic consciousness in WeChat, individual images on social media and identity of rural youth.
- 4) Media and memory research (e.g. Chen, X. 2017; Liu, Y.-S. 2018; Wu, S. and Yang, G. 2018), including the memory experiences of specific groups, online memorial spaces, online autobiographies, the ethnography of objects on the internet and technological nostalgia.
- 5) Materiality and bodily practices (e.g. Gao 2021; Huang, S. and Chen, Y.-N. 2021; Tao, Wang, S. and Zhu, H. 2015; Ji 2020b), with research focused on the materiality of technological objects, material networks and infrastructure.

- 6) Platforms and digital labour (e.g. Ding 2021; Dong and Ye 2021; Dong, Ding and Ye 2021; Lin and Liu, Y. 2022; Qi, Ma and Bao 2019; Qiu, Z. 2021, 2022; Sun, P., Li, Y.-F. and Wu, J. 2022; Zhang, Z. and Wu, F. 2019) including the analysis of ‘subtitle groups’ (*zimu zu*), live-stream anchors, game companions, freelance writers on internet platforms, e-commerce and food delivery riders.
- 7) Social interaction and social relationships (e.g. Peng, C. and Luo, X. 2019; Qiu, Z. and Huang, S. 2021; Sun, Y. and Li, Z. 2020; Sun, X. and Wang, D. 2021b; Tang and Shao 2017; Ji and Zhou 2017), with in-depth case studies of WeChat groups and business and matchmaking platforms, family interactions and the relationships between community volunteers and residents during the pandemic.
- 8) Media and social change (e.g. An and Wang, Z. 2020; Fan 2022; Li, C. and Tu 2022; Qiu, Z. 2023; Sha and Li, Q. 2022; Yang, X., Tang and Sun, X. 2020; Zhao, X. 2021), often carried out by scholars in the field of journalism and communication on people’s lifestyles, cultural concepts and social structures brought about by the introduction of modern media into communities, especially rural societies.

With the proliferation of affordable digital technology into the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people, the impact of digital technologies has attracted significant scholarly interest, particularly from researchers in internet studies, media studies and journalism. A striking feature of this stage is its emphasis on the new – both the new behaviours and societal changes facilitated by emerging technologies and the new forms of expression shaped by digital platforms. The sheer diversity of this literature shows how academic research was gradually catching up with the increasing complexity of daily life in the digital era in China. Many of these studies explore broader themes of social transformation in the context of digital appropriation. These include shifting family dynamics, the transformation of rural communities, online place-making and so on.

Expanding the field in anthropological study

As ordinary Chinese and various social groups began to embrace the digital, ethnographic studies became increasingly prevalent. The work of Sun Xinru and her team, along with other collaborating scholars, exemplifies the ways in which Chinese anthropologists are tackling the profound transformations in the digital age, as digital technologies become increasingly integrated into the daily life of communities.

Sun's ethnographic focus has been on rural communities and ethnic minority groups in Yunnan. Sun has revisited several villages over a period of more than a decade, gaining in the process a deep understanding of evolving media practices in village life. Studies by Sun's team examined the impact of modern communication networks on social development and cultural values of ethnic minority villages, including new digital platforms such as WeChat and TikTok (Douyin). For example, Sun Xinru (2016a, 2016b) conducted an ethnographic investigation of a WeChat group for Pumi villagers, while Sun Xinru and Wang Donglin (2019a) examined how Bai villagers used singing in WeChat groups to express their unique culture, aesthetics and experiences. Sun Xinru and Wang Donglin (2021a) also investigated the concept and practice of the 'TikTok Home' and its impact on family interactions. Furthermore, Sun Xinru and Tang Youyou (2021) documented the journey of a self-media entrepreneur in a Yao Autonomous County in southern Yunnan Province, highlighting his success in fostering local social interactions.

In a study on the use of digital media among women from the Dulong ethnic minority, Sun Xinru and Qian Hao (2022) found that mobile phones significantly expanded marriage prospects, provided emotional support and re-integrated Dulong women into village life. In another study Sun's team explored how locals of the Da Yingjie Community in Yunnan Province creatively transformed a self-run WeChat public account into an 'electronic file' for community digital governance and connection (Sun, X. and Zhang, L. 2023).

Meanwhile a series of studies focusing on urban spaces has also revealed new forms of 'stranger sociality' (forming social connections with unknown others) brought about by digital technologies. Many middle-aged and elderly women, for instance, become active in digital technology after leaving the labour market. They use mobile phone photography and online singing for emotional expression and psychological adjustment (Sun, X. and Zhao, J. 2018; Wang, D. and Sun, X. 2023b). The 'fun group', connected by childhood toys and mini four-wheel-drive cars, demonstrates how intergenerational experiences and cultural memories may be reconstructed through online interaction, dialogue, storytelling and offline competitive activities (Sun, X. and Wang, D. 2019b). Their research included various urban groups, such as food delivery riders (Sun, X. and She 2022), video streaming anchors (Sun, X. and Gan 2020) and Vietnamese border residents (Sun, X. and Wang, D. 2020).

Sun Xinru and Wang Donglin (2021b) explored how villagers preserve personal memories by tagging locations on social media,

thereby creating new online places. In practice, the communal memory of the village is now shaped by the interplay between the representation of local customs and rituals on social media and the physical places in the community. Using GIS and ethnographic methods, Sun's team (Wang, D., Sun, X. and Zhang, Z.-X. 2023) analysed digital footprints to elucidate an important aspect of mobile culture. Their study suggests that information such as geotagged location mediates the relationships between people, technology and place on electronic maps, forming a digital landscape of individual life. This demonstrates how individuals' 'resonance' with multiple locations, along with their ability to connect quickly to specific places, are transforming living spaces.

One of the key works of Sun's team, the monograph *Digital Da Yang: An ethnography of rural social media in China*, employs 'social media in localisation' as a method and analytical framework to understand the life situations of technology users (Wang, D. and Sun, X. 2023a). They highlight the relationship between the research processes – such as observation, interviews, field notes and narratives – and the overall methodology. Sun believes this is essential for the goal of depicting the process of technology-embedded social systems fully (Sun, X. 2019).

Based on these ethnographic cases, Sun Xinru and her collaborators argue that the development of digital anthropology is not merely a research practice; it also requires the construction of a systematic theoretical framework at both the epistemological and methodological levels. Such a framework includes theoretical concepts, for example that around the role of narrative in internet anthropology (Sun, X. 2022), and the analysis of digital objects (Sun, X. and Huang 2022) that offer new dimensions for understanding the relationship between network technology and people.

Furthermore, Sun Xinru and Peng Siyu (2025) point out that as digital technologies become more deeply embedded in human social life, scholars must also re-examine their relationship with 'the distant' and 'the other'. Using 'online cultural markers' as an entry point, they propose the 'spatio-temporal framework' as an analytical approach to understanding digital practices. This framework emphasises that only by situating people's perceptions of time and space within specific fieldsites can we fully reveal the social meanings embedded in digital everyday life, as well as the integrality and diversity reflected in cultural practices.

The research trajectory of Sun Xinru and her team, along with other collaborating scholars, illustrates an important characteristic of research in Chinese digital anthropology. Questions prominent in Western academic discussions – such as whether the digital is 'virtual' or 'real', or

if it qualifies as a legitimate field in anthropology – are not central to their concerns. Instead Sun and her team prioritise the lived realities of their research participants. They naturally embrace the digital as an integral part of ‘real’ life: a field, a place, daily existence, family and social relations. This approach respects the way in which the communities they study have already woven the digital into their daily routines, social interactions and sense of self. The subsequent deep understanding of communities through long-term traditional, immersive ethnography effectively contextualises digital engagement within the broader social fabric. This approach, which is shared by the authors of this volume, is one that we believe reflects the full potential of digital anthropology.

The following sections examine the contributions of other scholars in the field. It focuses upon the emergence of new phenomena facilitated by digital technology including e-commerce, audiovisual platforms, algorithm and digital labour. Research in digital anthropology and related fields by Chinese scholars has been particularly concentrated in these areas.

Ethnographic studies of e-commerce in China

The anthropologist Qian Linliang has examined the impact of China’s booming e-commerce industry on both practitioners and broader society. Since 2015 his fieldwork has focused on Yiwu, a small city in Zhejiang Province that has become one of the country’s leading e-commerce hubs. In 2022 Yiwu hosted over 200,000 e-commerce operators who generated nearly 391 billion *yuan* in transactions, the highest among county-level cities nationwide. These e-commerce merchants run a wide variety of e-businesses on platforms such as Taobao, Tmall, Pinduoduo, Douyin and Kuaishou. They are often based in urban and suburban areas dubbed ‘Taobao villages’ (*Taobao Cun*) by Alibaba Group. By 2022 Yiwu had 222 such villages, more than any other county-level city in China.

Despite being born in Yiwu, Qian initially struggled to grasp the world of e-commerce. As an ethnographic researcher, he enrolled in e-commerce courses and even opened his own Taobao shop. By immersing himself in the e-trading community, he sought to grasp the nature of internet thinking, including related concepts such as big data, cloud computing and crowdfunding.

Qian’s initial study for his doctoral dissertation, from 2015 to 2016, focused on the business operations and daily lives of the e-merchants who ran shops on Taobao, Tmall and other Alibaba platforms. He returned in

2018 to revisit these merchants and broaden his research to include cross-border e-commerce. In 2020 and 2021 he shifted focus to livestreaming e-commerce, then a dominant trend. His participation expanded to encompass e-commerce training courses, renting a room in e-commerce villages in order to get to know landlords and other tenants engaged in e-commerce, and working as a customer service agent or business partner in selected e-shops.

