UNDERSTANDING CHINESE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA: THE INNOVATIVE AND CREATIVE AFFORDANCES OF TECHNOLOGY, LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstract

In this chapter we set out to briefly sketch out a description of Chinese internet culture from its historical development through to some of its current characteristics. From the early roll out of the internet through to the use of social media Chinese internet cutlture should be understood as emerging from the interplay of a number of forces: technological changes, software development, user-generated interactional practices, and government censorship. The discussion goes onto highlight how increasingly divergent forms of Chinese social media use provide a rich source of analysis of new and innovative practices as well as an awareness of the distinct context of communicative technological and social environment of it its 772 million users.

Keywords: Chinese, Social Media, Interactional Practices.

Introduction

In March of the year 2000, then U.S. President Bill Clinton gave a speech on the China Trade Bill. At the time, China had completed negotiations with the United States to enter the World Trade Organization (W.T.O.). Clinton's main argument was that after entering the W.T.O., China would become a nation more open economically and politically, closer to the U.S. and other nations of the West, and that such change would come about organically and inevitably. He

illustrated this with a comment, delivered as a joke, about China's attempts to censor the internet:

> Now there's no question China has been trying to crack down on the Internet. (Chuckles.) Good luck! (Laughter.) That's sort of like trying to nail jello to the wall. (Clinton 2000)

Clinton believed that the internet was an untamable force and the Chinese government would fail in its attempts to censor it. In the future a globally connected China would become a nation and economy more like the West. Yet nearly two decades later, Clinton's speech is remembered not so much for what he predicted that turned out to be right, but what turned out to be wrong.

We begin our chapter with this anecdote as a way of drawing attention to two points. First, China as a nation and context – notably when referencing the internet and social media – is an important and understudied locus of study. Second, China's government did not give up or fail in its attempts to control the internet; instead, the internet has grown and become an increasingly important part of China's economy and society, albeit in ways dissimilar from that of the West and countries outside of China. In this chapter, we provide a brief description of China's internet culture and the communicative environment of social media, highlighting how technologies and interactional affordances engage with and through social media, to create distinctive discursive and linguistic interactional practices.

1. History, scope, and impact

While Usenet newsgroups based at universities in China were connected to the internet as early as the late 1980s (Yang, 2009: 29), 1994 can be pointed to as the year when China's internet really began, as full connectivity to the world-wide-web was established (Jiang, 2016). From that time onward growth was rapid. The number of internet users reached one million in 1998, and in 2006, China surpassed the U.S. to become the country with the world's greatest number of internet users (Pace, 2006). This gave rise to what was described as a 'dynamic Chinese internet culture' 'full of humor, play, and irreverence', and contrasted with China's state-controlled media, both 'drab in tone' and 'pompous' in imagery (Yang, 2009: 14). Yet, like all internet cultures, while this binary distinction goes some way to characterise emerging communicative spheres at the time, Chinese internet culture exists in a complex, subtle and ever-changing socio

political and landscape that is both reflected in the evolution of Chinese social media platforms and in the way they are used.

The Chinese internet should be understood as emerging from the interplay of a number of forces: technological changes, (e.g. smart phones), software development (e.g. Web 2.0 applications such as Weibo and WeChat), user-generated interactional practices, and government censorship. Consider that in the West the development of Web 2.0 - software applications that afford 'user-generated-content' (UGC) - social media applications such as Facebook and YouTube have afforded the internet to become a platform for users to easily and widely create UGC, (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010); and with the development and adoption of smart phones, the internet was no longer limited to those with computer access, but widely available. These same processes were at work in China. By the end of 2017, 772 million Chinese actively used the internet, with more than 753 million mobile phone users, accounting for more than 55 percent of the population (Statistical Report, 2018: 7). Yet numbers alone cannot tell the whole story.

