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Affective Networks: How WeChat Enhances Tencent's Digital Business Governance

An emerging body of literature reveals how social media enhance digital business governance to facilitate Internet companies to generate profit via regulating users' everyday lives (Cote & Pybus, 2007; Dean, 2010). However, while the existing debates are often contextualized in the West, little attention has been paid to China – a country in which social media are widely used. To fill this knowledge gap, this article enquires into the digital business governance practised by Chinese Internet companies, such as Tencent. Specifically, I employ an affective lens to analyse how WeChat, the most popular social media application launched by Tencent, allows the Internet Company to influence users for its own business purposes. Chinese college students, as a representative group of young people, were early adopters of WeChat and have led the trend of social media use in China. Following on from a year-long netnographic enquiry with Chinese college students, this article uncovers how the affective design of WeChat captures these Chinese young people's attention and influences their everyday practices. The outcome of the discussion provides insights into how digital business governance operates in the Chinese context in which authoritarianism and capitalism work closely together.

Keywords: affects, attention economy, business interests, digital governance, WeChat

Subject classification codes: N/A

Introduction

Nowadays, there is an emerging body of literature exploring how social media influence digital governance (Rod & Weidmann, 2015; Weidmann, 2015). Digital governance refers to the employment of digital technology in governance practices (Dunleavy, 2006, p. 3). Much of the literature pays primary attention to digital governance driven by political interests, scrutinizing the interplay amongst government, digital technology, and users. In particular, this literature often investigates the implications of control by authoritarian regimes over

ordinary people in terms of their usage of social media (Rod & Weidmann, 2015; Weidmann, 2015). However, Dean (2010), Cote and Pybus (2007) point out that Internet companies may also act as bodies of digital governance. The digital governance practised by Internet companies is driven by business interests and enhanced by the social media applications they launch. For instance, Cote and Pybus (2007, p. 88) have already found that MySpace provided News Corporation with a means to practise digital business governance of young people from which the company could then benefit financially. Nevertheless, the existing scholarship often focuses on the interplay between Internet companies and ordinary users in Western countries. Little attention has been paid to the digital business governance taking place in China – a country in which social media are having an increasingly significant impact on people's everyday lives. While China remains an authoritarian regime, economic reform has brought about marketization of Internet businesses in China, leading to the rise of native Internet companies – such as Tencent and Sina – which monopolize the Chinese social media market. Thus, this article enquires into how these Chinese Internet companies influence ordinary users for their own business purposes, thereby filling the knowledge gap concerning digital business governance in the East-Asian country.

To analyse how the design of social media applications enhances the digital business governance of ordinary users in China, this article uses the most popular Chinese social media application, WeChat, as a case study. WeChat is a mobile social media application launched by the Chinese Internet Company – Tencent – in 2011. This application can be described as a cross between WhatsApp and Instagram, enabling users to socialize with each other through the exchange of instant messages and the sharing of stream-based content (Moments updates). Within six years, WeChat has attracted almost 850 million users (Statista, 2016, p. n.p.), and generated huge profits (e.g. ¥3,308 million mobile advertising

incomes in 2014 alone) for Tencent (Tencent, 2014a, pp. 8–9). WeChat is not the only social media application that enhances digital business governance in China[1]; however, this application is probably the most representative given the fact that it is overwhelmingly popular with Chinese users.

This article uncovers how WeChat enhances digital business governance, allowing Tencent to influence Chinese users. To this end, I argue for an affect-centred account to understand the design of social media applications. Affects are the effects of encounters between abstract bodies (human bodies, technologies, and objects) (Ash, 2014, pp. 84–85). With a focus on people's use of social media, an affect-centred account scrutinizes how users' bodily encounters with social media applications generate their affective responses (Ash, 2014, p. 87). Social media form affective networks in which affects are generated and circulated. The affective design of social media applications encourages users' participation in the networks, creating their desire for attentive affects and thereby tempting them to pay constant attention to the application. The affect-centred account helps explain the logic and reasoning behind the design of WeChat and similar social media applications, and how this supports Chinese Internet companies' digital business governance practices.

The present research focuses on Chinese young people because they have been the early adopters and active users of WeChat, leading the trend of social media usage in China (Lin & Li, 2014, pp. 61–62). Statistics show that the penetration rate of social media is highest amongst the younger generation[2] compared to senior citizens in the country (Kantar, 2016, p. n.p.). Growing up in the post-reform era, these young people enjoy material

[1] Other examples include Weibo (the most popular Chinese micro-blogging application, similar to Twitter).