Qian's ethnography highlights the differences between e-merchants and other businesspeople in Yiwu. He found that e-merchants – mostly rural migrants – take great pride in mastering industry-specific jargon and expertise, thus signalling their identity as new-age internet entrepreneurs. In this they differed from Yiwu locals. They also employ the discourse of *suzhi* (qualities based on knowledge, values and other intangible metrics) to construct their identities in the urban business world and counteract local discrimination (Qian 2018). These elements form part of e-merchants' self-branding, indicating a clear socio-cultural position within the business world (Qian 2021a); they also influenced the e-merchants' conceptualisation of a good life, harnessing elements of neoliberalism to improve their wellbeing (Qian 2023). Similarly Shao Zhanpeng (2019) examined how e-commerce practices shape specific socio-cultural perceptions among practitioners.

In revisiting this fieldwork in Yiwu, Qian further examined the ethical dilemmas faced by Chinese e-merchants, revealing how diverse moral perspectives co-exist in business interactions (Qian 2020a). While the anthropologist Yan Yunxiang (2021) attributed this moral diversification to China's post-Mao structural changes (e.g. the loosening of socio-political control and the introduction of liberal values), Qian highlights the role of individual agency in negotiating and expanding the freedom to make diverse moral choices. Based on this foundation, Qian's later work further explores how these individual choices interact with, and reshape, broader structural forces. In so doing they mark a shift towards more macro issues of political economy – for example, how regional inequalities in digital consumption manifest through practices such as '*baoyouguo*', 'the free-shipping kingdom' around the Yangtze River Delta where e-shops can afford free shipping. In a 2023 article Qian and Chen (2023) analysed how courier-imposed shipping costs led Yiwu e-merchants to treat customers from outside this region unfairly, charging exorbitant fees or rejecting orders – and so creating new forms of digital inequality across China's online marketplace.

While oppression and resistance in digital capitalism are central paradigms in contemporary research (Fuchs 2018), Qian argues that

applying this framework to Chinese e-merchants misrepresents their role. Rather than merely selling their labour, the owners of these small businesses possess means of production and generate value through commodity trade. Following the approach of Zhang Lin's work *The Labour of Reinvention: Entrepreneurship in the new Chinese digital economy* (2023), Qian conceptualises e-merchants as 'entrepreneurial labour' and explores their specific subjectivity within the context of digital capitalism (Qian 2020b). This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of their roles and experiences. In an article entitled 'Experiencing developmentalism: The state(s), grass-roots traders and the e-commerce boom in a Chinese city' (2021b), Qian examines how these e-merchants navigate the digital economy, balancing between state developmentalism and the opportunities and constraints posed by digital platforms.

Previous studies attributed the development of China's e-commerce industry to state guidance and patronage (e.g. Hong 2017). However, the perspective from Yiwu suggests that industrial agglomeration stemmed more from the spontaneous entrepreneurial actions of grass-roots e-merchants and the expansion of e-commerce platforms. The government often acted retrospectively, implementing policies only after the e-commerce industry had already formed. The government's high ambitions and bureaucratic management failed to mesh with the needs of grass-roots and self-reliant e-merchants, who capitalised on a less-regulated business environment, as tolerated by central and local government. Their entrepreneurial experiences led them to embrace the market fully and to develop a stance of indifference or resistance towards state intervention in the economy (Qian 2021b).

The Chinese government aims to use the digital economy, including e-commerce, to drive post-pandemic growth, reduce income disparities and achieve 'common prosperity' (*gongtong fuyu*). Thus e-commerce has been documented to facilitate income growth, particularly in Taobao villages, where rural acquaintance networks drive participation (Zhang, S. and Qiu 2022). However, this model's reliance on existing social networks limits its scalability and sustainability during market changes.

By contrast, Yiwu's e-merchants have created a more inclusive digital economy by fostering new entrepreneurs through employment, cultivating related industries via e-commerce clustering and replicating successful models in new regions. This market-driven approach transcends the limits of rural e-commerce, offering a more universal model for using the digital economy to promote common wellbeing (Qian and Lv 2023).

Taking a more global perspective, Qian's latest article explores the development of Yiwu's cross-border e-commerce amid the US–China trade war and the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite fears of declining globalisation, his fieldwork and interviews with merchants, trade officials and platform agents serves to reveal how Yiwu's deep involvement in global trade has fostered a new form of globalisation, maintaining connectivity despite macro-political disruptions (Qian 2024).

Qian's comprehensive anthropology of e-commerce has incorporated practices at the micro level (focusing on individuals and relationships in business practices), at the meso level (examining e-commerce industry shifts) and at the macro level (considering national and international changes, such as the spread of digital globalisation). All of this derived from Qian's immersion in his fieldsite. Conducting research in one's hometown or home country offers distinct advantages, particularly in gaining acceptance and trust – often a major hurdle for foreign researchers in China. However, despite these advantages, it still comes with challenges. In Qian's case these include navigating the complexities of local e-commerce culture and the rapidly evolving digital landscape. As with the work of Sun Xinru, we see the benefits of long-term, sustained ethnographic study.

Ethnographic studies of short videos and online live streaming in China

Besides the ethnographic interest in China's booming e-commerce industry, the growing popularity of short videos and live streaming has also been reflected in related research. The 2024 *Research Report on the Development of Chinese Online Audiovisual* reveals that online audiovisual has solidified its position as the largest internet application in China, with 1.074 billion users and a usage rate of 98.3 per cent.¹ As of December 2023 China also had 1.55 billion short video accounts and over 15 million professional live streamers.² The use of audiovisual apps has become an integral part of Chinese people's daily lives.

In this context, the anthropologist Zhao Xudong (2021) argues that as ordinary citizens become both creators and viewers of short videos and live streams, related anthropological research in China has shifted from the transmission of text and images to the dissemination of real-time dynamic video content. This reflects a new genre of ethnography as a collection of representations. Visual anthropologist Zhu Jingjiang (2020) believes that video platforms such as Kuaishou and

Douyin (TikTok) provide opportunities for the ‘silent majority’ to express themselves, seek resonance and even change their destinies. They give a sense of community that transcends geographic boundaries, as well as new business models based on social interactions, for example, fan gift-giving during live streaming, a practice known as ‘*shua liwu*’.

A collective work, *Kuaishou Anthropology* (2021), produced by the ‘Real Stories Project’, a Chinese media organisation, uses real stories from the video-sharing platform Kuaishou. The book’s four chapters cover lifestyles, gender, interests and profit models, introducing over a hundred individuals to form a comprehensive picture of contemporary Chinese society. Each chapter begins with an analytical commentary by anthropologists or sociologists Zhao Xudong, Zhu Jingjiang, Tong Xin and Deng Guoji respectively.

The study of new media has traditionally been a key area of research for media scholars. In recent years researchers such as Lu Ye, the professor of journalism at Fudan University, have begun to incorporate the methodology of digital anthropology into digital media studies. Since 2016 Lu and her research team have been observing and investigating the short video and online live-streaming landscape.

In one of the early studies team member Zhang Lihua (2019) conducted a 16-month digital ethnography on the live-streaming platform ‘6Rooms’ to explore systematically its impact on people’s interactions, social relationships and daily lives. The unique information flow of live-streaming platforms, including synchronicity in time and co-presence in space, creates a new media context (Zhang, L.-H. and Luo, S. 2019; Zhang, L.-H. 2021), in which users assume roles such as ‘family members’, take on personas such as *Bangyi Dage* (top brother), wear *Majia* (virtual costumes) to gain community status and engage in competitive celebrations through *Dashang* (gifting rewards) (Zhang, L.-H. 2019). Live streaming also allows users to inhabit both physical and live-streaming spaces simultaneously, blurring relationships and sometimes reconstructing social functions originally tied to physical contexts (Zhang, L.-H. 2021).

Short video platforms, with their low barriers to content creation, have resulted in a surge in opportunities for individuals to enhance their visibility (Lu and Lai 2020; Lan 2020). Lu Ye and Lai Chuyao highlight how, in contrast to their previous passive exposure to mass media, individuals on these platforms actively perform and interpret their identities (Lu and Lai 2020).

Reciprocity has long been a key theme in anthropology. In the digital age it extends to fan engagement in live-streaming communities, where

interactive exchanges shape social connections and online economies. A study by Sun Xinru's team explores this phenomenon (Sun, X. and Gan 2020). Fan gifting during live streaming goes beyond the exchange of tangible items; it places an emphasis on reciprocity through interactions between fans and anchors. Anchors cultivate relationships by sharing personal experiences, engaging in discussions on intimate topics and performing physical acts for their audience. Such interactive reciprocity online partially compensates for the lack of intimate relationships in offline social settings, offering a pathway to connect with strangers in modern society.

Beyond urban settings and mainstream digital behaviours, scholars have also explored rural contexts, where digital platforms are transforming traditional ways of life. He Zhiwu and Dong Hongbing (2021) found that short video serves as a practical and frugal tool among elderly residents in a mountainous village in North China, both for entertainment and for learning skills. This has led to gender practice reversals and a decline in shared family spaces, while reconstructing public interactions within village life. He and Dong (2021) argue that these practices intertwine traditional habits with digital life, signalling a renewal of some aspects of rural living.

Similarly, the intersection of digital labour and rural livelihoods has been explored by Sha Yao and Li Qiannan (2022), who conducted online and offline ethnographic investigations into rural live-streaming practices in a poverty-stricken mountain village in central China. Their study shows that while rural live streamers in China are becoming digital labourers and exhibit signs of alienation, local communities maintain resilience and vitality. Faced with external pressures from platform capital, local governments, small local capital and civil society have been compelled to reorganise, forming a three-dimensional co-operation model for rural live streaming – comprising 'local government + small capital + civil society' (Sha and Li 2022). This evolving structure illustrates how rural communities navigate digital economies while preserving local agency.

Ethnographic studies of algorithms

Although research has shown that the rise of audiovisual apps has significantly enhanced visibility and equality among ordinary people in mainland China, especially compared to the mass media era, it is crucial to recognise that a new form of inequality has emerged, produced by the

algorithmic architecture of audiovisual platforms (Lu and Lai 2020; Lai 2022a, 2024).

