



WeChat Ethnography: New Practices and Limits of an Emerging Research Method

Part I : October 7, 2022

Part II : February 9-10, 2023

Conference Abstracts

As more and more social practices take place online, scholars have also changed their ways to conduct research, disrupting the traditional methods of social sciences. Indeed, online ethnography has evolved into an increasingly popular research method and, as Hallett and Barber pointed out, “*it is no longer imaginable to conduct ethnography without considering online spaces*” (2014: 307). In the context of conducting research in China or with Chinese, reinforced by the Covid-19 situation and a limited access to the fieldwork, the use of WeChat – the most popular social media in China – has become critical. However, this platform may be both promising and constraining and requires methodological and ethical reflections on how to operationalize “WeChat ethnography”: May we use or reproduce a private chat conversation to support an academic argument? How to deal with pseudonyms and identity markers to protect the participants? Whose permission should we seek for the publication of an image publicly shared online? How to credit users for their creations while respecting their privacy? How to deal with the respondents’ intimacy?

This workshop encourages researchers in social sciences and Chinese studies to share their “Wechat ethnography” experiences and to open discussion related to online research methods, grasping the new opportunities as well as the limits and difficulties it provokes, bearing in mind that doing good ethnographic research consists of “finding practical and defensible balancing points between opposing tensions” (Baym, 2009: 173), and making accounts that are “properly responsible and accountable to their audience and their informants” (Hine, 2013: 6).

Part I: October 7, 2022

Friday, October 7

<p>9:30-10:00 (online)</p>	<p><i>WeChat Ethnography: From Hype to Reality Check</i> Haiqing Yu (RMIT)</p> <p>The field of China Studies has experienced significant challenges in recent years. Not only are researchers having to deal with COVID-19 travel restrictions and political tensions between the US and China; we must also address shifting ethics requirements of our home institutions amid the distrust from folks in China and fellows in the West. This has been reflected in the use of WeChat as an ethnographical site and tool for research by non-Chinese and/or non-China-based researchers. From chat groups to Moments, from mini programs to third party services, the different functions of WeChat are organised according to the locations and social space that users live or associate with. It is therefore important to recognise that WeChat (or the internet in general) is not placeless; that WeChat as ethno-transnational media is not void of geopolitics; and that (West-based) WeChat researchers are not free from ethical and ideological constraints imposed by their home institutions or countries. This article reflects on the <i>technological, cultural, and political</i> affordances and limitation of WeChat ethnography in comparison with Twitter and other Western social media based digital ethnography. Such a discussion is put in the context of Western scrutiny and distrust of made-in-China platforms for their surveillance and censorship practices. It examines the practicality and necessity of the platform as an ethnographical site and tool for qualitative research, typical methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the hurdles and shortcomings in conducting WeChat digital ethnography. Findings of this article are based on my ethnographic experience of and through WeChat in a number of projects over ten years.</p>
<p>10:00-10:30 (online)</p>	<p><i>Ethnographic Research on the Team Working Online: Using WeChat and Online Meetings as Data</i> Kun Han (Renmin University)</p> <p>During the COVID-19, some of teams adopted online work to cope with the uncertainty of officework, which triggered discussions on online work efficiency. Some people think that WeChat communication is direct and clear, while others think it may lead to misunderstanding or ignorance. With the transformation from officework to online work, researchers in sociology of organization need to include WeChat group communication and online meeting as ethnographic data. With the consent of the online work team, the author joined their WeChat work group to do online field work. This paper takes the ethnography of the online team work as an example, focusing on three points: First, what impact does online work have on team management; second, the role of ethnographers in the online fieldwork; third, the feasibility of WeChat ethnography in organization research. This paper argues that the online work requires team members</p>