[2] These include both the post-80s generation and the post-90s generation.

satisfactions. They are significantly influenced by Western mass consumer cultures, and, therefore, share many identical features with their peers in the West (Liu, 2011, pp. 58–60). Their unique lifestyle and regular use of WeChat make them an ideal social group for an exploration into how the mobile social media application enhances Tencent's digital business governance in China. The salient points addressed in this article are as follows: 1) How digital business governance has become possible in authoritarian China. 2) How Tencent affectively designed WeChat to manage Chinese young people. 3) How Tencent's digital business governance reflects the rise of attention economy in China, and how the Internet Company's governance practice is particular to the Chinese authoritarian context.

In particular, college students are typical of contemporary Chinese young people. Often raised in one-child families, these students are particularly close to their parents (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702). Leaving home to attend university is probably the first time most of them have lived away from home. These students' emotional attachment to their hometown is maintained by continuous communication with their parents and old friends by means of WeChat. Thus, this article draws on my empirical findings of Chinese college students' use of WeChat. The present empirical study comprises a year-long netnographic enquiry of 19 Chinese college students[3]. Netnography is an ethnographic research method undertaken with

[3] The present netnographic enquiry was conducted between July 2014 and July 2015 at a Chinese university whose school office allowed its students to participate in the research. The recruitment of participants was on a voluntary basis. The recruitment advertisement was distributed to the university's 16,400 undergraduates (the male/female ratio is approximately 1 to 1.15). Since my netnographic data collection required year-long access to participants' personal profiles on WeChat, many students were concerned about the risk of revealing their personal information, despite the fact that I had fully explained the anonymity of their participation. A total of 19 students aged between 18 and 23, including eight men and eleven women, enthusiastically agreed to participate in the present research. The male/female ratio was balanced. The participants came from different parts of China and were studying different subjects. The size of my sample was relatively small and could not therefore guarantee its ability to accurately represent the target population. However, the participants represented a wide range of characteristics regarding both

the facilitation of digital communication technology (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). In the present research, this method enabled me to analyse the Moments updates generated by the participants (observations of the 19 participants' WeChat Moments) and subsequently ask them questions according to the issues raised in the observations (in-person interviews with each of them) [4]. The in-depth data gathered help achieve a detailed understanding of how my participants' everyday practices are influenced by WeChat. This provides a glimpse into how digital business governance works.

Contextualizing Digital Business Governance in China

In terms of digital governance in China, much of the existing literature focuses primarily on digital political governance, emphasizing the direct conflict between dissidents and the government (King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013; Stockmann & Luo, 2015). Pessimistic observers, such as Rod and Weidmann (2015, p. 338), see social media as tools of "repression" that enable an authoritarian regime to impose restrictions on people's freedom of speech (e.g. censoring content and gathering intelligence about dissidents). However, through analysis of millions of posts on various Chinese social media platforms, research by King et al. (2013, p. 339) found that the circulation of opinions contrary to government policy is not completely prohibited by the Chinese government. Furthermore, Tong and Zuo (2014, p. 66) conducted a quantitative analysis of Weibo posts[5] during the "Haimen" and "Wukan" mass incidents in

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their personal background and their patterns of WeChat usage. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the present research, this variety ensured that my research findings were empirically rich, reflecting and capturing the complexity and nuances of different types of Chinese college students and their use of WeChat.

[4] The participants' original WeChat Moments updates and the transcripts of interviews were in Mandarin Chinese. I have translated these data into English for analysis. The participants were provided with pseudonyms for this article.

[5] The Western counterpart is Tweets.

China, which disclosed that people's criticism of the government on social media may also influence state leadership to amend local authorities' "wrongdoings".

Nevertheless, while much of this literature focuses on digital political governance, little attention has been paid to Chinese Internet companies, which play an increasingly prominent role in regulating Chinese young people. Internet companies' digital governance is certainly not independent from political control in authoritarian regimes. In China, digital business governance is an aftermath of the state's marketization of the Internet; the Chinese government allows private capital to be invested in Internet-related businesses because an over-restricted Internet is considered to be harmful to economic growth (Yang, 2009, p. 111). Nevertheless, the social media market in this country does not provide free entry to global businesses. The Great Firewall blocks ordinary Chinese users' access to Western social media platforms (Stockmann & Luo, 2015, p. 8), creating a unique Chinese social media ecology in which native Internet companies are granted monopoly status. This gives rise to privately-held native Internet companies, such as Tencent and Sina. As long as these native Internet companies adhere to government policies, the regime is happy to share power with them in regulating Chinese users' everyday lives. Thus, while still living within the confines of political restrictions, these native Internet companies are able to conduct digital business governance, so as to enhance corporate profitability on a market stage comprising unique authoritarian characteristics.