This led Lai Chuyao to conduct a digital ethnography on influencers in typical live-streaming villages where they gather. The more organic grass-roots and informal process of algorithmic knowledge construction contrasts starkly with the top-down monopolisation of technical knowledge by elites (Lai 2022b, 2024). Influencers, through their interactions with platform algorithms, generate fragmented pieces of algorithmic knowledge that are collectively assembled, exchanged, revalidated, challenged, shared and reproduced (Lai 2022b, 2024).

This dynamic, participatory ecosystem, involving live-stream training institutions and grass-roots algorithm experts, plays a crucial role in spreading and evolving algorithmic understanding. As Lai (2022b) and Ma (2022) show, these grass-roots algorithm experts serve not only as conduits playing pivotal roles in this dynamic and participatory algorithmic ecosystem, but also as catalysts for its growth. Lai's (2023) concept of 'grass-roots algorithm experts' underscores the importance of ethnography in capturing this bottom-up process, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of algorithmic practices.

For example, Lai's analysis of specific algorithmic practices such as *Yanghao* (develop accounts), *Lashichang* (extend the live-streaming duration), and *Ka Zhibojian* (display the live-streaming room prominently) demonstrates how these mechanisms create a dynamic, reciprocal negotiation between individuals and algorithms, resulting in a state of perpetual instability and adjustment (Lai 2023). These mechanisms provide new insights into recurring transformations in China's ever-evolving technological landscape (Lai 2022a, 2024). On a societal level, for example, algorithms have the potential to regulate and reshape community life, socio-economics and local culture (Lai 2022c; Xu 2022).

Linking to these grass-root dynamics, Zhou Lingyu's ongoing project, 'Algorithms and the space production of immigrants in urban villages', explores the influence of platform algorithms on immigrants' living conditions. The research site, Guajiatun in Western Beijing, has a century-long history of immigration. It has evolved from being a settlement for migrant workers, the unemployed and socially marginalised groups into an urban subaltern space. Zhou's ethnography explores how digital technology has transformed Guajiatun into a centre for low-end digital labour, where platform algorithms drive workforce differentiation, reinforce class divisions and influence the daily experiences of digital workers. The study shows how algorithms shape both offline and

online spaces, binding Guajiatun's immigrants to a parallel subaltern class structure.

Finally, as Lai Chuyao observes, one of the rapidly evolving areas in the study of algorithms is that of personalised algorithmic recommendations. Now, even comments on the same video vary by user, as algorithms filter and organise both content and interactions. This is very different from the social dynamics of older social media, demonstrating the necessity of ongoing ethnographic research and interpretations. This is also true of the global spread of short video apps, where the comparison between the Chinese version Douyin and the global version TikTok has provided evidence for new kinds of comparison and theory, as argued more generally in this volume.

These studies collectively highlight how algorithms are active agents in shaping social structures, economic opportunities and digital experiences. From grass-roots influencers navigating platform mechanics to urban migrants negotiating algorithmically defined labour spaces, ethnographic research reveals the profound and evolving impact of algorithms on everyday life in China. At the same time the increasing entanglement of digital platforms with labour practices extends beyond algorithmic visibility and content curation. Below we consider how studies in China investigate digital labour, examining how platform economies are reshaping production, livelihoods and social relations in the country's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Ethnographic studies on platform economies and digital labour

The platform economy in China has reconfigured production relations, creating imbalances between new types of work and labour relations – such as digital labour, network labour and gig work. These are explored through a growing body of ethnographies that have collectively revealed the complex interplay between algorithmic control, worker agency and shifting social expectations in digital labour.

For example, Sun Ping's (2019) ethnography on food delivery workers reveals how temporal embeddedness, emotional labour and gamification are critical manifestations of algorithmic management in the platform economy. Highlighting the phenomenon of 'digital involution', Sun calls for an urgent reconsideration of platform algorithms, noting that they have already exerted profound influence on labour relations and are likely to play an even more consequential role in shaping future

labour politics and labour relations in Chinese society. Expanding on this, Sun's (2024) monograph, based on seven years of ethnographic fieldwork across 19 cities, shifts the focus from algorithmic platform control over the workers to the control over the labour process itself. Her concept of 'transitional labour' captures the delivery food riders' concerns about career prospects, paying special attention to the dual challenges faced by female riders who must balance work and family obligations.

Beyond food delivery, digital labour frameworks have also been applied to content creation on short video and live-streaming platforms. In their 12-month study of live streaming, Dong Chenyu and Ye Zhen (2021) examine how 'relationship labour' and 'platformisation' shape the experiences of female content creators. They identified three key strategies employed by live streamers in managing their relationship to audiences – 'pricing', 'differentiation' and 'boundary' – to explain the 'double instability' faced by female live streamers, for whom relational instability co-exists with economic instability. Similarly Wang, Xu and Dong (2023) investigate gendered aspects of digital labour in China's live-streaming industry, with Wang Yilin conducting participatory research as a female anchor. They find that beauty filters, while serving as tools for cultivating relationships with top donors, also create tension between curated online personas and demands for 'authenticity', leading to increased pressure on live-streaming anchors to reveal their unfiltered selves as a 'test of loyalty'.

In a five-year digital ethnography on Kuaishou, Lv Peng (2021) analysed digital labour on short video/live-streaming platforms, focusing on aspects such as appearance, language and rhetoric, imitation and replication, persona and performance. Across platforms researchers observe commonalities such as establishing relationships with fans through intimate terms such as 'family' and 'brother' and performing specific acts to receive 'rewards' from the 'top brother' (Zhang, L.-H. and Luo, S. 2019; Dong, Ding and Ye 2021; Dong and Ye 2021; Lv 2021). These studies highlight the blurred boundaries between digital intimacy, economic exchange and platform labour.

In their anthropological study of the labour processes of delivery workers in Beijing, Zhou Lingyu and Hu Yong (2025) argue that the status of 'independent contractor' is not merely a form of employment adopted by platforms, but also an ideological strategy. Through the narrative of 'you are your own boss', platforms construct an illusion of occupational autonomy that obscures the real hardships faced under performance pressures. In practice, however, couriers have developed

a labour logic organised around ‘accidents’ as the basic unit – a practice that not only reshapes spatial order, but also intensifies group fragmentation and tensions within communities.

The impact of algorithmic management extends beyond content creators to platform-mediated gig work, where digital control mechanisms not only dictate labour conditions but also redefine the very nature of worker autonomy and resistance. Participatory observation was also the basis of Chen Long’s (2020) fieldwork on takeaway riders in Beijing. Chen’s ethnography reveals how these algorithms collect data to manage workers, shifting the responsibility of labour conflicts to the platform system and consumers. Consequently ‘digital control’ diminishes riders’ willingness to resist, reduces their autonomy and involves them in an implicit process of self-management.

Building on this theme of how algorithmic governance shapes worker strategies, Ding Wei (2021) turns to the case of Didi taxi drivers. Here algorithmic opacity similarly structures power relations but, in contrast to the delivery workers who operate in relative isolation, drivers have found ways to collectivise. Ding uncovers the way in which drivers navigate the power dynamics of digital capitalism, resisting platform control through strategic interactions. Ding’s later work (2023) explores how drivers leverage these social ties to form grass-roots resistance networks, such as the ‘Shenzhen WeChat Fleet’, in order to reassert some degree of collective bargaining power against the platform’s control.

While gig work highlights how digital platforms reshape labour conditions through algorithmic control, creative industries reveal a different dimension of digital labour – one driven by participation and collaboration. Chu (2019) explores how the rise of web fiction has redefined online literary production and participation. Through online ethnography she unveils how the digital platforms facilitate closer collaboration between authors and readers, challenging traditional models of content creation. This interactive nature of these platforms blurs the lines between creator and audience, introducing new opportunities for engagement while also raising concerns about copyright and ownership.

Collectively these studies show how anthropologists have revealed a more complex landscape of digital labour beyond the blanket control-resistance model. Each study adds depth to our understanding of contemporary labour practices.

Efforts from the industry

While previous studies have examined the societal consequences of digital media, ranging from platform economies and digital labour to algorithmic governance, another critical perspective comes from research conducted within major Chinese tech companies themselves. These industry-driven studies offer insights into how digital platforms both shape and respond to emerging social challenges, bridging the gap between academic ethnographies and corporate self-reflection.

One of the most significant players in China's digital landscape is Tencent. The company provides a wide range of services, including QQ and WeChat, the country's two leading social media platforms. In 2017 the Tencent Research Institute, the social science research department of Tencent, launched the 'Tech for Good' (*keji xiangshan*) project, with the initial intention of finding solutions and effective actions for the new and complex social issues brought about by Tencent's products and services. By 2019 'Tech for Good' had evolved into Tencent's official long-term vision and mission.

Senior researcher Lu Shiyu and her colleagues at the institute have integrated sociological and anthropological research methods into their investigations. For example, their 2017 study 'The scale of sociality: A report on a social media fasting experiment'³ investigates the impact of social networks on individuals, with a focus on WeChat usage. The study uses a field experiment method, implementing 'fasting' – not using platforms for several days, closing Moments on WeChat or setting one's phone to airplane mode – as a form of reverse intervention. They observed changes in various variables before and after the fasting period to assess its effects. Combining qualitative research with quantitative measurements, this study addressed various issues in current social network usage, particularly the effects on wellbeing, sense of alienation and work engagement.

The 2018 report 'The realm of our elders: The WeChat lives of seniors and intergenerational support on WeChat'⁴ by Tencent Research Institute and Zhou Yuqiong's team from Shenzhen University focuses on seniors' WeChat usage and intergenerational support. Using questionnaires and action research, it aims to enhance seniors' digital integration within families. The report, divided into survey findings and insights from a workshop involving three-generational families, suggests recommendations for smoother intergenerational WeChat support, aiming to improve seniors' digital experience. The 'Invisible guardians: Silver-tech blue book 2022'⁵ also addresses elderly care issues and innovations in

technology intended to support ageing populations, for example, home safety, elderly health management and community services.

