Editorial

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Digital society in China

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Digital technologies have become an integral part of societies across the globe. Despite varying degrees of access and use, online services and applications have transformed almost every aspect of our lives from media consumption and knowledge production to labor and governance. To a certain extent we have all become data managers and content creators – for better or worse. Unsurprisingly, the emergence of the so-called digital society as well as its effects have become one of the most pressing issues debated across the humanities and social sciences. This special issue on "Digital Society in China" follows up on the conference "Wired China: digital media and online culture" held at the University of Zurich in November 2020.[1] While the conference addressed a very broad range of issues related to new technologies and the Chinese media landscape, the five contributions to this issue focus more narrowly on how the internet, Big Data, algorithms and new media are affecting social life and the public sphere. By addressing recent technological transformations from a regional perspective, the papers also shed light on ongoing transformations in the field of Chinese studies in the context of the digital turn.

In 2021 China exceeded the threshold of one billion internet users – almost one fourth of active internet users worldwide.[2] Today, the People's Republic of China is the country with the highest rate of smartphone penetration in the world.[3] The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic gave digitization an additional push since severe social distancing rules made people turn to remote business operations.

1 This conference was jointly organized by Jessica Imbach, Justnya Jaguścik, Helen Hess and Qian Cui. We thank the Graduate Campus of the University of Zurich as well as the doctoral program "Asia and Europe" for their generous financial support.

2 China Internet Network Information Center (2021).

3 By the end of 2021, 1.64 billion people subscribed to mobile service in China according to Slotta (2022).

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Data traffic surged during the pandemic and China became a large testing ground for 5G technologies. The country's infrastructure passed the test and proofed its readiness for the rapid expansion of the digital economy.[4]

Slowly foreign perception of China is also changing. A recent (2022) textbook for teaching Chinese in German middle schools is exemplary in this regard. Whereas older textbooks introduced students to bustling outdoor markets and taught bargaining skills to language learners, this new course describes the morning routine of a certain Mr. Wang who wakes up in an anonymous Chinese smart city. He gets his soy milk from a self-service kiosk and rides a bike rented from a ride-share platform. He buys tickets, pays the rent, and shares his life on his smartphone.[5] What the authors of the book forget to add is the fact that Chinese smart life is no longer limited to urban spaces. The textbook speaks of rural populations only in the context of internal migration; migrants from the Chinese countryside build the infrastructure of smart cities and put together smartphone for a growing global market. Hence, the authors are unintentionally playing into the "metronormative"[6] assumption that rural people are somehow backward and the only way out for them is to leave the countryside for highly connected cities. Nevertheless, scholars have already convincingly demonstrated that Chinese villages are also reinventing themselves along the digitalization path.[7] Indeed, the dynamics of rural to urban migration have not only fueled China's breakneck economic growth, but also put mobile phones – as a tool for keeping in touch with family members and as a means for navigating urban environments – at the forefront of internet adoption.[8] Moreover, the emergence of digital grassroots economies outside urban centers has been supported by top-down policies on a national level, since the Chinese government officially declared digitalization the key to rural revitalization.[9] The digital transformation of the Chinese countryside has also brought attention to the "vernacular creativity" of rural content creators on social media platforms such as the video-sharing app Kuaishou.[10]

Our own engagement with China has since the start of the pandemic also become increasingly reliant on digital channels. WeChat feeds, websites, digital archives, and podcasts provide us with an important lifeline to both source materials as well as the "hot issues" on the ground, even though they are a poor substitute for actual research trips. However, we conceived of the conference and

4 See GSMA (2021).
5 Lee / Soufflet (2022).
6 Halberstam (2005).
7 Wang (2020).
8 Wallis (2013).
9 Zhao (2021).
10 Lin / de Kloet (2019).

this special issue in pre-pandemic times. As trained literary scholars, we both had little experience with the study of (digital) technologies, but while becoming ever more reliant on digital materials, we noticed how emerging entanglements of techno-capitalist development, culture production, civic engagement, and state regulations also required us to rethink our print-based assumptions about content, creativity, and communication. The phenomenal rise of internet literature is but one of many examples that reflect how digital technologies have reshaped the Chinese mediascape in the last decades. At the same time, digitization has also spurred new forms of offline sociality. The surprise success of live-action murder mystery games (*jubensha*) in the past years shows that China's digital transformation is anything but a homogenous and one-directional process.