Chinese Internet companies regulate society for profit. Unlike digital political governance, their digital business governance involves no law/legislation. Instead, control is silent but ubiquitously practised via proxies – the social media applications that the companies launch (Cote & Pybus, 2007, pp. 103–104). In the West, scholars (boyd, 2014;

van Dijck, 2013) have noted that social media lead to the rise of a sharing culture. For instance, boyd (2014, p. 61) argues that the affordances of Facebook encourage users to share information about their personal lives. These affordances are institutionally appropriated via the privacy settings and interface design of Facebook, which encourage users' original content sharing (van Dijck, 2013, pp. 59–61).

In China, social media applications enhance a similar form of digital business governance. For example, a survey by CNNIC (2014a, p. 19) indicates that the sharing and browsing of Moments updates comprise an important dimension of Chinese young people's use of WeChat. This sharing culture certainly reflects the rise of individualism among the younger generations in post-reform China (Liu, 2011, p. 53). Yet, it is arguably driven by the design of social media applications, like WeChat, specifically to encourage content sharing as well. This makes WeChat a proxy for digital business governance that assists Tencent's profitability. Tencent's (2014a, p. 18) annual report for shareholders clearly acknowledges that WeChat is a valuable asset to the company's business success. WeChat's mediation of young people's everyday practices in order to further Tencent's business interests is a good example of how the design of social media applications facilitates digital business governance in China.

An affect-centred account helps to articulate how social media applications enhance Internet companies' digital business governance through highlighting the role affects play in the mediation of young people's use of the technologies. The sociology of emotion uses affect to describe how human emotions are affected through one's bodily encounters with the outside world (Wetherell, 2012, p. 19). For example, a person may cry when listening to a sad song. We can explain that the person cries as a result of being deeply affected by the

music. The emotion of sadness is a reflection of the person's affective experience. Building upon the emotion of sociology, affect studies extensively widen the scope that affects address. Affects are considered in relation to non-intentional and pre-social forces, which opens up the body to new capacities for action (Ash, 2014, p. 86). For instance, an incoming message may generate an affect, encouraging users to move their fingers to click on a mobile screen so as to respond to it.

Two key issues – namely material thresholds and associated environment – are central to an affect-centred account of how technology influences users' everyday practices. The material thresholds of a technology are dependent upon its materiality; they define the technology's capacity in affective production (Ash, 2014, p. 86). The associated environment is the environment in which affects are transmitted; it comprises a technology's relations with other relevant material (Ash, 2014, p. 86). For example, a mobile phone is made of a screen, enclosures, antennae, and other electronic components to facilitate communication between users. The material thresholds of the mobile phone, i.e. the appropriate design, determine what it can be used for. However, the affects of the mobile phone can only make sense when it connects to other mobile phones through wireless networks. The cooperation of mobile phones and these wireless networks is an example of the "broader ecology of technical objects", explaining the associated environment in which the mobile phone is placed (Ash, 2014, p. 87).

The affect-centred account of mediation provides a framework for understanding how the design of WeChat manipulates Chinese young people for the benefit of Tencent's business interests in specific terms. This account argues that our use of social media applications generates affects, which require responses from our bodies. This affective

process ultimately mediates how we behave in our everyday lives. The following sections draw on my empirical findings to explain the logic and reasoning behind Tencent's digital business governance of Chinese young people, and how this is embedded in the design of WeChat.

Attentive Affect, Affective Design, and Networks

Following the affect-centred account, it can be said that social media applications govern young people by mediating their everyday practices. The mediation is achieved through generating affective responses from them. The attentive affect, which leads to capturing one's attention (Ash, 2012, p. 9), is probably the most notable form that emerges with young people's use of social media. Social media applications mediate users' everyday practices by encouraging their desire for attentive affects. This increases the amount of time that users spend on the relevant applications and consequently maximizes the applications' influence on their everyday lives. Our desire for attentive affects – which is encouraged by social media applications – is the main reason why we constantly log into our personal accounts to check upon on what is occurring. This desire legitimizes frequent checking and interactivity with a mobile phone as an acceptable and increasingly normalized pattern of practice among young people. In order to stimulate young people's desire for attentive affects, the affective design of social media applications is crucial, because the affective capacity of an application, to a certain extent, is defined by how it is affectively designed.

Affective design augments the capacity of social media to drive users' desire for attentive affects. The phrase "affective design" is used to describe the design of a product which indirectly generates certain affects that grasp people's attention (Ash, 2012, pp. 3–4). The importance of the affective design is shared across industries in contemporary society.

Consumer goods have to be manufactured to tempt the senses, so as to be desirable for consumers (Ash, 2012, p. 4). Although the designers do not have complete control over how their products are used by individual users, they are able to narrow down "the possibilities for the kinds of affective responses that are generated" (Ash, 2012, p. 6). For example, video games are designed to provide special visual experiences that attract players to pay particular attention to the screen. The affective design comprises the material thresholds that the designers impose on their products to amplify their capacity in affective production.