'Unforgettable bonds: Exploring the impact of technology on individuals with dementia and their caregivers'⁶ (2022) is concerned with the 15.07 million elderly people with dementia and 37.88 million who experience mild cognitive impairment (MCI). Through vivid and concrete stories of families and caregivers, this Tencent Research Centre report, led by Lu, reveals the considerable heterogeneity among dementia caregivers. This group includes young migrants working hard in first-tier cities while worrying about family members in remote home towns, elderly individuals in their twilight years, middle-aged women having to balance part-time work with caring for elderly parents and rural residents unfamiliar with dementia and related issues.

'Fixing nearby: From touch-up and repair to interpersonal proximity in the digital era'⁷ (2023) explores the concept of 'nearby' that has gained popularity, particularly among young people in first- and second-tier cities, thanks to the anthropologist Xiang Biao's insights. Xiang argues that 'nearby' is a crucial link between individuals and society. When daily encounters and conversations lose their appeal the 'nearby' fades, taking with it the vitality and cohesion of grass-roots communities. An example of how technology can address the 'vanishing nearby' in urban China is the 'Touch-up and repair map' launched by WeChat and Tencent Maps in 2023. This map allows users to locate repair vendors and stores, check their details and navigate to specific locations. Within three weeks of its launch over 7,300 shops, including shoe repair shops, locksmiths and tailors, were listed, reviving the concept of the disappearing daily 'nearby' in a new guise. Furthermore, Tencent research revealed that digital routines expand everyday life's boundaries and create a 'digital nearby'.

In early 2024 large language models such as ChatGPT achieved breakthrough progress and drew worldwide attention. Lu Shiyu published *The Warmth of Large Models: An experimental report*,⁸ introducing a method of measuring 'human warmth' and comparing models across topics. Her findings showed that disadvantaged groups – older adults, people with disabilities, left-behind children, women in distress and low-income communities – rarely received reliable or compassionate answers, and that few AI products were designed for them.

In response, Tencent Research Institute and hundreds of social organisations launched the 'AI for Good Corpus'. In this project they collected real questions from these groups and commissioned professionals to provide expert, empathetic responses.⁹ The corpus is freely

available to charities and non-profit researchers to encourage more inclusive AI products.

In July 2024 Lu's study *The 'Old Friends' of Large Models* explored older adults' use of AI, revealing unmet emotional and practical needs.¹⁰ This led to the first collaborative theme of the AI for Good Corpus, which was: 'Daily life of older adults'. After a year the corpus contained 8,047 expert-level Q&A pairs, with evaluation by Tsinghua University's Future Laboratory. These showed marked improvements in emotional interaction and cultural fit. In July 2025 the Older Adults Corpus opened for applications, becoming the world's first publicly accessible, collaboratively created corpus for social good.

These industry-driven research initiatives underscore how major tech companies are not only shaping digital life, but also engaging in self-reflection on their social impact. As digital ecosystems continue to evolve, the relationship between corporate research, public policy and digital anthropology will play an increasingly crucial role in shaping the future of technology and society in China.

Conclusion

Mapping the academic landscape constituted by these Chinese language publications reveals a trajectory distinct from Western approaches to digital China. First, empirical and ethnographic research into China's digital transformation has evolved in tandem with the country's own technological development. This process was initially top-down, beginning with state and institutional initiatives before extending to communities, families and individuals. As digital infrastructure expands, it brings new populations into the fold, integrating technology into daily life in ways that are both systematic and pervasive.

Second, whereas international scholars tend to focus on the political implications of China's digital rise, local research is more varied. Some political discussions are in fact largely absent, due to various constraints.

Third, academic debates outside China often engage with the broader implications of digital technology, exploring ontological questions about the relationship between humans and technologies. In China such philosophical concerns barely register; the historical negative ideological stance on technology as diminishing our humanity, found frequently in the West, is much less prevalent. This divergence, and its implications, will be revisited in the conclusion of this book, in which

we will consider the deeper and longer influences that emerge from the history of attitudes to technology in China.

Ordinary Chinese people have collectively forged a new digital life, skilfully integrating digital technology into their lives and endowing it with rich meaning. This transformation has profoundly impacted the studies conducted by Chinese anthropologists. Sun Xinru and her team exemplify this influence through their research, which spans traditional villages to urban communities and extends from physical spaces to the virtual and global world. They have interacted with various groups, including ethnic minority youth, urban middle-aged and elderly women, delivery riders, Vietnamese multinational workers, personal media practitioners, network interest groups and network anchors.

The ethnographic observations by Sun and her team regarding the diverse digital engagements of various individuals and groups resonate with the concept of ‘self-society’ (*ziwo shehui*) proposed by Qiu Zeqi in his book, *Rebuilding Relationships: The essence of digital social interaction* (2024). The idea of the ‘self-centred society’ is influenced by the theory of the ‘differential mode of association’ (*chaxugeju*) by Qiu’s teacher, China’s renowned anthropologist Fei Xiaotong. Fei has described how relationships in traditional Chinese society are networked around the individual, akin to the ripples that emanate from a stone thrown into water (Fei 1992). The distance between the ripples represents the closeness of social relationships. In this mode, norms and ethics shift based on relational proximity, leading people to favour flexible customary laws over universal principles. This profoundly affects various aspects of Chinese society, including power structures, state functions, ceremonial order, economic systems and social stability. Fei’s ideas have also been complemented by other influential approaches to Chinese sociality such as those of Yan (2003, 2020).

While Fei’s theory captured the self-centredness of traditional Chinese social structures, Qiu sees digital technology as extending and deepening this dynamic. In his view, both concepts describe social networks that radiate from the individual outward. Fei’s ‘differential mode’ applies to agricultural society, whereas ‘self-society’ offers a framework for understanding the dynamics of a digital society where people position themselves as central nodes in an increasingly interconnected social web.

The concepts of ‘bottom-up’ and ‘grass-roots’ are also important to Hu Yong’s reflections on Chinese digital society, as outlined in his book *Seismic Digital Shift: Rethinking our digital future* (2020). While often associated with marginalisation in mainstream thought, Hu Yong

believes that these two concepts also represent a profound transformative power in societal dynamics. Building upon the narrative of ‘marginal revolutions’ by Coase and Wang (2016), Hu Yong posits that the internet revolution constitutes China’s fifth ‘marginal revolution’.

In the book *How China Became Capitalist* (2016), Ronald Coase and his Chinese student Wang Ning characterised the last three decades of reforms in China in relation to four major marginal revolutions: the rural ‘household responsibility system’ (*nongcun jiating lianchan chengbao zerenzhi*), private enterprises (*getihu*), special economic zones (*jingji tequ*) and township enterprises (*xiangzhen qiye*). The key actors driving these revolutionary changes all hail from the margins. In Hu Yong’s view, the evolution of the internet society in China has been predominantly bottom-up, thriving within an inclusive system that fosters growth and innovation.

As showcased in a significant portion of this chapter, the rise of the short video industry and the live-streaming industry, alongside the booming e-commerce in China, has given rise to numerous novel professions while also integrating traditional occupations. Only thanks to ethnographic studies can we relate these larger trends to the relationships between individual, social and technological relations as practices within daily life.

Looking ahead, Ji Guangxu highlights the importance of discussing the reliability of online ethnography, the evolution of fieldwork techniques and the shifting relationship between researchers and subjects, as well as the positioning of researchers’ identities. Ji (2020a) considers that the dynamic between anthropologists and their subjects has changed, requiring anthropologists to acquire new fieldwork techniques to familiarise themselves with others in the digital world. Digital anthropologists should fully embrace the online world to engage with a wide range of individuals and gain thorough knowledge.

Qian Linliang also emphasises the need for researchers to reconcile the fast pace of technological and social changes with the slower, more in-depth nature of ethnographic methods, while systematically addressing multiple levels of analysis. This is exemplified by his own research trajectory of e-commerce, which provided rich material for a multiple level analysis of Chinese society (Qian 2018, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2023 and 2024).

Yang Guobin (2013) has long argued that ‘immersion’ is paramount in internet research, arguing that a true comprehension of internet culture can only be achieved through active participation, both online and offline. This chapter has revealed just how much we have learned

from the relatively few such studies that have so far been undertaken. The potential is clearly evident. What digital anthropology in China really needs now are many more of these studies, engaging cogently with this ever-changing world.

Notes

- 1 https://www.lwxsd.com/pcen/info_view.php?tab=mynews&VID=49646.
- 2 https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/statistics/202403/28/content_WS6604c172c6d0868f4e8e58ce.html.
- 3 <https://www.tisi.org/16016>.
- 4 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/vH81AVZUsmNFGbuYtzUvZA>.
- 5 <https://news.qq.com/rain/a/20220922A08B5Z00>.
- 6 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/kPu349Au3lO4EneS2DbhnA>.
- 7 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/5gPAnytu103ODyKsgEJ7tA>.
- 8 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/BINB63jhmki3E47RNRjzazg>.
- 9 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ggdoPoCtTmimzqu7IW8P9Q>.
- 10 <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/ndJTUKzCFjHOGCVLuddqXw>.

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Conclusion

Daniel Miller and Xinyuan Wang

This conclusion aims to make good on the claims made in the introduction: to generate original insights that may change views on what we mean by the ‘digital’, by ‘anthropology’ and by ‘China’ through demonstrating the ways we have employed digital anthropology to understand contemporary China. The immediate problem is that these are huge claims that pertain to very general concerns, whereas the ethnographic chapters that make up this volume are parochial and specific. Yet this is also the strength of anthropology. One reason the chapters often illustrate their points through discussion of a particular individual is that we do not want to lose the humanism reflected in our respect for their individuality. We reject the essentialism and stereotyping that merely addresses them as the token of something called ‘Chinese’. Anthropology proudly incorporates a cultural relativism, recognising the uniqueness of every population and every person within that population. However, having shown that respect we feel it is then ‘safe’ to build tentatively towards generalisation.

