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Chinese social media: Technology, culture and creativity

1. Introduction

The aim of this article collection is to examine Chinese social media technology and culture as a distinctive form of mediated communication and practice. The Internet and social media have grown and become an essential part of the society and economy in China in ways that are increasingly dissimilar from that of the social media platforms outside of China. From the early roll out of the Internet, to the now pervasive presence of social media, Chinese Internet culture continues to reflect the unique interplay of technological changes, language affordances (i.e. Chinese as a character-based script), software development, user-generated interactional practices, and government censorship. Social media platforms and practices provide a rich, yet surprisingly under-explored source for the analysis of new and innovative practices within the distinct context of communication technologies and platforms for nearly one billion users. The papers in this article collection contribute further to examining how the technologies and technological affordances of Chinese social media interact to afford distinctive discursive and linguistic practices across a range of interactional contexts.

In 2006, China surpassed the U.S. to become the country with the world's greatest number of Internet users (Ju et al., 2019a). Since then, China has continued to innovate and develop new platforms and applications, making social media an integrated part of life in China (Craig et al., 2021; Yang and Wang, 2021). For instance, users can follow news and popular culture on *Weibo* (also known as *Sina Weibo*), exchange messages with friends on *WeChat*, purchase goods on *Taobao*, pay for purchases with *Alipay*, read travel and product reviews on *Xiaohongshu* (*Little Red Book*), follow live streaming broadcasts on *Weibo* or *Lang Live*, and post and share short videos on *Douyin*, *Kwai*, and *Bilibili* (e.g. Huang et al., 2020). With multiple functions and features of other digital platforms consolidated into one application, *WeChat* is described as a 'super-app' (Sandel et al., 2019), or an 'infrastructuralized' digital platform (Plantin and de Seta, 2019) that dominates Chinese social media. At the heart of the success of *WeChat* is the decentralization of software development with the potentially limitless expansion of third-party apps and 'mini programs' that can be added to the app as well as the centralization of data flows through China's official accounts. This is evident in the app's expanding number of functions, ranging from instant messaging in the verbal, audio and visual forms, social networking of 'Moments', payments, and travel and e-commerce services. The continually expanding multiple functions of *WeChat* and the diverse communicative affordances of the platform highlight the transformation and increasing divergence of China's social media ecology as it evolves within the Great Firewall (see Ju and Sandel, 2018; Ju et al., 2019b; Sandel et al., 2019; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021b).

While the Internet and digital platforms that first entered China in the 1990s through China's state-controlled media were seen as 'drab in tone' and 'pompous' in imagery, this has given way to a vibrant and creative online environment that is now 'full of humor, play, and irreverence' (Yang, 2009, p. 14). In more recent years the Chinese state has taken a more active role in monitoring and censoring digital communication (Ju et al., 2019a; Wu, 2018; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021a), though China's digital environment continues to be dynamic, shaped by a number of forces and embracing technological changes (e.g. smart phones), software development (e.g. Web 2.0 applications), user-generated interactional practices and the affordances of Chinese as a language to create alternative meanings (Craig et al., 2021; Gong and Yang, 2010). In this environment, while the state monitors digital content, creating boundaries around what it defines to be sensitive political and social topics, app developers and content producers compete to develop marketable and successful products for the vast Chinese audience (Plantin and de Seta, 2019). It is this interplay between these two forces that makes Chinese social media, culture and technology, interesting and distinct from that found in other parts of the world.

Acuse of the entwined influences of technology, creativity, commercialization and politics, Chinese social media should be understood as embedded within and a product of the intersections of a unique environment of political, social, economic and technological forms.

2. Discourse studies of Chinese social media

Previous studies of China's social media from a discourse perspective have tended to converge around four main research themes. The first theme includes the examination of Chinese social media as a relatively free space for the articulation of different voices (see Gleiss, 2015; Tao, 2021; Wu, 2018; Wu and Montgomery, 2020, 2021). For instance, Gleiss (2015) examined the discursive strategies adopted by a Chinese charity organization to contest official discourse and campaign for medical treatment for workers with severe lung disease on *Weibo*. Focusing on the same social media platform, Wu and Montgomery (2020) explored the discursive forms of witnessing to create a public testimony that challenged the official discourse of the 2015 Tianjin explosions in China. The second research theme explores the innovative role of social media in mobilizing online movements and social campaigns (e.g. Fang and Repnikova, 2018; Feng and Wu, 2018; Gao, 2022; Wu, 2020). For example, Feng and Wu (2018) examined the design of *Weibo* posts and the interaction among users in mounting an anti-corruption movement through the case of 'watch brother' in China, while Gao (2022) examined an online campaign against a Chinese celebrity through a creative reappropriation of the technological and linguistic resources that

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questioned the social inequality of privilege.