Similar to any other industry, the affective design of social media applications attempts to amplify the applications' affective capacity, with a particular focus on encouraging users' constant attention. The affective design of a social media application is reflected in the functional features and interfaces of the application. Researching the historical development of WeChat reveals that the technology was initially launched as an instant messaging service, similar to WhatsApp in the West. The experience of using WeChat at that time was similar to that of mobile messaging. A user could exchange text/voice messages with either a contact or a group of contacts (Huang, 2012, p. n.p.). In the early versions of the WeChat Graphical User Interface (GUI), dialogue boxes were used as the default main page. Attentive affects were generated as soon as users received messages from their contacts. In particular, a red bubble with a number appeared in the top right corner of a dialogue box, indicating the number of messages received. This, alongside a vibration and tone, notified users of incoming messages, tempting their senses and, thereby, driving their attention to the application.

However, Tencent soon realized that the affective capacity of WeChat was inadequate as the application did not attract as many users as expected. Thus, while maintaining the

instant messaging function, a series of additional affectively-designed features were sequentially applied in the updated versions. These features, for instance, include "stranger social plug-ins", which facilitate users to find and communicate with people previously unknown to them. On WeChat, these include: (1) "Look Around", which allows users to find others who live geographically close to them; (2) "Shake", which enables users to find others who are shaking their mobile phones simultaneously; and (3) "Drift Bottle", which allows users to send a short message randomly to another user.

Interestingly, the present netnographic enquiry found that WeChat may tempt Chinese young people's attentive affects by encouraging them to spend time on using the above-mentioned stranger social plug-ins. Many participants started using the plug-ins to develop friendships but ultimately found them to be merely a way to cope with boredom. For instance, participant Zuo is a student whose hometown is not far from her university. However, moving away to university was the first time that the 20-year-old had lived without her parents. Zuo said that she sometimes felt lonely, particularly late at night, despite enjoying good relationships with her university classmates. Since the launch of "People Nearby" on WeChat, Zuo started using the plug-in to find strangers and to communicate with them. However, she soon became fed up with this "game" after being bothered by what she described as "annoying guys". Zuo admitted that she still occasionally uses "People Nearby" to find other people on WeChat and observe the Moments updates[6] they share. However, she has almost entirely stopped accepting friend requests from strangers. As she noted:

[6] "Moments" updates are the stream-based content that users share on WeChat (see p.14). Users' ten most recent updates are accessible to other users when they are found via "People Nearby".

> I do not add any strangers now because it is only a way to kill time for me… I only (use "People Nearby" to) check who is around and what they are doing – when I have nothing to do… This just helps to distract me when I am really bored.
>
> Zuo

WeChat's stranger social plug-ins, then, simply provide Zuo with a way to pass the time when she feels lonely. Similar experiences were also found in the interviews with other participants, such as Ning. The 19-year-old uses all the aforementioned stranger social plug-ins, with the objective of developing new friendships after moving away from his hometown to attend university. Ning said that he has communicated with up to 100 strangers during the past year. However, only a couple have become friends and remain in contact with him to the present day. Ning still believes that new friends might be made via stranger social plug-ins, despite realizing that the chance might be small. The imaginary benefits of using these plug-ins have been tempting him to spend too much time on WeChat.

> I sometimes spend half an hour or more checking others' profiles or picking up "Drift Bottles"… I guess I have to invest time to find them ("real friends")… Probably the time I spent was not always worthwhile (because not many "real friends" were made), but at least these (the stranger social plug-ins) help me cope with boredom.
>
> Ning

It is clear that WeChat's stranger social plug-ins facilitate users to search for and communicate with strangers, possibly helping them to expand their social network. The above examples, however, show that the likelihood of their actually doing so is small. Yet, the present participants still spend time on the plug-ins, describing them as tools to "cope with boredom". This demonstrates that the plug-ins also drive users' desire for attentive

affects, and that WeChat positions itself as an accessible way to fulfil this desire. While driving users' attention from elsewhere, the plug-ins comprise an important dimension of the affective design, increasing WeChat's affective capacity.

Furthermore, a key feature of the updated versions of WeChat is the "Moments" function. This function enables young people to generate original content, sharing everyday life episodes with friends as updates on the application. If users upload a Moments update, it will appear in their contacts' Moments streams (similar to Facebook news feed). Connecting with hundreds of contacts, the Moments updates provide a steady flow of content constantly attracting users' attention. In addition, a red dot appears on the screen as soon as any update is made by users' WeChat contacts. The red dot further strengthens the affectivity of the content, encouraging young people to click on it to check what new updates are available. In my netnographic enquiry, almost all participants rated Moments as one of the most attractive features of WeChat.