The scales of comparison and ethnographic evidence

Generality is approached through scaling. While an argument may not apply to some particular person or group it may be typical for middle-class males in Beijing, or common for people in Hubei Province. Some insights might reflect situations specific to China; others may hold global relevance. The two long-term projects in which we have previously been involved (Miller et al. 2016; Miller et al. 2021) were important in this regard since each consisted of multiple fieldsites around the world. This

meant that rather than a simple comparison between China and ‘the West’, we were able to see Chinese use of social media and smartphones alongside variations all around the world – as well as to consider the internal differences within China itself, supported by our research across two distinct fieldsites in the country (McDonald 2016; Wang 2016). Though, as further instances in this conclusion will show, sometimes we did encounter a global universal or something best presented as a dualism between China and the rest of the world, which is perhaps unsurprising given the difference in platform ecologies. It is also important to recognise that populations define themselves in relation to others. A key task of this conclusion is to compare the ethnographic insights presented in each chapter to identify patterns at scales. We aim to assess both what kind of comparisons generate generalisations and to what extent such claims hold.

Even though each chapter focuses on specific populations in distinct locations within China, the research participants often engage with the same digital platforms and applications, such as WeChat, mobile payment systems and various short video platforms. We need to consider whether these outcomes stem from the unique characteristics of the population, the local context, the affordances of the digital platforms or broader structures reflected in Chinese society, culture or folk beliefs.

For instance, the analysis of short video usage in Enshi City by Xiang Kunyu (Chapter 2) stands out from the general literature on social media in showing that it can reinforce conservative, not just transformed, values. WeChat usage reflects the normative values of older people living in Enshi City. Yet those values are viewed as expressions of the way Enshi is neither the same as metropolitan nor rural China. Such conservatism reflects Enshi’s standing as a fourth-tier city, shaped by China’s deeply entrenched societal hierarchies, mirrored in the country’s official city ranking system.

At the same time the chapter highlights the changes brought about by social media. While these conservative values may previously have been expressed in other forms, such as popular sayings, the digital has facilitated an unprecedented capacity for daily reinforcement, particularly through visual postings. The ease with which these can now be shared is likely to have cemented these values to an unprecedented extent. To conclude, the same study shows how Enshi may be different from other regions and cities within China, but it also illustrates the overall increase in visual media and the new ease of sharing through social media. Such phenomenon were found in all the fieldsites featured in our previous global project (Miller et al. 2016) and can be considered

universal properties of social media. However, we then have the caveat that young people in the same city use social media in other ways.

[Chapter 3](#) by Liu Chun presents other possibilities in the relationship between change and continuity arising from the growth of digital technologies. She finds significant disruptions of long-established trade patterns of matsutake between Tibetan villages in Southwest China with Eastern urban China. WeChat has been used to deviate from the carefully calibrated steps of traditional supply chains and so to bypass several layers of middlemen. Liu's chapter reveals the ability of digital technology not only to transcend time and space, but also to build a network of networks – creating a more fundamental shift in which networks can transform foundational structures.

However, it is still possible for Liu Chun to argue that the manner of change reflects local traditions. Prior academic studies have shown how in at least some parts of China, in contrast to most other regions of the world, trade was often itself a unit of social bonding (Skinner [1964](#)), with money the appropriate medium of gifting (Martin [2015](#)). As a result when commodification drifts too far from social ties, it fails. This provides a contrast with the discussions in [Chapter 8](#), in which live-streaming often fosters social bonds in trade across China (Dong and Ye [2021](#); Lai [2022a](#) and [b](#); Sun and Gan [2020](#)).

In [Chapter 4](#) Wang Haichao provides more examples of practices that could not have existed prior to the digital – for example, the way people refine their online visual self-presentations and the way they connect up without being physically together. Yet ultimately this chapter confirms the arguments made by Liu Chun. Once again WeChat trading is anything but a form of decontextualisation. On the contrary: it works by turning close kin and friends into the initial trading networks that allows such grass-root entrepreneurship to develop. They then develop close relations with loyal customers, amounting to an adaption to China as an 'acquaintance society' (Fei [1992](#)). Unlike the two previous examples, Wang Haichao's study does not emphasise regional specificity. Her analysis also can be applied more broadly to examine how WeChat, China's dominant platform, is involved in e-commerce, especially among individuals with limited financial and social resources.

If these three chapters explore the use of digital media among individuals, the chapters by Zheng Ken (7), Wang Xinyuan and Sun Yuling (5) and Li Xinru (6) are linked by their examination of the way in which new digital technologies are accompanied by new discourses about the digital. While valuable studies examine digital capitalism in China, focusing on its broader social consequences, key driving forces

and political implications (e.g. Ding and Chai 2023; Huang and Tsai 2022; Zhao and Schiller 2001), there is a relative scarcity of research grounded in ethnographic evidence carried out within the relevant institutions. The key to contemporary capitalism is not, as commonly thought, the way in which it directs money as investment, or involvement in what companies actually do. Shareholder capitalism is mostly about making bets based on the claims that have been made about future profitability (Henwood 1997). The most important role of the digital within capitalism lies in the way people employ it to make claims about future profits. It is the financial bet that this algorithm, this AI platform or those drones will be the technology of the future. We might have expected that turning our attention to corporations means becoming focused on what they produce rather than how people use their products. However, because of the nature of capitalism, the ethnography needs to focus more on the consequences of discourses and beliefs.

This helps to explain why Zheng Ken found that the workers in a leading IT company talk about what they do largely in the framework of the technological processes they claim to foster. Nor is it surprising that Li Xinru found that Hunan/Mango TV prioritises portraying their new digital platform as the future. This is not just true of the major industry players. Even a care home for the elderly in Shanghai, discussed by Wang Xinyuan and Sun Yuling, strives to impress potential clients with an image of being at the vanguard in data-driven healthcare. All three businesses are not simply selling what digital technology can do today; they are also selling promises of what it will do in the future.

The task of the digital anthropologist is both to study these claims and to reveal what is actually happening, beyond the way in which this is presented. This highlights another reason why ethnography is invaluable to the study of broad discourses such as capitalism; it relies on participant observation as a core methodology, rather than depending solely on language. Zheng Ken shows that the IT workers have become the Chinese equivalent of nerds/geeks – that is, people who like to think exclusively in technological terms. What they thereby ignore is their own contribution. In Chapter 7 her detailed observations reveal how it is actually an inextricable combination of technological, social and personal factors that create digital platforms and algorithms (see also Seaver 2022).

The discussion then extends beyond what these people do to show what makes them *those people*. Their perspectives may reflect the particular job they have been assigned by the company or their background as an elite class within Chinese society. Zheng's argument

resonates with Qian Linliang's observations in [Chapter 8](#). Here Qian (2021) examines how e-commerce entrepreneurs adeptly use self-branding techniques, including adopting specialised e-commerce jargon, to secure their social and cultural standing in the industry.

In the case of the care home described by Wang Xinyuan and Sun Yuling, the corporate desire is again to appear nerdy, dazzling potential clients with its high-tech data collection systems. However, the ethnographic detail shows how, unlike the case of Zheng Ken, the lower-level care workers have not bought into this discourse. Being at the coalface of care work, they know only too well how untrue to life these representations have become. They insist on showing the value of human interventions because they are themselves the humans who are intervening. The key to this ethnography is that we hear the voices of those who are generally invisible, and who even their own company fails to listen to.

Li Xinru represents the anthropologist as detective in much the same vein. While the corporation deploys platformisation and digitalisation to affirm its firm grasp upon the future, it is the anthropologist who finds the true reason behind its success: its careful consideration and re-packaging of the past. In the case of Chinese corporations, their alignment with the state may be just as important to their success as their expression of capitalism. This emphasis on nostalgia fits well with the ideal of a modernisation that is supposed to express traditional Chinese characteristics. The 'body-and-clothes' strategy employed by Mango TV is akin to Deng Xiaoping's famous 'Black cat, white cat' theory during the early stages of Chinese economic reform, which balanced political constraints with such pragmatism.

Finally, in [Chapter 1](#) Li Xiaolin reminds us that we need to consider the norm as well as the normative. A company selling period-tracking apps needs to claim that it allows users to compare themselves to a 'norm' in the experience of Chinese women and their periods. For this it relies on data based on the feedback from users. Yet because women are not very assiduous in providing the requisite data, the company is actually taking information generated by technological processes, then presenting it as though it was derived from human experience. If Zheng Ken brings us workers who ignore the human input in presenting what they do as digital, Li Xiaolin provides the opposite example of a company that uses information based on technology, but presents it as though it was ultimately derived from people.

Chinese characteristics

What, then, is distinctly ‘Chinese’ about these findings? In general the arguments about the importance of discourse in relation to capitalism and the economy of appearances (Tsing 2000) are common to global capitalism, whereas the issues that follow from having to align with the Chinese state are regionally specific. However, these ideals may also be more widely held. The ethnographies of Zheng Ken, Li Xinru and Li Xiaolin, which include the studies of content moderators, highlight the platforms’ mediating role in this context, as seen in a broader discussion on China’s ‘platform economy’ (e.g. de Kloet et al. 2019; Zhang and Chen 2022). Mediators are constantly trying to guess what would not be acceptable to the Chinese state (also see King, Pan and Roberts 2013; Wang 2016).

Our ethnographies reveal the constant balancing between the agency of platforms, of individual employees and the need to align with the state’s agenda. For instance, in both Zheng Ken’s and Li Xiaolin’s studies (Chapters 7 and 1 respectively), the platforms share the state’s disdain for what they regard as ‘vulgar’ modes of expression. However, their interpretations of state expectations, the rationale behind their own standards and the methods of enforcement vary significantly. In Wang Xinyuan and Sun Yuling’s research (Chapter 5) care workers innovatively applied their personal smartphones to accommodate the institution’s overwhelming emphasis on data-driven care. More examples can be found in Chapter 8, such as the way in which taxi drivers utilise WeChat groups to resist the control of the taxi-hailing platform’s algorithms (Ding 2023).