	<p>to be online for a long time, as the working time and rest time are ambiguous. Leaders need to increase the frequency of incentives to members, which aims to consolidate their relationships. As for WeChat ethnographers, they mainly act as “invisible” participating observers in online fieldwork, and it is not easy to ask questions to interviewees immediately. According to the author’s fieldwork, it may be more effective to collect data in this way: Work together as team members, and join their WeChat subgroups (outside the work groups). Ethnographers may talk with interviewees about the relaxing topics to gain their trust, then use the voice chat to do the formal interview. Without location constraint, WeChat ethnography may be more efficient in organization studies, but some key information may be missed. Thus, ethnographers need to step out of silent observation and integrate into team work to exert the function of WeChat ethnography in organization research.</p>
<p>10:50-11:20 (online)</p>	<p><i>The Digital bridge: WeChat ecology and Chinese international students in Melbourne</i> Gavin Xun Zhou (RMIT)</p> <p>In the past seven years, research on WeChat has gradually moved from single functional studies to a focus on its infrastructure and ecology research. WeChat’s “ecology” is thought to be the result of a multifunctional merger (Becker, Montag, & Gan 2015), which is a well-established social media ecosystem that is effectively defined as an integrated platform (Chen et al. 2018). WeChat ecology research is a closed social media ecosystem that people use every day that provides a seamless, integrated, contextualized and efficient experience (The Medium 2019). The ecosystem formed by WeChat is immersed in a socio-technological framework. It allows users to enjoy and access a wide range of services without switching platform (Chen 2017). This type of social media can often enrich information data flow and user experience. The nature of the WeChat ecosystem amplifies the network effect, a phenomenon in which users measure the commercial value of a product. The more users use it, the higher the value of the product. It allows people to interact and participate in service and makes the platform difficult for users to disengage. This paper will focus on WeChat ecology and Chinese students living in Australia. It seeks to understand how the WeChat ecosystem continues to play a significant role in the lives of these young user groups. More precisely, I will investigate why Chinese students in Melbourne continue to use WeChat despite its strict censorship regime and all the other social media platforms available. This paper will use a mixed research methods, collecting quantitative and qualitative data, aiming to bridge the research gap on WeChat ecology and overseas users, frequency of social media usage of overseas users and the phenomenon of cultural attribution in online practice. Rethinking the relationship between WeChat and users, such as the reason for continued, re-examining functionality and users, and re-discussing stickiness concept.</p>

<p>11:20-12:00 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>WeChat as an object of study and research methods: Human mobility & Mobility of goods</i> Natalia Ryzhova (Palacky University) & Iulia Koreshkova (Palacky University)</p> <p>Latour's (1999) metaphor of the American pilot going nowhere without interweaving human and nonhuman actants and networks that support his flight illustrates how social scholars examine the modern infrastructure that moves people, commodities and ideas through spaces and borders. In our projects, we study the movement of people and commodities across Chinese borders and identify that WeChat plays an essential role in this infrastructure. Exploring WeChat as an object of study opens up new methodological opportunities but requires methodological and ethical reflection.</p> <p>:Human mobility <u>Natalia Ryzhova</u> & Iulia Koreshkova Xiang and Lindquist (2014) introduced the concept of migration infrastructure - the systematic interlinkage between normative, humanitarian, commercial, social and technological components - to study how people move to foreign labour markets. Scrutinizing such components in precarious labour markets in Russia, China and Korea, we revealed that technological one (social media in particular) plays an increasing role in migration infrastructure. Still, this role differs for the polymedia situation (where WhatsApp, Viber, or WeChat are available) and the one-dominated (WeChat) media situation. We conclude that in the polymedia situation, mobile people and intermediaries connect to social media to influence (at least partially) the migration infrastructure. In contrast, in the situation with one-dominated media, people link to it, to WeChat, as a migration infrastructure for it to govern them. Digital ethnography - and the comparison of WeChat with other media - was an additional method to conventional ethnography and an essential way of triangulating our conclusions.</p> <p>:Mobility of goods <u>Iulia Koreshkova</u> & Natalia Ryzhova During the COVID-19 pandemic, the mass movement of people across state borders proved impossible. Restrictions on physical mobility seemed destined to affect the work of small traders and thus the movement of goods. However, during field research in Siberia and Central Asia's 'Chinese' markets in 2022, we discovered that the locals continued to engage in lively bazaars trade. This discovery raised the question of how commodities currently move across the 'closed' Chinese border? Answering this question, we found out that the infrastructure for the 'mobility' of commodities partially has been moved to the digital space, where WeChat plays a crucial role. Using the Hughes' (1983, 2004) system metaphor, we analyze the commodities delivery system as an "interconnected technological structure" and reveal how during COVID restrictions "system builders" became indissociable to digital infrastructure.</p>
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	<p>In our talks we aim to discuss the following issues:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) The use of digital ethnography - obtained from WeChat and other social media - provides unique data for triangulating findings drawn about closed groups or sensitive topics (such as the informal movement of goods across closed borders or work in precarious labor markets). 2) The use of WeChat (and other social media) allows one to become an almost equal participant in closed groups, which gives rise to numerous ethical dilemmas. 3) WeChat ethnography differs from other social media ethnography in terms of access and available data, which raises the question of data comparability.
<p>13:30-14:00 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>Discovering common impressions on mega-event site through user-generated content: Analysis of Beijing 2022 Big Air Venue through data from the WeChat channel and Weibo</i> Huishu Deng (EPFL)</p> <p>The Big Air venue of Beijing is constructed in an industrial heritage site named Shougang, under the concept of activating the abandoned area and linking the Olympic venue with public leisure life. As Beijing 2022 has concluded half a year ago and the Shougang park has opened to the public and is attracting thousands of visitors from local and surrounding cities, it's a proper occasion to investigate what kind of scene, images, and features are more perceived and preferred by visitors, what are visitors' common impression and attachment towards this special site. It addresses a widely discussed debate that the relationship between mega-event sites and local citizens often appears detached and even conflicted during post-event period and if the public space in the site could be used as a medium to reconnect them.</p> <p>The proliferation of social media sites and the photo-taking/sharing lifestyle in this information era opens the availability of content generated and publicly posted by normal people. Weibo is one of these kinds of crowd-sourcing social media platforms that is the most popular in China. WeChat Channel (shi-pin-hao) is a program embedded inside WeChat where users can update their videos, share them with their WeChat contactors and open them to the public. This research collects user-generated and publicly posted photos, short videos, and text comments with the keywords: Shougang, Big Air Venue, and Park, from these two platforms. The data analysis approaches include photo clustering based on similarity and linguistic content analysis. And the aim is to extract the common regularity from individual on-site experience.</p>
<p>14:00-14:30 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>From Practical to Scientific : WeChat as an Ethnographic Method in Chinese Migration Studies</i> Yali Chen (School of Social Sciences, University of Geneva)</p> <p>With the emergence of digital technologies and the popularization of the use of social media, international migration has entered a new era. The diaspora online redefines the national borders and promotes the formation</p>