It is evident that Moments serves as a way to address young people's curiosity about the personal lives of friends and acquaintances. Many participants' hometowns are far away from the university. They upload Moments updates to share personal life episodes with old friends, whilst simultaneously browsing old friends' streams to keep informed about their latest news. For instance, more than half of participant Euc's WeChat contacts are people known to him before he entered university. While Euc shares Moments updates that describe his personal life episodes, the Moments updates that these old friends generate also provide a glimpse into their lives. As CNNIC's (2014a, p. 21) survey shows, friends and acquaintances comprise 70% to 90% of a typical user's WeChat contacts. The use of Moments as a way to gain information about friends' recent news is common among WeChat users. However,

having used Moments for over two years, participant Euc seems to have become "addicted" to Moments:

> Sometimes it is difficult to stop spending time on WeChat… It is like compulsiveness really… You feel that you have to click on Moments to eliminate the "annoying" red dot… When clicking on the red dot, your friends' Moments updates appear – Okay, so why not spend some time browsing what they share?
>
> Euc

Similar to Euc, other participants also mentioned how Moments increases the amount of time they spend on WeChat. Many described browsing WeChat Moments as the "first thing they do after waking up", as well as a "daily habit when travelling on public transport". In fact, browsing Moments updates to pass the time while travelling has also become shared practice among almost all my participants. Participant Chen, an active WeChat user, even said that Moments has even caused her minor traffic accidents: Once, when walking while using WeChat in a street, Chen's attention was fully occupied by her friends' Moments updates. She, therefore, did not notice a cyclist coming towards her. The accident left a tiny scar on Chen's arm, reminding her to be more cautious. However, she confessed that she still occasionally takes a glance at Moments when walking alone in the street. This indicates a kind of "compulsiveness", as reported by Chen and many of her peers.

The above examples clearly indicate that Moments not only helps these Chinese college students to stay up to date with friends and acquaintances' latest news but also encourages their attention, making them unable to leave WeChat. Born in the 1990s, Chinese college students are typical of the post-reform Chinese younger generation. Brought up in

one-child families, these students share close relationships with their parents and schoolmates (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 702). Entering university is probably the first time that most of them have experienced living in a new environment without parents and close friends accompanying them. Loneliness and homesickness are new life experiences that these young people are encountering for the first time. While they seek attentive affects to help deal with these new experiences, WeChat has been affectively designed to address and even encourage their desire in this respect. From an instant messenger to a complex social media application comprising a variety of functional features, WeChat has been, from top to bottom, affectively designed and updated to tempt users' senses. By 2015, the number of monthly active users on WeChat had increased 70 times from early 2012 (Statista, 2016, p. n.p.). This increase exemplifies how the affective design of WeChat has expanded the application's affective capacity, making it an extremely popular social media application among Chinese young people. This is the foundation that effectively enables WeChat to play a significant role in these young people's everyday lives and thereby enhance digital business governance.

The ways in which WeChat enhances digital business governance do not involve directly forcing users to behave in certain ways. Instead, the affective design of the application provides young people with a pseudo-empowerment by encouraging them to play a significant role in generating and circulating attentive affects. This pseudo-empowerment is built upon social media's Web 2.0 characteristics. Unlike traditional mass media, the ability to create and circulate content on Web 2.0 is not institutionally centralized, but is rather shared among ordinary users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, pp. 60–61). The service provider of WeChat, Tencent, does not produce original content. All the original content is generated and circulated by the users themselves when they make their personal profiles publicly accessible to strangers (through stranger social plug-ins) and share their life episodes as stream-based

content (Moments updates). While encouraging young people to generate original content, WeChat forms affective networks in which attentive affects are circulated (Dean, 2010, p. 95). The creation and transmission of such affects through the networks of users is "a binding technique", encouraging young people's continuous engagement (Dean, 2010, p. 95). These young people seem to be in charge of when to share content and what content to share. Yet, these content streams are also the sources of the attentive affects. Being affected by the content streams results in users' psychological satisfaction (Dean, 2010, p. 95). This form of psychological satisfaction drives their desire for more affective affects, transforming young people into essential components of the affective dynamics; they are not only attracted by attentive affects but also voluntarily help to generate and circulate them. This makes young people both consumers and manufacturers of affect; however, they have little conscious awareness of being involved in these affective networks.