Other findings relate to historical rather than political contexts. To appreciate Li Xiaolin’s analysis in Chapter 1 we need to understand the way people in China think about the very nature of blood and sex. For example, in TCM (Traditional Chinese Medicine) menstrual blood is important as an external sign of the internal health of the body. Similarly arguments about the way in which digital media reflect the precise position of a fourth-tier city, or the way trade is socially embedded rather than reflecting money as decontextualising, are based on traditions relevant to at least some, but not necessarily all, populations within China.

Finally, Chapter 8 provides an important, more generalising context for studies in China. It summarises a substantial body of ethnographic work by scholars within China that has documented how each new digital technology, from platforms such as QQ and WeChat through

to live streaming, has been deployed in a range of fieldsites. This chapter also covers a wide range of significant topics not particularly prominent elsewhere within this volume, such as politics, digital labour, the media and the rise of various forms of e-commerce. The sheer volume of such academic work shows how our studies occupy a niche, but need to be viewed within this much wider context. This also includes the work of scholars from outside China summarised in the introduction.

As noted in the introduction, the approach to digital anthropology represented in this volume reflects the legacy of earlier anthropological studies of offline China. Zheng Ken's findings reflect those of Yan Yunxiang (1996) who also argued that, even within the seemingly coherent structure of kinship, individuals will attempt to assert their own ambitions as derived from their particular positions within this structure (see also Yan 2013). This equally applied to Liu Chun's exploration of how different e-commerce practices challenge the highly collectivist ethos of her traditional Tibetan village (Chapter 3). Her analysis can also be seen as the latest iteration of what Harrell described as the long-term anthropological interest in the way villages and other local communities seek to respond to the twists and turns of larger forces that bear down on them (2001, 142–4). Such arguments also apply to the way individuals try to improve their quality of life, as described by Wang Haichao in Chapter 4.

Moreover, as introduced in Chapter 8, the long-term, multi-site research of Sun Xinru and her team (e.g. Sun and Qian 2022; Sun and Wang 2021; Sun and Yang 2018; Wang and Sun 2023) in rural areas continues this deep anthropological interest in how rural communities adapt to technological and economic changes imposed by broader societal and state forces. Together they relate to questions posed by earlier studies. For example, along with other scholars Wai-chu and Chung-tai (2011), we might ask if there is any case for saying that the digital corresponds to a different form of association and relatedness equivalent to Fei's (1992) emphasis upon *chaxugeju* as a model of association.

To conclude, we suggested in the introduction that using digital anthropology to understand China means paying equal attention to Chinese exceptionalism and to places where what is happening in China reflects global trends. In the above summary many examples were given of how the digital leads to change, but often in a manner that incorporates cultural continuities. Our ability to develop original insights into these processes returns us also to the point made in the introduction about how we understand the discipline of anthropology itself. We can

see now what followed from our commitment to holistic contextualisation and an emphasis upon observation rather than what people say in interviews, questionnaires and focus groups.

This chapter also confirmed our commitment to the ordinary, ensuring the presence of those who are at the lowest rungs of society and generally ignored: the grass-roots women who struggle with *gaokao*, the intense national examination system, and end up at low-tier colleges and who need WeChat to make a living; residents of a remote Tibetan village; low-level workers in a care home. However, when we need the relevant information and insights, we also talk to the top executives in the most successful media and IT corporations in China today. It is important too that several chapters combine the perspective of creators and users. Li Xinru not only completed an internship at Hunan/Mango TV, but also worked within a district where people watched the programmes created by the network. Li Xiaolin worked mainly with those who used period-tracking apps, but she also spent several months inside a company that produces them. None of these chapters is based solely on online research. Our commitment is to understanding China itself, not just the digital.

Explanation from the *Longue durée* of history

The ideal of holistic contextualisation means that we cannot be limited simply to our ethnographic findings (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) or to the epistemology of positivism. To complement our ethnographic insights in trying to understand contemporary China, we also pay respect to that which we cannot observe, derived from the work not only of historians but also of geographers such as Skinner (1964), as well as the long tradition of anthropology that preceded the digital, for example work by Fei (1992), Kipnis (1997) and Yan (1996). Since it would be especially strange to talk about change and continuity without acknowledging the contribution of historians, the following section examines both long- and short-term histories.

The concept of the *Longue durée* was developed by the French historian Braudel (1996) for his study of changes in the entire Mediterranean region over several centuries. Inspired by Braudel, and also influenced by structuralism, the American Chinese historian Huang Renyu (Ray Huang) proposed a ‘macro-history’ (*da lishi*) approach to understanding Chinese society, examining social structural issues and development over extended historical periods (Huang 2015). For example, his seminal book *1587, A Year of No Significance: The Ming*

dynasty in decline (1981) uses the events of a single year to examine the historical trajectory of the entire Ming dynasty (1368–1644).

An example illustrating the necessity and benefit of considering this *Longue durée* may be found in a consideration of the national university entrance examination in mainland China, known as *gaokao*. Interaction with Chinese students and scholars at UCL, including some co-authors of this volume, quickly brings out the scars and legacies they carry from the intense pressure and workload associated with preparing for this exam. Why should so much of a person's future be determined by this single examination? One of the most popular contributions to Chinese literature was the thirteenth-century play *The Romance of the Western Chamber* (Wang, Y. 2025). It concerns an illicit love affair between a lower status male and a higher status female. Ultimately the woman's mother agrees to the relationship as long as the male does sufficiently well in the Imperial examination. This examination was well established even at that time, having originated during the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE). It was then further formalised and institutionalised under the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) before reaching its full maturity and refinement in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE).

The Chinese character for education, *jiao* (教), is composed of two elements: *xiao* (孝), meaning filial piety, on the left, and *wen* (文), representing literature or scholarship, on the right. This composition reflects a traditional Chinese understanding of the purpose of education – to cultivate individuals who embody the societal ideal of filial piety through scholarly and literary development.

China has a long-standing tradition of moral education, heavily shaped by Confucian thought. Under the socialist regime this tradition has been reconfigured, blending Confucian ideals of *jiao* with socialist values of collective responsibility (Wang 2023). This ideology, reaching from the family unit to the state, emphasises the central role of authority figures in guiding, shaping and caring for those under their supervision.

What has changed nowadays is that this exam now pertains to nearly all schoolchildren, not just to the elite. Even a pupil from a relatively poor background, with little chance of escaping destiny through successful exam results, still strives to embody the qualities of self-cultivated discipline as a *gaokao zhanshi* (warrior) (Howlett 2021). We might expect that the main impact of digital technologies would be to provide alternative pursuits such as gaming. However, as illustrated in a recent paper by Shi (2023) and the accounts of our students, the main impact may be still further pressure from parents, in conjunction with teachers, in ensuring pupils' devotion to their studies. The role of digital

technology in shaping ‘*gaokao* warriors’ seems to be more of a reinforcing force than a counteracting one. The contemporary changes only make sense in the light of centuries of continuity.

Can we extrapolate from this example to develop a wider appreciation of what the digital means in China? An appreciation that would enable us to escape from assumptions that the ‘Chinese digital’ is simply an oriental version of Silicon Valley? It is not just that *gaokao* ranks the population according to one exam. Elites in China are very clear about the exact placement of their top universities, to the extent that individuals carry lifelong ‘branding’ based on which one they attended. But then nor can we understand [Chapter 2](#) by Xiang Kunyu without noticing how the constant ranking of towns and cities equally serves to ‘brand’ their inhabitants. This then seems also to apply to the way in which digital credit systems such as Sesame Credit are currently developing, and the wider social credit system (Liu [2020](#); Wang [2019](#)).

What makes China unique was that, as a result of the Imperial examination, while much of the West was ruled by aristocracies, the elites in China were often formed from bureaucrats selected through these examinations, making them far more inclined to this kind of semi-quantified ranking. The social credit system has its precedents in *Dang’an*, a system within which every individual was subject to a personal dossier. The origins of this system (Jiang [2020](#)) go back three millennia to the Western Zhou; they were elaborated in the Han dynasty and reach their height in the *Jiaku* system of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). They went on to play a highly significant role in the Mao era. Bearing this in mind, the use of the digital for quantified ranking could be an instance of new technological capacities meeting historical cultural propensity.

A second example may help to explain another conundrum that arises in trying to understand the digital present. How is it that China is, on the one hand, the world’s leading investor in digital technologies, and the state has prioritised making China the vanguard in this sector, while on the other the state has done more than any other region to curb these same technologies? Herold ([2011](#)) has argued that one of the facets of these ‘Chinese characteristics’ was the relatively high degree of government control over the development of the internet in China. Both the investment and the constraints reflect this degree of control. Recent historians (e.g. McDermott [2022](#)) have questioned the views held at the time of Weber and others that merchants had a particularly low status in ancient China. Nevertheless, there are clear examples during the Ming and Qing dynasties of restrictions being imposed on merchants – including, for a period, a ban on all seagoing trade.

In short, these ‘Chinese characteristics’ have always served to put the harmony of the state above any commercial interest – precisely the way in which the contemporary Party-state would justify this curbing of modern digital corporations. The Great Firewall of China is at least analogous to these historical rejections of foreign traders. It thus seems reasonable to explain the present as stemming in part from long-term continuity in the priorities of firstly the imperial, now the Party-state. However much it wants to drive forward digital advancement, the top priority will always be security and harmony in relation to the state itself (Naughton, Xiao and Xu 2023; see also Naughton 2021).

These two examples set up the foundation for a more ambitious rethinking of what the digital means in contemporary China. As the latest form of technology, the meaning of digital is derived in part from the meaning of the term *technology*. The possibility that this would be different within China comes from the contributions of the historian Joseph Needham and the anthropologist Francesca Bray. The project begun by Joseph Needham (from 1956), *Science and Civilisation in China*, has produced 27 books. These gave evidence that, with the invention of paper, gunpowder, the compass, the clock and general advances in chemistry, biology and other sciences, China was for an extended period a leading region in technological innovation. This was partly because it was more concerned with the practical human needs to which science could be directed, and partly because what was meant by practical was always also moral, concerned to protect the harmony of the state.