Media companies and software developers in China developed social media applications that have changed practices in myriad ways. A few of these, Sina Weibo (weibo means 'micro-blog', or China's version of Twitter, and launched in 2009), WeChat (launched in 2011), Taobao (an online sales application, launched in 2003), and Alipay (an app used for online banking, launched in 2004), dominate the market. For instance, a user may follow news and popular culture on Weibo, exchange messages with friends on WeChat, purchase goods on Taobao, and pay for purchases with Alipay. Instead of exchanging printed name cards with newly met acquaintances, it is more common in China today to use WeChat to scan each others' QR codes, and add each other to a contact list on the app. Then with WeChat users can send messages, share pictures, and make audio or video phone calls (Sandel, Ou, Wangchuk, Ju, & Duque, 2018). Furthermore, using WeChat or Alipay, users can make purchases from almost any vendor. Urban China has become 'cashless' at a rate faster and more widespread than any other country (Mozur, 2017).

While the above practices are not dissimilar from those found in the West, the Chinese have developed other online practices that are less so. One example is the rise of self-promoting and self-marketing 'internet beauties', called *'wanghong'* in Chinese. Young women (and sometimes men) upload images, text, and

streaming video to a commercial website, with the aim of generating followers who may then purchase items that the 'celebrity' advertises (Roberts, 2010). Hence, with a mobile phone and connection to the internet, anyone in China can become a 'celebrity' and impact purchasing behavior and fashion choices.

China's internet culture, however, cannot be understood apart from actions by the Chinese government. As Chinese used the internet as a platform to engage in such activities as sharing messages, buying and selling products, self-promotion, and airing complaints, authorities began to take a variety of measures to censor and/or shape these actions. Beginning in the early 2000s, the Chinese developed measures to filter and censor the internet, often called the 'Great Firewall' of China (Zhang, 2006). The system works by inspecting web traffic 'to determine if specific keywords are present' (Clayton, Murdoch, & Watson, 2006: 20). Keywords – and websites – that are blocked are done so based upon the government's filtering rules from a law first passed in 2000, that prohibited online content deemed illegal. What counts as illegal is based upon a list of broadly defined interpretations of content involving one or more of the following: 'endangers national security', is 'detrimental to the honor and interest of the state', 'disseminates rumors, disturbs social order', or that is 'generally harmful' (Zhang, 2006: 276).

While censorship of the internet began with filtering keywords, over time it expanded and become increasingly sophisticated. For instance, Facebook was banned in China in 2009, in response to riots in Xinjiang Province that were led by Uighurs who communicated on Facebook; Twitter, Flickr and Hotmail were banned in 2009 before the Tiananmen anniversary (Branigan, 2009), while Google left China in 2010 when its search engine was censored and servers hacked. The New York Times service, which launched its Chinese website in June 2012, was blocked later that year following the publication of a piece on the finances of China's premier, Wen Jiabao (Smith, 2017). In each of these cases, the Chinese authorities, using an increasingly sophisticated system of web censorship, blocked online content and/or websites that it could not control. Yet for many in China, such content was not missed: homegrown Chinese websites and applications fulfilled many of the same functions as those developed in the West (Li, 2018). Furthermore, as we describe in the following, China's internet users and censors have engaged in a sophisticated and creative ongoing struggle to shape the reporting, narrative, and discourses of major events.

1.1 Early Internet, pre social media period

In the early years, China's most popular and vibrant part of the internet was 'bulletin-board-systems' (BBS) (Yang, 2003: 475). BBS forums were originally set up in the mid-1990s at China's leading universities and research centres, such as Tsinghua University and Peking University (Yang, 2009: 29). They quickly became sites of online activism, where issues such as violence against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, and disputes over territorial claims to the Diaoyutai (Chinese named) or Senkaku (Japanese named) Islands were discussed and debated (Yang, 2009). These online activities gave rise to new terms and a vocabulary of bottom-up citizen-led activism, including such phrases as '*wangluo weiquan*' (online rights defense) and '*gongmin jizhe*' (citizen reporters). Many individuals and rights groups set up websites where users could blog, post online videos, and text messages, believing it important to 'cover significant social issues ignored by the official media' (30).