	<p>of a new digital national identity for migrants. The use of WeChat contributes to the formation of the Chinese diaspora online.</p> <p>In my research about gender and Chinese migrant women in Switzerland, I firstly employed WeChat as a tool for recruiting participants in order to collect their migratory life stories. With the advancement of my research fieldwork, I discovered that WeChat is not only a recruitment tool for my research or a communication tool for Chinese migrant women in Switzerland, it is also a space where the true lives of these women happen in parallel with what is happening in the physical world. Then I decided to do online observation of each of my participants' WeChat moments by combining physical interviews with them. This fieldwork practice makes me to develop my own ethnography method in Social Sciences with a gender perspective and especially suitable for research on Chinese migrants and explore more the phenomenon of the Chinese diaspora online.</p> <p>This presentation discusses how the practice of the mixed fieldwork method of face-to-face interviews and online observations makes ethnography legitimized within research in social science. What are the advantages of doing an online ethnography in feminist research on migrant women? This presentation also opens up a reflection on the ethical issue of online ethnography, particularly with regard to the observations of moments on WeChat and the use of scientific data drawn from these online observations.</p>
<p>14:30-15:00 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>An Ethnographic Space between privacy and publicity: A study on the Anti-epidemic music video of WeChat opera-fan accounts</i> Xiaoxin Wang (Ruprecht-Karls-Universität Heidelberg & Nanjing Arts University)</p> <p>One of the theoretical cornerstones of virtual ethnography is the boundary between virtual scenes and material space, and ethnographers need to return to onsite material space to find real support for online virtual scenes. "Social space is that through which both class or social groups and individuals move through time." (Fiske, 2002: 33) Wechat account system as a virtual fieldwork site, operatic music videos uploaded on this field is not only entertaining product on social media but also an acquaintance networks on real society.</p> <p>Why does it focus on the anti-epidemic song videos created by Chinese opera fans? The opera fan group is a hobby-driven network with private contacts, yet anti-epidemic-themed songs are a public topic with public attention. This case brings the possibility to deal with both the public social space and the acquainted relationships, opening dialogues with the spacious lens from the post-2020 epidemic society to the 1950s socialist era.</p> <p>Pierre Bourdieu's notion of social space (Bourdieu, 1996a: 124) is also presented in the Chinese opera fans, who are marginalized in today's cultural capital system. In particular, the amounts of like, favorite, and forward play a decisive role in Wechat's algorithm (Wu, 2020). So, the unpopularity of the operatic music videos shows the dependence on public demand rather than personal connections.</p>