Another factor that makes WeChat so influential today is the installation of the application on mobile devices[7]. This resonates with Ash's (2014, p. 88) emphasis on the associated environment, involving not only how the applications are designed per se, but also how they work in relation to other technologies. Mobile users account for four-fifths of the Internet population in China (CNNIC, 2014b, p. 23). WeChat is primarily used on mobile phones, running parallel with the trend of mobile Internet usage. Mobile devices are portable; they allow users to carry them from one place to another. By accessing WeChat via mobile devices rather than computers, young people can easily be affected at anytime, anywhere, even when they are in motion. The cooperation between WeChat and mobile devices constitutes an associated environment in which affects are transmitted. This associated environment facilitates the amplification of the affective capacity of WeChat because the

[7] This applies to Weibo and other mobile social media as well.

amount of time that users spend on everyday traveling can then be exploited for transmitting affects as well. In accordance with my empirical findings, figures show that more than 50% of Chinese young people access WeChat when they are using public transport, on the way to school or work, or simply when waiting in a queue (CNNIC, 2013, p. 24). Research also indicates that they spend over 40 minutes per day on WeChat (DMR, 2016, p. n.p.). The figures provide a glimpse of the attention obtained by the affective network of WeChat.

Defining WeChat as an "affective" network does not mean that the use of mobile social media is irrelevant to users' communication needs. A key motive that encourages Chinese young people to sign up for an account on WeChat is their need to stay in touch with friends. The technology-assisted connectivity shapes the world into connected networks, whereby social dynamics rely on exchanging information (Castells, 2009, pp. 48–51). The benefits that these young people possibly derive from the use of the application are never complete fabrications. However, as my netnographic data indicate, WeChat attracts Chinese college students' attention even when they do not really need to communicate. This shows that, while WeChat provides convenient communication services, the application also regulates users by encouraging them to spend extra time on stranger social plug-ins and browsing Moments updates. The affective design drives Chinese young people's desire for attentive affects, ultimately enhancing the digital business governance by which these young people's attention is manipulated.

The logic of digital business governance is not only particular to WeChat but rather is shared among other mobile social media applications. Today, the fast-paced urban lifestyle in China has led to the prevalence of mobile Internet access while traveling (Hjorth & Gu, 2012, p. 701). Since these applications were designed for use on mobile phones, Chinese young

people are able to access the applications anywhere, anytime. Today's urban citizens are already overwhelmed by stimulators which constantly attract their attention (Goldhaber, 2006, p. n.p.). The affective design of mobile social media applications, however, creates more tasks to tempt their attention, thereby promoting multitasking. This constant access to mobile applications, for instance, may help Chinese young people to cope with their spare time, such as waiting in a queue or when encountering insomnia at night. However, these young people might find that it becomes increasingly difficult to concentrate on one specific activity. Their desire for affects and their limited capacity to cope with the demands on their attention has become an increasingly important source of tension in contemporary urban life in China. This tension reflects how mobile social media applications like WeChat enhance digital business governance to exploit the limited amount of attention that Chinese young people have.

Attention Economy in China

The affective design of WeChat is not aimless. It manipulates Chinese young people in order to benefit Tencent's business interests. While these young people feel as if they are enjoying the use of the application for free, the amount of attention they pay to WeChat becomes a valuable asset to the Internet Company's profitability in itself. For example, Tencent claims to value WeChat users' privacy, but the Internet Company also utilizes users' personal information for business purposes and requests that people agree to this privacy policy before signing up for a WeChat account. In WeChat's terms of service, Tencent clearly states that the company may circulate customized advertising to users, according to the personal information they provide (which reveals the users' tastes, lifestyle, and consumer preferences) (Tencent, 2014b, p. n.p.). Furthermore, the company also offers paid official account services, allowing brands and businesses to sign up for official accounts to engage with

customers (WeChat, 2014, p. n.p.). Many famous brands, such as Starbucks, have already created their own WeChat official accounts for marketing purposes in China (Moth, 2014, p. n.p.).

In the present netnographic enquiry, for instance, Participant Chen described herself as a 'coffee lover'. She follows Starbucks' official WeChat account and views it as a channel to explore Starbucks' trending coffee products. As Chen noted, WeChat is the social media application that she uses most regularly. This, to a certain extent, is the main route by which Starbucks' content can successfully reach Chen and then influence her coffee consumption with the brand. Chen is not an isolated example. I discovered that 14 out of my 19 participants have subscribed to at least one brand's official accounts on WeChat. Due to its popularity among Chinese young people, WeChat has huge potential for social media advertising, encouraging brands to link up with Tencent. Thus, Tencent's business success depends on the attention paid to WeChat by Chinese young people. The huge amount of attention on WeChat content generates profits. According to its 2014 annual report (Tencent, 2014a, p. 3), Tencent's revenue soared to over ¥78 billion, reaching a record high and almost doubling the figures from 2011 – the year in which WeChat was launched.