The development of BBS, blogs, and other forms of online activism afforded an internet culture and forms of Chinese social activism that – from the Chinese government's point of view – led to both intended and unintended outcomes. The former, intended outcomes happened most often in response to incidents that were perceived as threats to Chinese nationalism. One example was the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade. Immediately after the incident, the Chinese Communist Party's official newspaper, the People's Daily, created an online BBS named 'Protest Forum' (Yang, 2009: 30) . Within a few days, tens of thousands of posts were made by Chinese citizens, angry at what was perceived to be a deliberate and intentional attack by NATO against China (Gries, 2001). A second example happened in 2005, when the 'group of four nations' (excluding China) of the UN Security Council proposed to grant Japan a permanent seat to the body (Coulmas, 2006). The Chinese government created an online petition against the proposal, which was signed by more than 30 million Chinese citizens, thus strengthening the government's position as the proposal was defeated in the UN (Yang, 2009: 30). But other forms of online activism led to unintended outcomes, at least from the point of view of the Chinese authorities.

One example was triggered by arguably the most important event of the early 2000s, the 12 May 2008 Sichuan earthquake. At 2:28 pm a 7.9 magnitude earthquake struck in Sichuan Province, with the epicenter located in mountainous

Wenchuan County (Xu, 2014). The earthquake caused '87,000 casualties and affected 46 million people' (94). The Chinese government responded quickly to the disaster, sending in teams of responders—many organised by NGOs—and soldiers. The government allowed both national and international media to cover the event and rescue efforts – the first time China Central Television (CCTV) was allowed to broadcast live (Shi & Yang, 2016: 71) – and the Sichuan government used social media as a channel to call out for assistance (Xu, 2014). The response was immediate and massive as thousands of citizens lined up to donate blood; charitable contributions to NGOs poured in. Arguably this was the first Chinese major disaster to be openly covered through China's mass and online media, and invoked a discourse of 'moral altruism' (96) across China. The initial and positive response was what led many to proclaim 2008 as the 'birth year of Chinese civil society', when the authoritarian state gave room for NGOs to operate and participate in public policy. This initial optimism, however, did not last long.

The first challenge to the government's narrative came from the many NGOs operating in the area. One association of NGOs – featuring many famous 'liberal intellectuals' and 'political bloggers', organized their fundraising and publicizing efforts by producing a blog, they called 'B-log' (Xu, 2014: 100). While bloggers' messages were apolitical, focusing on rescue and relief issues, some criticized 'technical issues in the government's response' (100). But what was more disconcerting to the authorities was the ability of these NGOs to raise money from donations. This was perceived as a threat to the state's 'moral image', and in response police froze the bank accounts of B-log organizers (101). Organizers then went to the Chengdu City Police Bureau to protest and unfreeze their accounts, and called upon more than 20 national and international journalists to cover their protest. Faced with such negative coverage, the police backed down. Yet, a few months later the government shut down B-log.

A second, and perhaps greater challenge came when the parents of school children began organizing and launched protests against the government for the poor quality of schools that collapsed during the quake. Then as the sensitive 4 June anniversary approached, a Politburo member, Zhou Yongkang, visited the quake zone and urged police and 'law enforcement personnel to "maintain social stability"' (Xu, 2014: 104-105). This call to 'maintain social stability' in the face of criticism, heightening and exaggerating the threat to the state from aggrieved parents, was an established tactic of the government; it was also a signal from the

central government that the work of NGOs and online activists was to be curtailed. Arguably, it marked the end of the 'birth year of Chinese civil society'.