<p>15:20-15:50 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>WeChat Moments as Interactive Diary Data in Ethnographic Research</i> Zhenwei Wang (Bielefeld University)</p> <p>Moments sharing in WeChat now constitutes a great part of social life in China, which makes it a significant source of data for scholars conducting ethnographic research about China-related issues. By sharing the experiences of using WeChat Moments as informants-produced interactive online diaries in the hybrid ethnographic fieldwork between 2020 and 2021 in China, this paper argues, first of all, observations of the WeChat Moments facilitate other means of data collection by 1) allowing the researcher to follow up the on-going life of the informants and thus to better prepare for the conversations for the next meetings; 2) increasing the frequency of communication to allow the informants to be familiar with and to build rapport with the researcher. Also, the informants' narratives of their own life in WeChat Moments provide rich background information about the informants' personalities, their life history, their perceptions of certain social values, their opinions about social issues, their preferred style of talking and so on. Grasping these indirect data helps the researcher to interpret the direct data (for example, interview data directly relevant to the research topic) from the perspective of the informants. Finally, the paper also reflects on the ethical issues of online observation in terms of covert/overt observation, anonymization, and reciprocity in research relationships. In general, this paper shares the experience of including WeChat Moments as pieces of self-reported interactive diary and discusses the (dis)advantages as well as the difficulties of doing WeChat Ethnography.</p>
<p>15:50-16:20 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>WeChat as an Unvoiable Research Tool for Fieldwork, and its Problems</i> Mengke Zhang (EPFL)</p> <p>I did not use WeChat as my main method or main source of materials, but I realized that during my fieldwork in China, I did use WeChat very often to help me collect data, and I see the potential of using WeChat as an increasingly important method for further research in China. Since I did not dig deeper with WeChat data, this proposal is mainly served as a starting point to help me think about potential approaches about "WeChat ethnography" and I would be willing to join the discussion and learn from scholars about how they use WeChat as a method for their research projects.</p> <p>I would like to share some ideas of how WeChat were used during my fieldwork in Beijing and Zhangjiakou for my research project about the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics. During my stay in Beijing in the first half year of 2022, I suffered from different forms of physical and digital restrictions, and therefore even I was on site, I did a number of interviews through WeChat, including video, voice, and text interviews, as well as informal chats, but I also encountered problems in terms of how to conduct effective virtual interviews, how to find useful informants, and how to communicate more deeply. Meanwhile, I also figured out different</p>

	<p>forms of second-hand information collection approaches via WeChat, such as through WeChat official accounts and mini-programs, as well as private WeChat groups serving as an agency platform. I also relied on informal information shared through my local friends as I was blocked in Beijing and could not access my field during my stay. Lastly, there were of course some other functions of WeChat, such as payment that has been studied by many scholars, and in the Covid era, some important functions have been incorporated into WeChat, such as the health code system that is even used to detect people's daily Covid test results, which I describe it as a new approach of digital regulation/surveillance. Thus, I follow Plantin & de Seta (2019)'s argument that WeChat is an infrastructure, which penetrates into people's everyday life, and is unavoidable if we want to do research in/related to China.</p>
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Part II: February 9-10, 2023

Thursday, February 9

<p>9:30-10:00 (online)</p>	<p><i>To Face the Coming of An Era of WeChat Ethnography – An Awareness of Anthropologists on the Cultural Transformation in the World</i> Xudong Zhao (Renmin University)</p> <p>Our life change is followed based upon the emerging of WeChat writing of internet. It is included several characteristics as followed: (1) Some basic everyday life is facing with overturning; (2) functional changes of urgency in real social life are led several compelled transformations of social structure; (3) “The World is Flat” based upon internet is becoming into a dominant trend; (4) an internet searching of information rather than encyclopedia knowledge storage is becoming an normal way of knowledge production; (5) it is led to fragments of time and space because of the motion interconnection in our life space; (6) a new life space of decentralization is coming up after the popularity of WeChat; (7) a time of consuming society driven by finance in our everyday life is gradually formed; (8) a clicking on interaction and the sharing encouragement in WeChat groups is also changed into a basic model of our group life; (9) a lifestyle of WeChat groups of virtual space is tightly connected each other; and finally, (10) an imagination of the world as a human community is coming into realized by most of people. For the anthropologists, in the present, all in all, an era of WeChat ethnography based upon an awareness of anthropologists on cultural transformation is coming now.</p>
<p>10:00-10:30 (online)</p>	<p><i>Digital ethnographers as a (perhaps) forgotten guest: the case of a teacher-student chat during Covid-19 lockdown in China</i> Michela Bonato (Ca’ Foscari University of Venice)</p> <p>Social media have been described as a space of possible democratization where the sharing of information and knowledge (re)making are basically allowed by an absence of vertical systems of power distribution (Bruns 2015). This perspective may appear as rather utopian when contextualised in the digital ecology of Chinese social space which is clearly characterized by an intrusion of the Chinese party-state in terms of mechanics, legislation, and media production. Therefore, any attempt of digital ethnography should take into consideration the fact that the Chinese digital is a space of compromise and resistance, censorship and consequently also self-censorship. Drawing from this premise, this paper investigates a teacher-student university chat within the WeChat domain, in its trajectory as a learning space in orthodox terms and its transformation into a normative space of control and distribution of best practices and rules during the pandemic wave that has hit Northeast China in 2022. The perspective is the one of a digital ethnographer during a participant observation session, however, the previous teacher status turns the chat into an uncomfortable space due to both empathy and</p>