The way in which Tencent profits by using WeChat to govern Chinese young people represents the adoption of attention economy in China. Attention economy describes a new economic model emerging from the West. This model departs from mass production, whose focus is on the manufacture of material items (Goldhaber, 2006, p. n.p.). In the attention economy, attention becomes a finite and exchangeable commodity – attention is scarce, whilst obtaining attention is very desirable (Goldhaber, 2006, p. n.p.). This scarcity and

desirability combined form a driving force that reshapes the business operation. Attention economy particularly applies to the nature of Internet companies' profitability, which is increasingly dependent upon attracting and managing social media users' attention (Goldhaber, 2006, p. n.p.). Following Castells (2009, pp. 97–103), social media might be defined as information technology, which shapes an information-based economic relationship. However, attention economy argues that this is epistemologically incorrect, because only scarce resources shape the economy (Goldhaber, 2006, p. n.p.). Information is no longer a scarce resource; it is already abundant or even overflowing on the Internet, and while information is abundant, attention is an increasingly scarce resource, and therefore one much desired by businesses.

WeChat attracts Chinese young people's attention, enabling Tencent to profit by exploiting their immaterial labour. Immaterial labour describes the production of the cultural content of the commodity in which "cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and, more strategically, public opinion" are defined and fixed (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 1). Immaterial labour, therefore, is not a singular form of labour which is a binary opposite to material labour (Cote & Pybus, 2007, p. 89); rather, it addresses how ordinary people create social and cultural meanings and how privileged groups derive benefits from the surplus value of the meanings. Understanding the logic of digital business governance behind the design of WeChat reveals how Tencent uses the application as a proxy to govern society following the attention economy model.

The digital business governance that Tencent practises is to utilize Chinese young people's immaterial labour through the affective networks formed by WeChat. WeChat is a "free" social media application. However, its affective design requires young people to pay

attention constantly in return for access to the service. Furthermore, the Internet Company does not have to provide content to obtain Chinese young people's attention. These updates are generated and circulated by the users themselves on a voluntary basis. For example, Zhang, a 23-year-old female participant, described Moments updates as a channel that allowed her to share certain parts of her personal life episode with friends:

> It is a pleasure to share the happy moments in your life with your best friends… Happiness is only real when shared: this is why I always upload pictures of myself with friends when we hang out together… I want my friends to feel what I feel, and Moments helps me to do so.
>
> Zhang

Zhang's explanation was generally endorsed by other participants. These students all admitted that they generate Moments updates not because they are "forced" by anyone but because the practice itself is a pleasure. However, while generating and spreading this creative cultural content, these young people are voluntarily working for Tencent, providing immaterial labour to help the technology accumulate others' attention. The attention accumulated forms a digital commodity that the Internet Company can sell to advertisers for tangible profits (Cote & Pybus, 2007, p. 100). Tencent's (2014a, p. 5) annual report for shareholders clearly states that, by the end of 2014, the company's revenues from mobile advertising increased by 65 per cent to ¥3,308 million compared with the previous year, whilst WeChat made a significant contribution to this increase.

Apart from advertising, Tencent also develops other additional services to generate more profit. For instance, Tencent has launched a third-party payment platform based on WeChat. This payment platform requires users to connect their bank cards and personal

WeChat accounts so that they can make payments on the Internet. The company is able to profit from the transactions by cooperating with commercial banks. While Chinese people have a tradition of exchanging "Red Envelopes" during important festivals[8], the third-party payment, which provides a convenient way to exchange envelopes, has attracted massive attention. On the 2014 Chinese New Year, "Digital Red Envelopes" were circulated extensively amongst young people who use WeChat (Miller et al., 2016, p. 97). Participant Chen noted that exchanging "Digital Red Envelopes" allows her to initiate communications with friends on WeChat. For her, this has become an increasingly important part of the celebration of traditional festivals. Chen said that "a Chinese New Year is incomplete without exchanging 'Digital Red Envelopes' with friends on WeChat". Chen and many of her colleagues have started using WeChat payment since the 2014 Chinese New Year. While these young people exchange "Red Envelopes" to celebrate festivals, their use of WeChat third-party payment simultaneously facilitates Tencent's profitability. Tencent's 2015 Third-Quarter Financial Releases (Tencent, 2015, p. 3) show that over 200 million users have connected their bank cards to their WeChat accounts. These additional services like third-party payment, alongside advertising, transform users' attention into a commodity, making a great contribution to the company's financial gain.