Finally, one noteworthy event in this accounting of events that have shaped the Chinese internet is the Wenzhou train collision. On 23 July 2011 two high-speed trains collided near the city of Wenzhou (Jiang, 2016: 32). Four cars fell nearly 20 meters and forty people died. Within four minutes, the first news of the crash was posted to Sina Weibo (hereafter Weibo); nine minutes later, a plea for help was posted to Weibo 'retweeted more than one hundred thousand times (later censored): "A cry for help! Train D301 has been derailed not far from Wenzhou station. Children are crying up and down the carriage. No staff member has come out! Hurry up and save us!"' (32). Unlike the Sichuan earthquake that was covered live by CCTV, this event was not covered by mainstream media; instead, news was spread via Weibo and social media, with nearly all messages 'angry, questioning authorities' rescue efforts, the hasty burial of evidence, and the truth behind the accident' (32). It was regarded by many as the 'first major disaster in the Weibo era', as an outpouring of bottom-up, angry messages demonstrated the power of China's online activism (Han, 2018: 101), and made Clinton's joke that attempting to control the internet was like 'trying to nail jello to a wall', look prescient. Yet that is not the conclusion to be drawn from this tragic event: the Chinese government redoubled its efforts to control the internet.

With the purported aims of taming 'online rumor' and safeguarding 'a healthy online environment', beginning in December 2011 the Beijing Municipal government began a number of measures to control and 'curtail public rage on weibo' (Jiang, 2016: 41). While Weibo bloggers could continue using pseudonyms for their public identity, in 2012 the government required all users to register their real names and IDs, mobile phone numbers, and other identification with the authorities. Then in late 2012 the National People's Congress passed laws prohibiting Weibo users from posting and/or passing on rumors (42). This was further strengthened by China's highest court in 2013 when it was decided that any user who posted a 'rumor' shared more than 500 times, or viewed more than 5,000 times, could face severe penalties, including fines, and/or a jail sentence of up to three years (43).

We conclude this section by highlighting the significance of these events. When events such as the Wenzhou train collision were reported by citizens, and then shared and commented on millions of times, the Chinese government could

have admitted defeat and given up their efforts to control the internet. Instead, the opposite happened. Chinese authorities redoubled their efforts, passing such laws as the 2012 'real identification' act, hiring unknown millions of persons to censor the internet, and employing a '50 cent army' of people to post messages favorable to the government (Han, 2015). (The name 50 cent army comes from the practice of awarding 0.50 Chinese Yuan to online commentators for each comment/post that promotes the government, Han, 2015: 16). The result is an internet culture that is increasingly less free, as the Chinese have indeed succeeded in their attempts to 'nail jello' to the wall. However, this does not mean that the Chinese internet is dull and drab and void of personal expression, and has erased all forms of online activism. This can be made apparent when turning our attention from a macro level history, to see how interaction works on Chinese social media at the micro level.

2. Micro level analyses of interactional practices

Two of the most widely used and best known social media applications on the Chinese internet are WeChat (in Chinese: *Weixin* or 微信) and Sina Weibo (in Chinese: *Xinlang Weibo* or 新浪微博). A review of the literature in recent years shows that studies of interaction by users of these platforms have generated the most scholarly attention. In the following we first provide a brief description of these applications, and then present an overview of some recent studies of social interaction on these platforms.

WeChat was launched in 2011 by the Shenzhen-based media giant, Tencent Company (Sandel & Ju, 2015). Based upon an earlier messaging service called, QQ, WeChat – designed for the mobile phone – continued to allow users the ability to send messages on their phones. The designers of WeChat, however, added a range of new and/or improved features to the app. Thus, with WeChat users can send text, pictures, exchange short, 60-second audio files and make audio or video phone calls (Sandel *et al.*, 2018). Another popular feature of WeChat is the 'Moments' function, similar to Facebook or Instagram; this allows users to post and respond to pictures and accompanying text, showing the important 'moments' of a user's life (Ju & Sandel, 2018). More recently WeChat added a payment service, allowing users to link the app to a bank account and make purchases with an app-generated, unique QR code. With such a range of

functions, WeChat has been called a 'super app' (Kessel & Mozur, 2016) and has become intertwined with, an almost indespensible part of a Chinese person's life.

Sina Weibo is the name of China's most popular and best-known 'micro-blogging' service. (The word weibo comes from the characters *wei*, meaning 'micro', and *bo*, meaning 'to broadcast'.) The first of China's weibo services was launched in 2007 and called Fanfou. Then in 2009, a number of other media/technology companies in China – Sina, Sohu, Netease, and Tencent – also launched their weibo services; the number of weibo users expanded rapidly, such that by 2012 there were 390 million registered users (Lu & Qiu, 2013). Yet within a few years, as Sina Weibo's market share increased, most other companies ceased weibo services and the term 'Weibo' most often references Sina Weibo's service (Leung, 2018).