	<p>scrutiny. The paper addresses issues of ethics and positionality while shedding light on peculiar aspects of the power network of digital communities and personal efforts of agency beyond the digital.</p>
<p>10:50-11:20 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>Beyond Quanzi: Digital Production of Queer Sociality and Spaces in Shanghai</i> Jiannan Shi (Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge)</p> <p>This paper discovers how gay men create and claim their spaces for queer sociality – physically and virtually – in a socially repressive environment in Shanghai. This research took evidence from a four-month ethnography in digital spaces, including WeChat groups and moments, TikTok, Twitter, and more, and physical queer spaces, including a cruising ground, gay bars, a gay board game cafe, and more in Shanghai from January to April 2022. Through fieldwork, interviews, and the author’s personal lived experience as a member of the queer community, this paper identifies how gay men in Shanghai paradoxically and tactically created queer spaces. They work with, rather than against, two major factors: political suppressions and digital entrepreneurship. This paper goes beyond the libertine imaginary of queer <i>quanzi</i> (literal translation: circle) but recognizes its fundamental role in the digital production of queer sociality and spaces. The social and digital layer of <i>quanzi</i> empowers queer sociality, but, meanwhile, problematizes gay men’s public engagement and visibility in contemporary China. The presentation of queerness is not in front of an entire public but rather in a redefined publicness co-produced by social, political, entrepreneurial, digital, and algorithmic mechanisms. Despite effective yet precarious tactics of making themselves visible in public, gay men still live with fear about their identities, sociality, and spaces being exposed outside of the queer community.</p>
<p>11:20-11:50 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>Between the “Virtual” and the “Real”: Benefits and Challenges of Using WeChat to Research Chinese Queer Sojourners in France</i> Cai Chen (Université Libre de Bruxelles)</p> <p>Drawing on an ethnographic study investigating the interrelationship between migration and sexuality amongst Chinese gay students in France, this paper presents some methodological reflections on benefits and challenges of using WeChat as a digital tool to research Chinese queer diaspora. Findings of this study suggest that WeChat groups serve as a virtual space not only for mutual informational and emotional support but also for transnational queer activism to Chinese LGBT+ migrants in France. WeChat enables Chinese queer diaspora to construct an Internet-based community across borders, embed transnational identity beyond geographic distance and express queerness in online and offline worlds. Previous studies documented that WeChat as one of the digital methods has both advantages and challenges in participant recruitment and observation, redefining ethnographic practice and reshaping the interactions between researchers and informants. Meanwhile, many ethical considerations need to be taken into account, for instance the ways</p>

	<p>how researchers present themselves and interact with informants in the virtual world, and how researchers collect and present data from WeChat. Emerged from a particular study, this paper provides original reflections on the necessity to combine and merge online and offline ethnographic methods in order to understand the multifaceted lived experience of Chinese gay student migrants in France as well as the new practices of Chinese queer diaspora at the crossroads where online and offline social spaces intersect. By emphasising the blurring boundaries between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’, I argue that researchers should constantly navigate between physical and virtual social worlds to critically account for the ongoing, increasingly digitally mediated, social interactions and practices amongst Chinese queer diaspora.</p>
<p>13:30-14:00 (online)</p>	<p><i>Applying WeChat Ethnography to politically sensitive topics</i> Yue Wang (Tampere University)</p> <p>In the increasingly digitalised world, it is crucial to include online spaces when conducting ethnography (Hallett & Barber, 2014). As the dominant platform of online interactions in China, the role of WeChat in China-related research cannot be overlooked, such as it being a data source, a research tool, and an ethnographical space. WeChat does not grant open access to the field sites due to its semi-private and non-anonymous characteristics, but it offers more efficient access to a network of informants and a more convenient way to maintain connections between researchers and informants. However, as the Chinese state intensifies internet censorship (Pan, 2017), is it still feasible and ethical to apply WeChat ethnography to politically sensitive research topics? By reflecting on relevant research experience, this paper argues that studying politically sensitive topics via WeChat ethnography may not be a good option. Compared with traditional face-to-face interactions, building a solid trust with informants through WeChat only is more challenging, but it is practically a requirement for most informants to discuss politics. Suppose some informants are open to engaging with sensitive research topics on WeChat, it may not be ethical to do so. Since WeChat accounts are verified with phone numbers connected to one’s national ID number, responding to sensitive questions may get the informants in trouble. However, it should be noted that this paper does not deny that WeChat ethnography could help researchers get quicker access to a network of informants, build better connections with informants before entering into the field, and possibly adjust the case selection based on the observations and interactions on WeChat.</p>
<p>14:00-14:30 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>Handling Online Intimacy: Some Methodological Uses and Limits of Islam-Related WeChat Groups in China</i> Pascale Bugnon (HES-So/Confucius Institute, University of Geneva)</p> <p>The use of WeChat with different Chinese Muslim communities has become more and more essential over the weeks, months of my various fieldworks in China. Indeed, the more I advanced in my data collection and my interviews, the more this tool became an integral part of my daily</p>