The anthropologist Francesca Bray (2019), who once worked with Joseph Needham, notes that the English term *technology* encompasses many Chinese concepts – words such as *ji* and *che*, *gong*, *fang*, *fa*, *shu* and *qiao*. These are all related, but none have the same connotations as the term *technology*. Yet late imperial China, with its chain suspension bridges, fine porcelain, lofty buildings, textiles and canals, was then well in advance of Europe (Bray 2019, 31). Song Yingxing’s (1997) book *T’ien-Kung K’Ai-Wu*, published in 1637, provides a useful guide to what had then been achieved, such as casting iron anchors or salt extraction.

However, this book also shows how technology, as the works of heaven, was viewed as something that unites cosmological and moral order in the tradition of Confucius. Rulers and bureaucrats were expected to promote the welfare of the country through preoccupation with problems such the hydraulics of irrigation, transport and the prevention of flooding. The historical perspective shows how:

key technological practices (present, as well as past) may be valued more for their moral and cosmological efficacy than for their material and economic output. (Bray 2019, 34)

For example, the role of the family head and the virtuous woman was equally important to technology.

In addition, Bray points to the importance of *quality* in relation to technology. An important component of the sense of national humiliation that drives so many of the ambitions of contemporary China stems from the decades when most people in the West considered goods made in China as the epitome of poor quality. The rise of the digital has coincided with the drive completely to repudiate that reputation, and instead to make Chinese goods to the highest global standards. Digital advancements have been instrumental in this transformation, enhancing the perceived quality of China exports, such as smartphones and now AI. However, just as the word technology means something different in China because of its moral connotations, so does the word quality.

In modern Chinese, the character ‘zhi’ (质) serves as the foundation for a few terms related to the concept of quality. By combining ‘zhi’ with other characters, these terms are tailored to different contexts and subjects. For example, ‘zhiliang’ (质量) usually refers to the quality of objects, whereas the term specifically used for human is ‘suzhi’ (素质). The anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2006) emphasises the significance of the term *suzhi* (human qualities) in understanding contemporary China, highlighting its role in establishing hierarchical and moral distinctions between high and low. He further argues that the improvement of *suzhi* is regarded as a mission of national importance.

Wang Haichao devotes Chapter 4 to people who feel they are regarded as lacking *suzhi*. In Chapter 1 Li Xiaolin shows how the creators of the period-tracking app see some of the more sexualised content as a form of vulgarity, again indicating the lower *suzhi* of some of the users of their app. Yet, as Kipnis (2006) also confirms, in its Confucian roots this word also refers to physical developments in China that would help in turn to develop the moral and intellectual quality of its people. This suggests something similar to the connotations of ‘civilisation’, as implied in Needham’s *Science and Civilisation*.

All of this is in stark contrast to the West, where the dominant tradition has always been to perceive technology and humanity as opposites. The tradition represented by the Frankfurt School philosophers such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1977), as well as Heidegger (1977),

has been to blame the ills of the contemporary world on the suppression of humanity by technology. Technologies such as the industrial and digital revolutions are almost always seen as dehumanising. In the next section we elaborate on the very different way in which technology was also understood in Chinese philosophical and cosmological traditions – namely as a way of developing rather than replacing humanity.

Traditional Chinese philosophy and technology

Hui Yuk, the Chinese philosopher of digital technology, uses mythology to illustrate why technology is closely tied to cultural world-views and why there is not a single, universal concept of technology. Instead, he suggests there are various ‘cosmotronics’ (Hui 2016; 2017) that differ across cultures. Hui Yuk (2016, 12–17) highlights how, in European mythology, the Greek tale of Prometheus serves as a cautionary tale about the perils of technology. Prometheus stole fire (symbolising technology) from the gods to help humanity, leading Zeus to punish mankind by allowing the contents of Pandora’s box to be released, which unleashed suffering into the world. Similarly, in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, Dr Frankenstein’s creation turns against him, symbolising the potential consequences of unchecked technological ambition. In these stories technology is depicted as a source of conflict, as well as something potentially alien to human nature.

By contrast, Chinese mythology offers a different perspective. The myth of the Three Sovereigns (Fuxi, Nvwa and Shennong) portrays technology as a positive gift. Fuxi, for instance, is revered for teaching essential skills such as hunting, fishing and cooking to humanity. Here technology is not a forbidden power stolen from the gods, but a harmonious gift from one person to another. When the Western perspective on technology as dehumanising arrived in China, it was confronted by a cosmology that had already ‘naturalised the divine’ (Hui 2016, 16).

The *I-Ching*, or *Book of Changes*, one of the oldest and most influential texts in Chinese philosophy, highlights the key difference between Chinese and Western thinking: the question of ‘being’ was never central to early Chinese philosophy (Shang 2016). Chinese thought was more concerned with how, where and when beings occur in a process of becoming. Such a perspective explains in part why major debates about whether technology challenges the ‘authentic being’ of humanity in the West have not had the same significance in China.

The goal of Confucian philosophy is to acquire practical knowledge rather than theoretical understanding, providing guidance for addressing the challenges of human life (Wang, N. 2013). There is a deep belief in ancient Chinese thought that the ‘ten thousand things’ (*wan wu*) that make up the cosmos are interpenetrating and interactive (Huang, C. 2006). The Chinese cultural ideal and pursuit for Confucian ‘harmony between Man and Nature’ (Liu, Y. and Wu, Y. 2024) underlies attitudes towards the ‘ten thousand things’ in their everyday life and surrounding environment. This concept of the ‘ten thousand things’ is sometimes translated as ‘nature’ in English, but it actually includes artefacts made by people (Farquhar and Zhang 2012; Hui 2017; Li, C. 2013; Liu, Y. and Wu, Y. 2024). Confucianists do not regard ‘ten thousand things’ as something separate from humanity nor as external objects. Rather, they had always read cultural significances into ‘ten thousand things’ (Huang, C. 2006).

For example, Mencius said ‘All of the ten thousand things are there, within me’. Although the context was moral self-cultivation, the human is viewed as part of the cosmos partaking in the total substance shared among the ‘ten thousand things’. There is at least an analogy between these strands of ancient Chinese philosophy and the approach to material culture studies described in the introduction to this volume, used by Hegelian philosophy to transcend the dualism between people and things (Miller 1987).

Another contrast with traditional Western views of technology can be found in Daoism (or ‘Taoism’). Daoists may be critical of urban life and, by implication, of techniques and artefacts. Yet the issue for Daoism lies not with machines and technology themselves, but rather with the ethics of engineering and the governance of technology (Allen 2010). In fact Daoism appreciates the inherent goodness of techniques (Wang, N. 2013). Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi expanded the concept of Dao from an ontological principle to something manifested in daily life, such as technique (Wheeler 2022). Were Zhuangzi alive today, he would probably have argued that since Dao is the origin of the ten thousand things, it must be reflected in everything, including the internet.

In modern times Chinese scholars have proposed the concept of the ‘Dao of technology’, or Confucian ethics of technology, as a philosophy of technology from the perspective of Chinese culture (Wang, Q. and Zhang, W. 2020; Wong 2012). In Chapter 5 Wang Xinyuan and Sun Yuling observe a ‘Dao of technology’, manifested in the daily caregiving and negotiation with digital control among frontline care workers. These care workers rank at the bottom of the data-driven knowledge hierarchy in modern healthcare institutions, which are heavily influenced by

datafication. However, their deeply entrenched understanding of the real goodness of technique and technology suggests a vernacular practice of intuitive rationality that expresses the real Dao of care and Dao of technology.

These philosophical considerations align with the concept of *suzhi* (human quality), where the latter part, *zhi*, carries the core meaning of the term – applying to the quality of both persons and of technologies. This perspective shapes how people understand digital technologies. This discussion of philosophical tradition runs parallel to the previous consideration of the *Longue durée*. Together they suggest an entirely different understanding of technology from the tendency in the West to see it as something intrinsically non-human that tends to diminish our humanity.

Newspapers in countries such as the UK have daily items about how people are losing humanity as a result of addiction to some digital technology, or because they are focused upon screens rather than people. China is certainly now part of such global discourses – for example, the fear that too much game playing will harm the education system. Yet underneath may lie a very different set of assumptions about what the digital itself means as the latest iteration of technology. In the Chinese view these are innovations that can develop our humanity through welfare and harmony, as opposed to something intrinsically dehumanising.

Our exploration of history and philosophy does not seek to define a fixed or stable notion of a Chinese ‘character’. China’s history has been marked by turbulence; empires have risen and fallen, dynasties have succeeded one another. While the chapters in this volume point to the country’s continued extraordinary internal diversity, this conclusion balances that more parochial lens with a wider consideration of the historical continuity of ideology. Being largely independent of the empirical, ideology can persist for centuries, remaining relatively impervious to historical shifts. However, ideology strongly influences people’s attitudes and beliefs. The historical evidence suggests a quite distinctive and normative meaning to the word ‘technology’. It is likely that this will have consequences for the meaning and experience of contemporary digital technologies.

Explanation from the more recent history

To confirm any continuity between the meaning of the term technology and that of the digital also requires consideration of more recent events.

Although China had been in the vanguard of technological development in earlier times, the late Qing and the Republican period saw the dominance of foreign powers in developing railways, telegraph systems and the film industry. In response to this and the national humiliation of the Opium wars *jishu* (technology) and *gongcheng* (engineering) became integral to the task of specialists seeking to create a modern China.

The historical role of technology as a moral project takes on a new complexion in revolutionary China. The young scientists who participated in the 4 May movement of 1919 already saw their role in creating a modern China. This in turn was influenced by the way in which Maoist philosophy emphasised material practice over theory, echoing the practical orientation of Confucian thought (Wong 2012) and contributing to the relatively seamless reception and adoption of Marxism in China (Wang, N. 2013).