While Weibo has been called by some a 'copycat of Twitter' (Yang, 2012: 50), others claim that Weibo is not simply Chinese Twitter and should be understood as a distinct social media platform (Han, 2018; Wu, 2018). We take the latter position here for a number of reasons. One is due to the affordances of Chinese as a language. Similar to the original design of Twitter, each Weibo post is limited to 140 characters. Yet what makes it distinct is that 140 Chinese characters can express content that is 'two or three times' what can be written using English letters (Wu, 2018: 64). Furthermore, users have developed ways to exceed the character limit by 'converting a long blog' post into a picture and uploading it as the visual component of the post (64).

One important way Weibo has been used is as a way for people to post 'grassroots' news and information, discussing issues ignored by official media (e.g., the Wenzhou train collision of 2011) and/or responding to and framing reported events in ways that diverge from official media. For instance, China's official television media, CCTV, produced an expose of the prostitution industry in Dongguan in 2014 and framed this as an illicit and criminal activity to be condemned, but Weibo users 'openly expressed their sympathy for the sex workers' and 'considered them to be the victims of CCTV's unfair' reporting on a 'vulnerable group' (Tai, 2015: 128). Likewise, after the 2015 Tianjin explosions that resulted in 173 deaths, Weibo became an important platform for people to share news and information, unreported by official media, about the event, and in ways that we will elaborate below (Wu, 2018). Hence, in China's censored media

environment Weibo has become a 'collective witness' (Han, 2018) and important means for grassroots 'empowerment' and 'resistance' against official discourses.

As discussed by Han (2018) Weibo also continues to evolve its communicative affordances, especially as the Chinese government has found ways to channel Weibo to serve its purposes. She has identified two new uses: (1) 'ideological contention' and (2) 'networks of expertise, monetization, and nostalgia'. The former is exemplified in debates involving 'universal values' versus 'Chinese characteristics'. On the one hand there are 'public/citizen intellectuals' called '*gongzhi'*, who are most often identified with those who oppose the government, while on the other there are the 'fifty cents' or '*wumao'*, as mentioned above, a term based upon the practice of paying people 50 cents for each pro-government post. Pro-government Weibo users are praised in official media for their 'genuine love' of the 'motherland' and for spreading 'positive energy' (105).

The most recent development for using Weibo is to serve its 'monetization potential' (Han, 2018: 106). Weibo began promoting 'experts' in particular areas, such as 'career development, entrepreneurship, technology, finance' who gain 'celebrity status' in the shared interest of financial success. This move has turned Weibo from a platform that initially gave a voice to dissenting voices, such as journalists and 'some outspoken celebrities' to a platform for those in the image of profit-driven 'Jack Ma' (owner of Alibaba, China's e-commerce platform). Of course, while the government seeks to promote its positive discourse or crowd out negative sentiment through celebrity, other Weibo users engage in creative ways to counter or find ways around this through the combined technological communciative affordances of platforms, the Chinese language and social culture.

3. Some interactional practices and affordances of WeChat and Weibo

In this final section we highlight what can be learned about interactional practices and affordances from some recent studies of WeChat and Weibo. In the introduction to a special issue of *Discourse, Context & Media*, Ren (2018) explained that when taking an affordances approach, we see that '[d]ifferent languages, different modes and different platforms all have different affordances' for online communication (2). He then explained how Chinese netizens are adept

at using the affordances of the Chinese language, such as by writing 'four-character idioms', or writing with homonyms – of which there are many in Chinese – to create messages that may be playful or mitigate offense, and may (initially) subvert online censorship. One of the better known examples for expressing protest, was to type 'river crab' 河蟹 instead of the government-promoted phrase, harmony 和谐，as both are pronounced as *hexie* (Nordin & Richaud, 2014). Such online practices, and ironic wordplay is popularly called *egao*, and describes a form of online, dark humor that responds to China's heavy online censorship regime.