Business interests motivate Tencent to continue taking advantage of Chinese young people by using their immaterial labour. The profitability of the Internet Company exemplifies that the design of social media applications includes an intention of digital governance for business interests in China. However, this digital business governance in China is also particular, because the marketization of Internet businesses is operated in an authoritarian context in which government policy has a strong impact. While an overly-

[8] Red Envelopes are monetary gifts that Chinese people exchange during important festivals and on special occasions (Miller et al., 2016, p. 97).

restricted Internet can be deemed harmful to economic growth, the government's ultimate goal is to remain in power by all means. In particular, the government has tightened its control over the Internet since Xi took power in 2013 (Svensson, 2016, p. 2). Thus, the digital business governance by Tencent and other Chinese Internet companies has to accept the effects of government policies[9]. While governing users for business interests, the Internet companies also become accomplices of the government in implementing political censorship in China.

Western Internet companies may not be particularly interested in what exactly young people share on social media. However, their counterparts in China have to pay great attention to the user-generated content involving political implications, so as to avoid sanctions from the government. For instance, WeChat's terms of service clearly state that circulating content that criticizes the "socialist system" or violates "socialist ethics" is prohibited (Tencent, 2016, p. n.p.). Users are not allowed to sign up for a WeChat account unless agreeing to these terms. The design of WeChat also automatically censors posts with politically blacklisted keywords and may suspend accounts which publish these posts (Custer, 2015, p. n.p.).

Furthermore, WeChat also supports self-censorship, encouraging users themselves to report and delete restricted Moments updates (Custer, 2015, p. n.p.). The content which can be reported includes a vaguely defined type, namely "sensitive information". This type is usually associated with dissenting views or criticism of the government. In particular, participant Wang, a 22-year-old male student, noted an incident: in the early 2014, he shared

[9] For instance, the Chinese government threatens to shut down internet businesses that do not meet its censorship requirements and embeds "cyber-security police" units at native Internet companies to prevent "crimes", such as "spreading rumours" (Dou, 2015, p. n.p.).

an article in WeChat Moments which uncovered the “secret lives” of contemporary Chinese politicians. However, the article was soon banned after being reported as “sensitive information” by users. This made Wang aware of the existence of political restrictions on WeChat, thereby stopping him from sharing articles of this kind. Wang’s experience provides a glimpse into WeChat users’ self-censorship practices facilitated by the design of the application. This self-censorship certainly discourages the circulation of certain types of content; it also potentially impedes Tencent’s profitability following the logic of attention economy. However, unlike Western Internet companies, their Chinese counterparts have to work extremely closely with the government in order to survive. The facilitation of self-censorship in the design of WeChat exemplifies that digital business governance has to make way for political restrictions in an authoritarian regime.

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how WeChat enhances the digital business governance of Chinese young people and how Tencent – the Internet Company that launched this social media application – profits from this digital governance. The analysis provides an affective account of WeChat, showing how the application’s capacity for governing young people is amplified through the affective design of the applications: the affective design of WeChat – which features stranger social plug-ins and Moments updates – encourages users to generate and circulate original content through their every single touch on the digital devices in their hands. This user-generated content becomes the source of affects circulated among connected devices. In my case study, the circulation of these affects through the network of devices attracts Chinese college students’ attention, provoking them to pursue more attentive affects by, for instance, interacting with strangers and browsing friends’ Moments updates. The desire for attentive affects requires these young people to constantly pay attention even when

they do not need to and are committed to other activities at the same time. This ultimately leads to the students' ubiquitous usage of WeChat. College students are a representative group of young people who lead the trend of social media usage in China. The way in which their everyday practices are mediated by WeChat explains, to a certain extent, how the design of social media applications enhances the digital business governance of young people in China.

The design of WeChat enhances digital business governance, serving business interests following the adoption of attention economy in China. As soon as Chinese young people participate in the affective networks weaved by WeChat, they become not only consumers of affects but also immaterial labour workers, who themselves help to produce and circulate affects. While addressing their communication needs, the affective design of WeChat also amplifies the application's capacity in encouraging young people's desire for more attentive affects. This desire motivates these young people to engage with the affective networks, devoting themselves to the assembly lines of affective production, with little consciousness of being exploited. While attention has become one of the scarcest resources in today's digital economy, the immaterial labour performed by users helps Chinese Internet companies, which have launched social media applications, to obtain huge profits from selling user attention to advertisers and/or developing paid services based on the application. However, this digital business governance in China has to be contextualized in a unique authoritarian context, in which the government still has strict control over business operations. While deriving benefit from regulating Chinese young people, Tencent – in common with other Chinese Internet companies – still has to work closely with the government, prioritizing political restrictions over business interests when conflict emerges. These native Internet companies are still living within the confines of political restrictions, despite being able to

profit by practising the tricks of digital business governance learned from their Western counterparts. It might be of interest for further studies to investigate how digital business governance is reflected in the design of other social media applications, such as Weibo, in the authoritarian country.

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