The digital turn in Chinese studies occurred around the end of the millennium when scholars began taking note of the Chinese internet as a distinct social sphere and media environment. Yang Guobin's study of online activism continues to be a landmark in digital China studies, as it was one of the first books to comprehensively study the dynamic interactions of various stakeholders in the online sphere and how these continuously bring forth new forms of contention and irreverence.[11] As Yang and many other since have made clear, the study of digital environments requires both careful social, cultural and political contextualization, while simultaneously accounting for the globalizing tendencies of network technologies and the transnational forces that shape them. Building on our own research into the entanglements of the global and the local in the constitution of aesthetic practices and techno-utopian narratives,[12] we similarly emphasized in the call for papers to the "Wired China" conference that Chinese online practices are significantly shaped by the "complexities and contradictions of our technocultural age."[13] This is particularly visible in the dynamic interactions between economic and political vectors that have spurred China's internet development. Many digital applications have become important pillars of China's digital economy and ICT infrastructure, as they for instance offer commercial and payment services that are not covered by the Chinese banking system.[14] These platforms have in turn also influenced political discourse. In his recent study of the Wuhan lockdown, Yang shows how state legislators successfully adopted "market logics" to create a "harmonious" online environment, brimming with "positive energy" (*zheng nengliang*). In this effectively de-politicized online space, the first accounts of the

11 Yang (2009).
12 Imbach (2021).
13 https://dlf.uzh.ch/sites/wiredchina/call-for-papers/.
14 Plantin / de Seta (2019).

Coronavirus and their censorship did not arouse public suspicion, as the management of online "rumors" had already become a normalized practice.[15]

Knee-jerk assessments of digital development in China as simply driven by sinister political ambitions nevertheless continue to powerfully shape (Western) perceptions of the Chinese online sphere. At the same time, domestic commentators view China's path towards cybersovereignty and its management of the online rumor mill as validated by the numerous instances in recent years, in which democratic societies proved poorly equipped to deal with online conspiracy theories and fake news as well as their violent eruptions into the streets. Moreover, China's approach towards digital governance appears to also find growing support among state legislators in the EU.[16] Scholars consider "The White Paper on the Internet" released in 2010 the starting point of a broader strategy dedicated to transforming China from a "norm-taker" to a "norm-shaper" in the management of the World Wide Web.[17] Since then a plethora of studies have been aiming at grabbing the essence of the so-called Chinese internet. Its convoluted ecosystem has been shaped by an interplay of governmental bodies, internet service providers, the commercial sector, anonymous users and influencers, grassroots organizations, just to mention but a few of multiple actors involved in this process. The authorities ambitiously aim at increasing digital inclusion, but without losing control over web-based content. This is perhaps the most widely acknowledged tension in the Chinese approach to the internet. While policy initiatives such as the "Internet+" scheme, proposed by Li Keqiang in 2015, reflect the strategic importance of digital technologies to China's transition from a low- to a high-tech economy, the state has also implemented ever more ambitious and sophisticated control mechanisms to manage all the things people do with their computers and mobile phones.

Two articles collected in this special issue discuss case studies that investigate this tension between digital social engagement and state control. Lai's contribution revisits one of the most memorable moments of the Covid-19 pandemic, i.e., the global uproar over the Chinese censors' efforts to make the 2020 article "The Whistle-Giver" disappear from the internet. The article quoted an interview with Doctor Ai Fen, who played a key role in alerting the public to the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan. Not long after its release, the interview was removed and the same happened to countless blog posts referring to it. However, Chinese netizens proved very creative in circumventing censorship. They translated the original blog post into various languages and codes, such as elven runes or the DNA code.

15 Yang (2022a, 2022b).
16 Renaud / Bideau / Laperrouza (2020).
17 Gagliardone (2019: 99).

Lai demonstrates how the gesture of passing the virtual whistle in its various semiotic renditions became an act of activating memory against the top-down enforced oblivion of the epidemic's immense human and emotional costs. The subversive act of remembering symbolizes for Lai a human victory against machine filtering and technological control of the internet.

Bloch's article on China's social credit system further explores the unstable field that emerges out of the struggle between technological-political assemblages and human creativity. Bloch counters the popular perception of the system as a digital panopticon patrolled by algorithms that score a person's political compliancy and that could be adapted by other authoritarian regimes.[18] Bloch argues against such techno-deterministic imaginary and claims that the system is yet still far from becoming a control policy on a national level. She emphasizes the experimental nature of the project and the role that the human factor plays in its different local adaptations.

Chinese authorities face the enormous challenge of controlling an online ecosystem shaped by nearly a billion active internet users. Next to technological means of policing the web, the Chinese Communist Party acknowledges the importance of human activity in enforcing the state's vision. In January 2022, the head of Cyberspace Administration of China pleaded for a new instrument called "social reporting."[19] It aims at creating a further layer of control by mobilizing netizens to report illegal or undesirable content and has thereby also further empowered various expressions of digital nationalism.