In a case study of the 2015 Tianjin explosion, Wu (2018) identified three discursive strategies of resistance on Weibo: (1) 'amplifying the event by incorporating witness accounts', (2) 'rumor creation', and (3) 'satire' (Wu, 2018: 66). The first strategy, incorporating witness accounts, takes advantage of a technological affordance of Weibo when users embed pictures, video, and screenshots of written messages posted to WeChat. By incorporating a string of messages, the force of the Weibo post can by amplified by demonstrating that an account comes not from a single source, but is embedded in an online chat with a number of witnesses. Rumor creation can work by posting messages that are based upon shared cultural knowledge among Chinese users. For instance, Weibo users shared the belief that there is a collusion between business and political leaders. Hence, when it was learned that the name of the CEO of the company responsible for the Tianjin blast was Zhi Feng, it was assumed, and stated as a matter of fact on Weibo, that he was the son of Zhi Shenghua, 'former deputy mayor of Tianjin' (6). That is, since Zhi is an uncommon Chinese surname, and politicians, such as deputy mayor Zhi Shenghua have ties with business, the rumor that these had a familial relationship was spread quickly and repeatedly.

The third strategy, satire, is most indirect and potentially the most effective. One widely shared Weibo post was a picture of thousands of dead fish floating on top of the water in a river located close to the blast site.

Example 1. #TianjinTangguMassiveExplosions

#天津塘沽大爆炸#鱼说：水都毒成这样了，你TM还恬不知耻的说没有检测到污染，老子死给你看。

(Wu, 2018: 70)

The government and official media channels declared that there was no link between the blast and these fish deaths. Weibo users posted the image, and wrote satirical messages such as the following: '[O]bviously they [fish] were drowned. … Believe the government that no pollution has been detected! Guess the fish were all drowned'. … 'The fish say: the water has been so polluted, but you still f**king say no levels of pollution has been detected. Daddy is gonna kill himself' (70). Such posts can 'sometimes generate a satirical chain and create a kind of shared culture' (70) among Weibo users.

We end this section by highlighting findings from a study of the affordances of Chinese WeChat (Sandel *et al.* 2018). As noted above, WeChat is a 'super app' with multiple functions, and since its introduction in 2009, has become an indespensible, and nearly-universal app among the Chinese population. A comprehensive examination of the uses and affordances of this app would be beyond the scope of any research paper. Hence, the study examined only the chat function of WeChat, and explicated user-generated methods for creating and interpreting online messages. They demonstrated four methods that are distinct to WeChat: (1) character input methods, (2) conversational abridgment, (3) language mixing, including the use of vernacular forms of Chinese (e.g. Cantonese) and emoji, and (4) changes in footing.

Character input methods are shaped by the affordances of Chinese as a language, and the methods software developers devise to input characters. Conversational abridgment allows users to make sense of messages that if spoken, or written formally, would be ungrammatical and/or indecipherable. A feature of Chinese WeChat that is more complex, and arguably, of greater interest, is how