	<p>life, multiplying the methodological approaches but also, and above all, questions of an ethical nature: to what extent I could make use of the messages, photographs, videos and “moments” shared by my interlocutors on WeChat? How do I use an official document photographed by one of my contacts? Disputed religious ceremonies recorded? Or a particular political position? These questions are even more topical in the face of the shutdown of China's borders and the various rule texts promulgated in recent years by the Chinese government which reduce online religious expression. In these particular political conditions, to what extent data collected through WeChat are reliable? And how to ensure the accuracy of the data collected without endangering my interlocutors? My proposal therefore will address these different ethical and methodological issues based on case studies that I encountered over the past few years.</p>
<p>14:30-15:00 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>Researching Nomadism and Ritual Practices in Peripheral China through WeChat Ethnography</i> Aurore Dumont (Groupe Sociétés, Religions, Laïcité – GSRL)</p> <p>For the last fifteen years, I have been exploring the evolution of nomadism and the ritual practices of the Mongol and Tungus minority groups living in Northeast China. More specifically, I am interested in the way these pastoral peoples perceive, use and shape their territory, on a material and symbolical level. So far, participant observation at the field site has made possible to establish close relations with local societies in order to better grasp their adaptation to a fluctuating socio-economic, religious and political environment. The shutdown of China's borders and the transition from an ethnography <i>in situ</i> to an online and WeChat ethnography not only put an end to the experience of the immersion in the day-to-day lives of the people, it also created a new way of working with digital data. In this proposal, I question how WeChat platform, as an online sharing tool and an instrument of control, may be used as a digital foundation to conduct remote research on nomadic and ritual practices. While fieldwork on site often mobilizes the researcher's five senses (one can touch an object, smell and taste a particular food, observe things people do in their daily life, etc.) that are part of ethnographic experience, online fieldwork produces mainly voices, sounds, and images that have not been recorded by the researcher. How should these resources be treated? How do they operate within the framework of online research methods? My proposal will also address the different ethical and methodological issues related to research in the peripheral and ethnic areas of the People's Republic of China.</p>

<p>15:20-15:50 (onsite)</p>	<p><i>Space Modalities of Chinese Academies in Contemporary China and the Implications for Modern Society</i> Jie Shu (Université Paris Cité, Institut Français de Recherche sur l'Asie et l'Est (IFRAE))</p> <p>With the impact of the pandemic, WeChat Ethnography for my research on Chinese academies in contemporary China becomes growingly significant in two ways : first, it is important to keep in contact with the informants and enable the continuation of data collection at distance ; second, it is of necessity to study Chinese academies as many activities are forced online now. In fact, even before the pandemic, there are some Chinese academies quite active online. To understand those academies and explore the relationship with modernization in China, online fieldwork is a must.</p> <p>The study focuses on the concept of <i>Space</i> to shed some light on the implications of different space modalities of Chinese academies in terms of the relationship with modern society as well as on their influence on the people studying there. Particularly, the study tries to compare students' feelings, emotions, and cognitions in the online and offline space and how the organizations, regulations, and interactions in the two spaces influence their study of traditional Chinese culture and their life. The study includes four Chinese academies (Daozhong, Mingde, Wenru, and Chuanxin) as cases in which the online fieldwork is compared with the on-site fieldwork conducted in 2021. The WeChat group aimed at studying Chinese classic together is the principal space for online participate observation where group notices and discussions and individual sharing of feelings and experiences are particularly focused. Private conversations are also generated to provide wider and in-depth information of each member and the group as a whole. As indicated above, WeChat in this study is both the research method and subject. Consequently, in addition to the analysis of the results, the experiences and reflections on the methodology of WeChat ethnography is also discussed.</p>
<p>15:50-16:20 (online)</p>	<p><i>Studying Mobility without Moving: Pandemic-Era China Research and Social Media</i> Tami Blumenfield (University of New Mexico & Yunnan University)</p> <p>Early in 2020, China canceled most existing visas and closed its borders to nearly all foreign travelers, then began requiring multiple rounds of invasive testing and lengthy quarantines for everyone. How can anthropologists maintain ties with collaborators, friends, and people from host communities in China when they cannot themselves travel there? And furthermore, how can researchers begin new projects without physically “being there,” the quintessential requirement for ethnographers (cf. Davis and Konner, 2011)? These questions have become more pressing during the COVID-19 pandemic, but they predated it as people advancing in their careers in distant countries find themselves juggling caregiving, administrative, and other responsibilities that made in-person fieldwork tricky. Some pivot to more local projects, while others wanting</p>