Within this framework, technology was never viewed as merely instrumental but as deeply political, bound up with questions of national strength and collective participation. It became a central site through which individuals could enact their political commitments and demonstrate their role in the socialist project. As a result, Marxism and Maoism have served as the foundation for the promotion and development of technology:

Political participation in Communist China is closely linked to economic and technological change. Possibly the most important expression of the Chinese participatory style is in the technical sphere. (Lee 1973)

Wang Xinyuan's monograph (2023) provides a detailed explanation of how older people's attitudes towards digital technology are fundamentally shaped by the Communist revolutions they experienced. She suggests a continuity between the ideal of continual self-reform, with the exhortation continually to become a 'new man' (as encouraged or enforced under the Cultural Revolution) becoming a principle now driving older people to embrace the smartphone revolution. Under this ideology, technology is regarded as a major progressive force in the pursuit of the ultimate liberation of human capacity. The 'information revolution' is being embraced by generations deeply influenced by the Maoist belief that technological development is essential for emancipating human agency.

As Wang also argues, individuals within the Maoist framework are expected to adapt continually to an ever-progressing world, including

its technological advancements. There is little tolerance for those who remain detached from the spirit of their era; it is widely believed that those who resist being transformed by their time risk being ‘dumped by the age’ and ‘becoming useless’. Many Chinese thus feel a personal responsibility and moral duty as good citizens to support the state’s drive to digital modernity (see also Ollier-Malaterre 2024).

While both the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in many ways failed, we can see how this trajectory laid the foundations for the way in which digital technologies have been grasped by the state as the instrument for making China a country that can once again lead the world. What changed was the increasing emphasis upon innovation found in the National Science and Technology Development Plan 2006–2020, which impacted many branches of science and led to an increase in patents filed. As Bray notes:

The Chinese government aims to promote ‘quality’ (*suzhi*) among its population not only by developing human capital through education and growth, but also by ensuring the quality of technological products, from food to digital devices to health-care. (Bray 2019, 43–4)

This would also be the final repudiation of the time when ‘made in China’ was synonymous with unreliable goods of poor quality.

Bray discusses the way in which groups such as the Iron Girls Brigade represented an abrupt shift to gender equality in terms of the people who would develop China’s new technologies in the Maoist period. Significantly, after the end of the ‘one-child policy’, women again became associated mostly with producing ‘good quality’ children and the domestic sphere (Bray 2022). In her study on digital surveillance in China, Ollier-Malaterre also observed that the technology is widely embraced by the Chinese people, regarded as ‘a vector of civilisation, holding promises of safety, morality, and modernity’ (Ollier-Malaterre 2024, 161). This technology optimism resonates with a broader sense of national pride, set against the backdrop of China’s narrative of overcoming the ‘national humiliation’. The rise of digital technology is seen to be pivotal in restoring the country to its rightful place at the centre of the world stage.

At this point we also see the cohesion of a contemporary ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1977) in China. Mao’s vision that modern Marxism would rise from the destruction of the feudal past has been replaced by Xi’s emphasis on the continuity of ‘Chinese characteristics’. Such an emphasis

reconnects these recent developments with the ancient imperial promise to promote welfare through technology as useful practices. In doing so it supports this concept of digital technology as a moral and cosmological project that will lead China to its promised future.

Understanding digital China

The latter part of this conclusion has shown why digital China should not be regarded as some version or adaptation of any more ‘authentic’ digital that naturally belongs to some other place such as Silicon Valley. The digital in China is what people in China understand by the digital and what they have created from it. We have argued in as much as the digital is understood as a form of technology that will create a marked difference between China and the West. As the internet started to develop in the West, it was almost always referred to as the *virtual* world, the antithesis of something else called the *real* world. This expressed the historical perception of an opposition between technology and humanity. It is equally reflected in the constant critiques that followed, ranging from how the selfie shows people as selfish and superficial or how the smartphone replaces real people with screens to current fears around algorithms and AI.

There is a constant reiteration of the principle that the digital will diminish our humanity and is less real (e.g. Federspiel et al. 2023; Fox and Moreland 2015; Shane-Simpson et al. 2020). However, none of this necessarily reflects any intrinsic property of the digital itself. Online is just as real as offline (Miller and Horst 2012). This terminology is an expression of Western ideology, as made explicit in traditions of Western philosophy reflected by thinkers such as Adorno and Heidegger. The West is shaped by its own ideological frameworks just as much as China is – and equally influenced by its own *Longue durée* China today will, of course, participate in the same global discourses about the digital. The argument put forward by Qiu Zeqi (2024) (see Chapter 8), suggesting that the digital fosters a self-centred society, is one that would resonate in many contexts. However, at a more general level, a distinctly Chinese perspective is apparent. In China the digital is not primarily seen through the Western lens of a divide between the virtual and the real, suggesting that the digital is in some way less authentic and less human than what is presumed to have been case in the ‘real’ world prior to the digital. Instead, the Party-state and the wider population have focused on the digital as a practical tool for advancing specific social and economic

goals. As Hu Yong argues (see [Chapter 8](#)) concerning the ‘fifth marginal revolution’ (Hu 2020), digital technology has enabled ordinary Chinese people, including once-marginalised communities, to enhance their quality of life and to articulate their visions of a better future in ways previously unimagined.

For the Party, digital innovation is not merely about modernisation and economic development, but also about seizing an opportunity to leapfrog other regions, positioning China at the forefront of global technological leadership. At the same time the digital serves a dual purpose: it allows the state’s capacity to ensure and reinforce conformity and harmony in the tradition of the imperial state’s vision for Chinese technology. This dual objective explains the seeming contradiction in which the Party-state simultaneously encourages a huge investment in the development of digital giants even as it also imposes radical constraints upon these corporations.

In summary, the argument for a fundamental distinction between the meaning of digital technology in China and in the West has rested as much on showing the ideological bias in the way the digital is being viewed in the West as the historical underpinnings of how technology is viewed in China. Our previous studies over 10 years (Miller et al. 2016; Miller et al. 2021) have also demonstrated an extraordinary gulf between Western ideology and Western practice. Even as they critique every aspect of digital technologies, people in the West continue to increase their usage. While describing the digital as anti-social, they increasingly socialise through smartphones and social media. Their assumption that face-to-face encounters are somehow more authentic ignores all that we have learned from Goffman (1959) about the performative nature of offline socialising, as well as ignoring Chinese concerns with *mianzi* or ‘face’ in offline encounters. In short, even our empirical studies of how digital technologies are employed in the West seem to align rather more easily with Chinese perceptions of the digital than that found in Western discourses and ideology.

The differences percolate down to the individual chapters in this book and help us to explain our detailed findings. Much of this is specific to China. We need to understand how the digital is constantly being employed in the project of uplifting the *suzhi* equally of people and things. Feelings about *suzhi* are evident within many of the chapters in this volume. As noted above, in [Chapter 4](#) Wang Haichao shows how grass-roots women see the adoption of the digital as itself a contribution to *suzhi*, while in [Chapter 1](#) Li Xiaolin shows how IT professionals worry that vulgar content online will reflect lower *suzhi*. The way in

which people think about ranking and hierarchy is crucial to explaining the findings of Xiang Kunyu with respect to the normative values of Enshi City.

The opposition to any propensity of technology to become decontextualised from the social is equally important for understanding the story of mushroom trading in the Shangri-La region (Chapter 3). This reflects that other difference from the West in which money itself is viewed as intrinsically decontextualising from humanity (Martin 2015; Simmel 1978; Zelizer 2007). Indeed, such a view of money may well be the precedent for the subsequent critique of the digital (Hart 2000). We can also appreciate how the practice of using nostalgia to build the future, in order to make a successful digital media platform aligns with the Party-state's desire to tame modernisation through an ideology of historical 'Chinese characteristics'.

None of these suggestions about what is essentially 'Chinese' in the Chinese digital context require us to homogenise the nation. The individual chapters demonstrate that these linkages are constructed in diverse, often quite specific ways. This is why it is possible to claim that we are changing the meaning of the term digital while also insisting on a different meaning to China itself – one that recognises that a common ideology is not in any way a claim to a common set of practices or populations, which remain local and disparate: specific to Enshi City, for example, or to Yunnan. The digital is also, and always remains, whatever a population or even an individual experiences.

These arguments are also intended to reveal something about the meaning of anthropology itself, together with its unique ability to bring together the most local and specific of studies with general and theoretical arguments on topics as broad as the meaning of digital. While most disciplines focus on the 'middle-range' of generalised quantitative evidence and explanation, anthropologists generally eschew this path. Instead they insist on staying with the qualitative humanism of individuals and small undistinguished places, where we follow people into the increasingly intimate, private spaces of online and offline worlds. However, anthropologists then deploy these micro-studies of life as it is actually being lived within a holistic approach that is as broad as possible, acknowledging the global comparative, the political economy and historical depth.

To conclude, we hope that this combination of ethnographic and historical detail has delivered on the promise made in the opening paragraph of our introduction. The meaning of this book's title would change once we come to see how our understanding of 'digital' and

‘China’ can evolve and gain a deeper appreciation of how these concepts are intertwined contexts, each shaping and redefining the other. We have also shown why anthropology needs to be regarded as the discipline of the future, given the challenges posed by trying to research digital and private worlds. Finally, we aim to leverage these perspectives to understand the diversity and creativity of the contemporary peoples of China and who they are becoming as part of the rise of digital China.

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Understanding China through Digital Anthropology questions our understanding of digital technologies by demonstrating fundamental differences in the meaning of both technology and the digital between China and the West. This follows from a longstanding historical divergence in the meaning of and attitude to the relationship between technology and humanity.

The book also challenges our understanding of China through a series of case studies that range from the creation of algorithms, the normative basis of social media and the impact of digital communication on diverse fields including economic practices, gender, media and healthcare. These further demonstrate the value of long-term ethnographic studies that situate people's online activities in their everyday offline lives. These case studies are testimony to the continued heterogeneity of China in covering sophisticated urban IT professionals, Tibetan villagers and grassroots women struggling to make a living. All of this contributes to a new understanding of a contemporary China that has been transformed by the sheer scale and dynamism manifested in the deployment of digital technologies. The book also includes an extensive summary of work undertaken by scholars inside China on digital anthropology and previously only available in Chinese.

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