Jia Ruxin's article studies the digital outburst of nationalist sentiment in the context of a fashion campaign by Dolce and Gabbana that used racialized stereotypes of Chinese culinary practices. The infamous advertising campaign "Eating with Chopsticks" provoked an online outcry against its patronizing and orientalist representation of Chinese culture. It finally led to the cancellation of Dolce and Gabbana's 2018 show in Shanghai and decreased earnings of the brand in the Asian-Pacific market. Focusing on the pitfalls of social media marketing in the era of the web 2.0., Jia, however, argues that the campaign fit well into the brand's core marketing strategy, i.e., provocation. According to the author, the brand had anticipated the uproar the videos would cause and staged Chinese protests as part of a broader campaign geared towards Western customers who remained loyal to the designer house. Furthermore, she argues, even locally, the Chinese cancel culture proved to have a rather short memory.

Next to Jia's article, contributions by Bram and Zhang also bring up the issue of digital capitalism. Both authors focus on WeChat, the most popular multi-purpose

18 Anderson (2020).

19 China Media Project (2022).

app in China with more than one billion users.[20] WeChat offers a broad range of add-ons and services that include almost everything from food delivery to charity. The app has thereby become an indispensable part of social life in China, but also in diasporic communities across the globe. Largely attributed to the apps "super-sticky" architecture that is designed to minimize engagement outside of the platform, WeChat has, as its own website unironically claims, indeed become a new "way of life."[21] Bram and Zhang explore segments of WeChat that cater to the tastes and lifestyle of the Chinese urban middle class, i.e. psychological services and art promotion. Both health services which target their customers' wellbeing and the self-staging by popular artists who seek to enhance their desirability among potential benefactors, point to the immense range of what Foucault called "technologies of the self" enacted through and shaped by WeChat. Moreover, both articles showcase the increased importance of digital ethnographic methods in Chinese studies.

Bram's contribution offers a glimpse into China's "psycho boom"[22] that fuels the rapidly developing mental health industry with its digital extensions in the form of online psychological services. The author offers a comprehensive discussion on the proliferation of online psychotherapy that is based on his fieldwork in China and digital participant observation. He argues that the growing commercial accessibility of online counseling does not necessarily lead to a more emotionally stable society, but it enforces a certain aspirational, task-oriented subjectivity that importantly also relies on the purchasing power of the health service customer.

Art mediates affect and stirring emotions is a successful strategy to attract attention in social media. Unsurprisingly, many artists and galleries view WeChat as the most effective way to stay connected with their audiences and promote their works and exhibitions. Zhang's analysis of this phenomenon draws on the author's history of 10 years of personal communication with artists and her observation of a selection of mainland China art outlets via social media. She discusses different digital strategies adopted by visual artists, ranging from business-minded marketing to a cautiously staged semi-private experience of direct personal communication. Even though some of the artists interviewed for the paper directly voice skepticism over the effectivity of digital promotion, they still decide to stay on the platform. Quitting the super-app appears to not be an option.

The year 2022 has begun with a tragic case that exemplifies some of the paradoxes at the core of China's digital society. In January, the video-sharing platform Douyin published a recording of a woman chained to a wall in a shack in the rural

20 Su (2021).
21 Chen / Mao / Qiu (2018).
22 Huang (2017).

part of Jiangsu Province. The footage went viral and soon caught global attention.[23] Some social media posts were censored shortly after publication, but the Jiangsu case quickly snowballed into something what might be called a "WeChat-wide" conversation on human trafficking, domestic abuse, gender discrimination and mental illness. Almost two months later, the case has not yet been solved, but due to overwhelming public pressure voiced across digital channels, the Chinese state media itself has started to report on the case and the provincial authorities in Jiangsu opened a probe into the matter.[24] In March members of the National People's Congress debated the case and also discussed legal reforms that would raise penalties for human trafficking.[25]

Netizens' reaction to the atrocity shows that, despite the party-state's attempts to tighten control over the internet by human and technological means, there is still more to social media than their super-sticky marketing strategies. Inhabitants of digital China know that their opinions are being watched and read. Sometimes the authorities respond to activist voices from the ground, as the recent Jiangsu case demonstrates. However, individual activists more often than not face persecution for telling the truth, which happened to numerous health workers and grassroots journalists who reported on the Covid pandemic. Importantly, while voicing political protest directly remains rare and dangerous, there is a massive and growing digital gray zone of discontent, in which various actors meet to push for incremental change through nonconfrontational activism.[26] One of its variations, for example, is refusing to be beaming with the state-promoted "positive energy" by either celebrating indolence and "lying flat" (tangping), or by sabotaging campaigns launched by the government with the help of satirical hashtags.[27] So far at least, digital development in China has not only been marked by a dynamic and, at times, messy entanglement of political and commercial forces, but has also continuously brought forth new forms of creative, fluid civic engagement.

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23 See press reports by Böge (2022); Horton (2022) and Li (2022).
24 Goldkorn / Fincher (2022).
25 Goldkorn / Fincher (2022).
26 Wang (2019).
27 For more see Richaud (2021) and Yang (2022a, 2022b).

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