	<p>to continue engaging in China-based research have found some creative workarounds. Among the workarounds is WeChat-based research (cf. Blumenfield 2017). This paper describes a research project built through membership in several WeChat groups related to Americans leaving or returning to China. Virtual fieldwork involved both observing discussions and participating in conversations. After an initial acculturation period, the participant-observation formed a foundation for a series of interviews and photo sharing. How to navigate ethical obstacles within social media fieldwork (cf. Schneider, Lord and Wilczak 2021), how to proceed carefully given the highly sensitive nature of some situations (and the extraordinary power exercised by the Chinese government to admit, restrict or exclude), and how to theorize these situations within the broader context of an increasingly intense state-individual relationship will all be discussed.</p>
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Friday, February 10

<p>9:30-10:00 (online)</p>	<p><i>Building A WeChat Group: Smart Phone Use and Elders' Community among China's Migrant Grandparents</i> Min Zhang (School of Ethnology and Sociology, Minzu University)</p> <p>Each year, hundreds of thousands of elderly Chinese travel long distances to and temporarily sojourn in major cities in order to provide care for adult children and grandchildren. Widely referred to as “migrant grandparents,” or the “floating elderly,” the size of this demographic segment has risen sharply amidst China’s rapidly aging population and socioeconomic and cultural transformation. Drawing on classic discussion of old people’s community and telecommunications, this study explores how smart phone use helps migrant grandparents create a highly unstable social ties with one another, their adult children’s families, and their social circle back home. Based on ethnographic research in a middle-class neighborhood in Shenzhen, China’s city of migrants, I show that the WeChat group (or <i>weixin qun</i> in Mandarin Chinese), an informal circle and communicational structure, helps elderly caregivers adapt to the unfamiliar circumstances once they move to the unfamiliar cities. It also helps them maintain connection to the people in the community of origin. However, the virtual community built among the like-minded migrant grandparents cannot provide them with moral support when controversies happen—a central feature of elders’ communities indicated in classic analysis of elderly people (Wolf 1972). In the long term, the challenge of maintaining such virtual community could be further intensified as migrant grandparents transition from healthy young old to infirm seniors.</p>
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<p>10:00-10:30 (online)</p>	<p><i>Coming of Social Media and Transformations of Long-distance intimacies : A WeChat Ethnography in China</i> Ting He (Renmin University)</p> <p>In this paper, I plan to examine changing modes of long-distance, parents-children intimacy along with the emergence of WeChat, the current dominant social media in China.</p> <p>Long-distance intimacy (LDI) involves distanced (affective) communication to maintain a sense of being virtually together. For parents (mostly born post-1970s in my research), as part of the “floating population” (<i>liudong renkou</i>) many of them left their families to major cities for job opportunities and career advancements; these cities constitute the thriving regions as China participated actively in the global economy since the new millennium. For the children’s generation, social media, combined with the rapid infrastructure improvements (especially the high-speed train system), made long-distance (affective) relationship increasingly viable and manageable. In addition, the on-going COVID-19 pandemic make “distance” almost internal due to the state’s various authoritative policies.</p> <p>Based on ethnographic interviews and WeChat communication records, in this paper I compare these two generations’ LDI modes. WeChat has changed the form of remote communication from letters/phone calls to social media, dividing the world into online and offline. Yet WeChat did not tectonically transform the kernel of LDI in creating a sense of affective co-existence.</p> <p>As a method of virtual ethnography, I further propose “WeChat intimacy” was embedded in China’s social transformations. My research explored an affective aspect of social changes that is intertwined with the coming of social media. Thus I suggest that we need to holistically and carefully interrogate entangled interactions between the “online” and the “offline” daily lives at age of social media.</p>
<p>11:00-11:45 (hybrid)</p>	<p><i>Re-constructing Transnational Relationships in Cyberspace : Employing WeChat to Mediate Qingtian (青田) as a 侨乡(qiaoxiang, sending area)</i> Mette Thunø (Department of Global Studies, Aarhus University) & Yiwen Wang (Aarhus University/University of Amsterdam)</p> <p>Chinese emigration localities or so-called “home towns of overseas Chinese” (侨乡(<i>qiaoxiang</i>)) are key elements in the construction of China as a diaspora state and in the local implementation of PRC diaspora governance. Given the extensive local overseas networks to Chinese emigrants and their descendants these sending areas are important for local economic development as well as for transnational space making. Heritage projects feature prominently in the construction of these diasporic localities, but transnational activities of engagement are playing an increasingly important role as digital technology facilitates direct, fast, and cheap communication. Based on a case study of Qingtian in Zhejiang province in the proximity of Wenzhou and with a century long sustained migration to primarily Europe this paper explores how the social media</p>