WeChat affords users the ability to write messages not in standard Chinese (Mandarin), but in vernacular forms. Here, the paper focused on unpacking the construction of messages written in vernacular Cantonese, arguing that these differ from standard Chinese by the use of such features as non-standard, Cantonese characters – that users can download to their phones, final discourse markers that mimic spoken Cantonese, and character substitution. For instance, the phrase 'now' is spoken as *jat gaa* in Cantonese. Instead of writing this term in standard Chinese characters as 現在 (pronounced, *xianzai*), they wrote it as 一家 , which if read on the basis of its standard Chinese meaning would be 'one home'; instead, in this message these characters are read and interpreted with vernacular, Cantonese sound-qualities, pronounced as '*jat gaa*', and thus interpreted as 'now' (9).
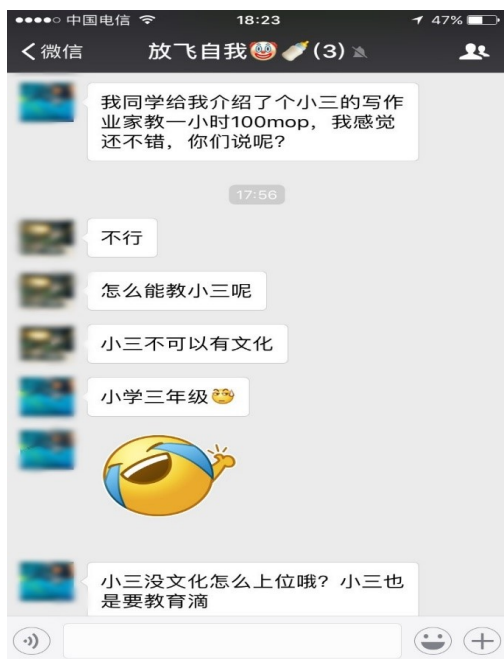
Example 2. '*jat gaa' as* 'now'

原来我记错左

今个星期都系朝早去补

死啦 咁你来 5 来得切去 啊一家？

黎唔切，所以今日唔洗去

咁都得……

(Sandel *et al.* 2019:12)

The last method that was examined focused on unpacking how users afford playfulness in interaction, accomplished through a change in footing. For example in the analysis of a group chat shared among three friends, the first message posted to the group was a bid for advice, asking if a 'little-third home tutor' job for 100 MOP per hour is worth taking (10). This was followed by a dispreferred response, 'No way', a question, 'How can you teach a little-third?' and the statement: 'Little-third cannot have education/culture'. The first poster then responded, clarifying that by 'little-third' she meant 'third grader' student. This was followed by an emoji, 'Big laughing with tears and thumbs up'. The chat closed with the ventriloquated response, 'If a little-third doesn't have education/culture then how can she advance o? Little-third also needs to be educated di' (11).

Example 3. Emoji and ventriloquated response

(Sandel *et al.* 2019: 14)

Through the detailed analysis of this particular interaction sequence the analysis attempted to explicate the complex multiple layering of the affordances of the technology, of the language and of the social knowledge involved in the collaborative construction of the joke. First, the phrase, 'little-third', written as 小三 (xiao san), to the Chinese user had two meanings. The first, intended meaning was a little third-grade student. The second, unintended meaning, and point of the joke, was that xiao san can also mean a 'mistress', as the mistress is the 'little third' person in a relationship involving a husband, wife, and mistress. The joke worked by invoking and building on this second meaning. The closing message in this exchange, then, completed the joke by ventriloquating (see Cooren & Sandler, 2014) the mistress, displaying a 'babyish' and 'cute' tone of voice, called 'sajiao' in Chinese (Yueh, 2017), marked by the use of the final particles 'o' and 'di'. The last 'di' (滴) was a deliberately chosen, non-standard character, meant to mimic the sound of woman's voice who speaks in a sajiao style. In sum, a fine grained analysis of messages on Chinese WeChat can demonstrate the range of methods afforded by both WeChat as a technology, and Chinese as a language.

Conclusion

In this chapter we set out to briefly sketch out a description of Chinese internet culture from its historical development through to some of its current characteristics. Of course we do not suggest this is any way comprensive but rather this hopefully gives a sense or flavour of the unique way that political, social and technological forms have, and continue to, influence the way Chinese social media and the internet are developing, and of the innovative ways in which the Chinese engage with this technology. At the heart of this discussion we would argue that discourse analysts will find a rich source of mediated forms of communication in Chinese internet and social media, but that this needs to be treated on its own terms, as a distinct communicative technological and social environment. While, of course, Chinese social media and interent development use has some resonance with other contexts, in China this is increasingly divergent from and creatively different from other contexts. While this would be true of many countries and regions, where internet and social media use have been adapted to particular social and political contexts, China is increasingly taking the lead in both developing its own social media technologies, which are in some cases more advanced than in the West, and in finding creative ways to engage with and through social media between the 772 million users.

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