	<p>platform WeChat has been mobilized to re-shape transnational space making during Covid-19 pandemic and the Ukrainian war. Based on textual analysis of media reports on setting up WeChat groups by the local authorities in Qingtian as well as interviews with WeChat users from Qingtian in Europe this paper argues that digital media has become a new powerful tool for reconfiguring territorial relations between aqiaoxiang and Chinese overseas. In addition, this paper will discuss methodological constraints due to ethical aspects of privacy when conducting WeChat ethnography related to semi-official WeChat groups with sensitive data. Some methodological solutions and approaches to such limitations as applied in this study are discussed</p>
<p>13:30-14:15 (online)</p>	<p><i>Evaluation of Fully Automated Translation in Social Media: An Ethnologic Study of WeChat</i> Haina Jin (Communication University of China) & Zhiyan Li (Communication University of China)</p> <p>In just ten years, from 2001 to 2011, the number of Internet users worldwide grew from around 500 million to over 2 billion (Barabé, 2013: 50). And with online communication becoming increasingly connected to people's real lives, the scope of ethnographic research has expanded from offline to online (Hallett and Barber, 2014: 307). WeChat, a social media platform launched in China and going international, has 1.29 billion users worldwide as of March 31, 2022 and this number is still growing. In other words, WeChat not only has a wide influence in China, but also has an important position in the international arena. Ethnographic research around WeChat has become a new direction for researchers. Zani (2021: 52) conducted ethnographic research using WeChat to analyze "the communications, interactions, sociality, and economic activities produced on the application WeChat by Chinese migrant women, together with the same practices constructed offline in Taiwan". Sun (2016: 500) combined online ethnography with offline fieldwork to study WeChat usage and WeChat group activities among Pumi youth. Wang and Sandner (2019: 324) conducted ethnographic research to study how Chinese rural women engage in online activities related to their offline experiences through WeChat. However, users' use of machine translation (MT) in WeChat has remained unexplored.</p> <p>Since WeChat went international in 2012, the number of its international users has continued to rise. In order to better meet the communication needs of its users, it launched the function of fully automated chat message translation on May 8, 2014. After that, WeChat also launched the translation for Moments on May 27, 2015, the in-camera translation for English to and from Chinese on May 28, 2018, and image translation on May 6, 2019.</p> <p>This study focuses on evaluating the use of MT in WeChat through online ethnography in the following four aspects: (1) the reasons why users use MT in WeChat (2) how they use MT in Wechat (3) their assessment of MT in WeChat (4) their expectations of MT in Wechat future. Researchers will design a questionnaire to conduct extensive and representative data collection via WeChat. The questions will consist of</p>

	<p>two main forms: multiple-choices and short answers. The content will first cover the respondent's age, occupation, and the frequency of using MT on Wechat. Second, for the group using MT, researchers want to draw more details in the process such as "in which situation" "with which function" and "memorable experiences". The researchers will integrate, analyze, and summarize the data and generate a comprehensive assessment of MT in WeChat to perceive its impact in society.</p>
<p>14:15-14:45 (online)</p>	<p><i>Is WeChat a Feasible Tool for Conducting China-based Ethnographic Research Under the Platform's Censorship?</i> Ningjie Zhu (Center for Advanced Security, Strategic and Integration Studies, University of Bonn)</p> <p>In the wake of the Covid 19 pandemic, China's strict travel restrictions have limited the ability of overseas ethnographers to travel for fieldwork. Compared to traditional ethnographic research, social media-based ethnography offers a faster, simpler, and less expensive alternative that reduces the limitations due to location-based realities. As the country's most popular messaging app, WeChat has the largest user base and the highest engagement, providing extensive data access to a large amount of China-related research. However, like any other internet platform operating in China, WeChat must follow the rules and regulations of the Chinese authorities regarding prohibited content. Moreover, the monitoring criteria or policy rationale WeChat uses to identify and censor harmful content, including any international or domestic topics deemed undesirable by the Chinese Communist Party, are arbitrary. These vaguely defined policies often mislead companies and individuals into self-censorship. Sensitive messages on WeChat are replaced with pinyin, homophones, double entendres, or emojis to circumvent censorship, resulting in distorted perception or understanding on the part of both ethnographers and respondents. Therefore, the platform is sometimes seen as an intermediary to other social media platforms with less censorship to discuss sensitive topics with respondents in more detail, which poses a higher hurdle for them as they need to use tools such as VPNs to access platforms outside the Great Firewall and also limits the reach of respondents. With this in mind, we interviewed scholars who focus on the study of China, from the discipline of international relations, political science to sociology, and who have experience using WeChat as a research site to discuss the hurdles and difficulties of social media ethnography under the platform's censorship and we attempt to sort out feasible solutions to balance the situation we face.</p>
<p>15:00</p>	<p>Concluding remarks</p>

Additional information

Location	Institut Confucius Route de Lausanne 266A 1292 Chambésy / Geneva, Switzerland
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