The third research theme focuses on user interaction and social actions on Chinese social media (e.g. Bouvier and Chen, 2021; Sandel and Wangchuk, 2020; Zhang and Cassany, 2020). For instance, Sandel and Wangchuk (2020) looked at interaction on China's most widely used platform, *WeChat*. They analyzed the text, images, and short audio messages shared in a private chat group in Bhutan, and from this proposed a new approach for studying how digital communication can bridge chronotopic (time/space) dilemmas. Looking at mediated interaction among massive anonymous chats, Zhang and Cassany (2020) examined how users maintain coherence in the form of *danmu* (bullet comments) on the seemingly chaotic interface of *Bilibili*, the video sharing platform that allows users to post and respond to comments on the screen while watching a video. The last research theme concerns the innovative and creative techniques brought by technological affordances, linguistic and cultural forms (see Gao, 2022; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021a; Zhang and Ren, 2020; Zhu, 2020). Studies from this theme are concerned with two major topics – creative techniques to circumvent China's Internet censorship and new forms of expression and discourse practices. In the context of Internet censorship, Chinese social media users have drawn upon technological, linguistic and cultural resources to post content and opinions about sensitive topics online to be 'hidden in plain sight' (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021a,b; Yang, 2009, 2012). For example, Wu and Fitzgerald (2021a) examined how Chinese social media users creatively engaged with online censorship and expressed political criticism through three discursive techniques of indirection surrounding the 2015 Tianjin explosions. Despite the increasingly sophisticated online censorship, the rapid development and proliferation of Chinese social media technologies have also given rise to a variety of forms of expression, genres, and discourse practices (see Ren and Guo, 2020; Teng and Chan, 2022a; Zhang and Ren, 2020). For instance, Ren and Guo (2020) investigated a popular online discourse genre called Versailles Literature, a form of humblebrag that show off one's accomplishments or privileged lifestyle in a humble way. They examined the pragmatic strategies users adopted through quantitative and qualitative analyses of a pool of microblogs collected from *Weibo*.

While previous studies have demonstrated the unique environment of Chinese social media, they tend to focus on the social and discursive practices of a limited number of platforms and technologies, particularly *Weibo* and *WeChat*. Relatively less attention has been paid to the diversity of Chinese social media, forms of technological and cross-platform engagement, and user creativity in taking advantage of the affordances of emerging social media platforms, semiotic resources, and cultural forms. The papers in this collection address these lacunae: they examine a number of emerging Chinese social media platforms, including *Bilibili* (Teng and Chan, 2022b; Yang, 2021), *TikTok* and *Douyin* (Darvin, 2022), *Lang Live* (Hsiao, 2022) and multi-platform engagement (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021b; Sandel and Wang, 2022).

3. Methodological overview and challenges

The study of social media platforms, including Chinese platforms, has proven to be a particular challenge for forms of discourse analysis in respect to the multimodal communication affordances within apps and platforms which can involve complex layering of meaning making. Within the broad discipline of discourse studies, there have been several useful frameworks and methods for examining Chinese social media including discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, multimodal discourse analysis, computer-mediated discourse analysis, media discourse analysis, and (digital) conversation analysis. Our review of previous research on Chinese social media shows that while discourse analysis, critical discourse analysis, and conversation analysis continue to be influential in unpacking discourse practices and social interaction in social media, multimodal approaches such as social semiotic multimodal analysis, multimodal (critical) discourse analysis, and systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis have evolved to be an

important toolkit for studying (Chinese) social media (Sindoni and Moschini, 2021). For instance, in a special issue on 'Social media as semiotic technology' in *Social Semiotics* Poulsen and Kvåle (2018) proposed a social semiotic multimodal framework to examine social media as semiotic technology, while underscoring the importance of the technological resources and design when analyzing the meaning potential of multimodal texts and semiotic practices within a particular context (see also Poulsen et al., 2018). Adopting a social semiotic multimodal approach, Djonov and van Leeuwen (2018) developed an analytical model that combines semiotic technology and discourse analysis to examine how *ResearchGate*, as a social media technology, transforms the practice of peer-review. Following the same approach, but focusing on an emerging Chinese social media platform, Yang (2020) explored the multimodal meaning making and the social practice of *danmaku* (also called *danmu*) subtitling on *Bilibili*, through using Djonov and van Leeuwen's (2018) analytical model. While multimodal approaches have offered useful insights into examining the discourse actions and practices in social media, there is an ongoing debate on what counts as a mode and how multimodality can be studied in the field. For example, Ledin and Machin (2018) critically engaged with systemic functional approaches to multimodality and challenged the over-creation of categories of multimodality in analyzing multimodal forms of communication. They suggested that it is more important to focus on multimodal data and undertake a bottom-up analysis. Our article collection further contributes to the methodological discussion for studying Chinese social media data, through critically employing social semiotic approaches to multimodal analysis, multimodal (critical) discourse analysis, and media discourse analysis, while examining a range of popular and emerging Chinese social media platforms.

4. The development of Chinese social media platforms

As mentioned previously, prior research on Chinese social media points toward possible avenues for exploration. These have examined the discourses and technological affordances of two of the most widely used and well-known social media applications in China, *WeChat* and *Weibo*. While these platforms are central to understanding the evolution and context of Chinese social media, and appear in a number of the papers in this collection, the aim of the collection is to explore the wider diversity of the Chinese social media platforms by examining a number of recently emerging popular platforms and features that have received relatively less scholarly attention including: *Bilibili*, *Danmu*, *DingTalk*, *TikTok* (*Douyin* in China), and *Lang Live*.

Bilibili, launched in 2009, is one of the most popular video sharing websites in China. It originally was targeted at a young audience (born between 1990 and 2009), with a focus on ACG (anime, comic, and games), but has broadened its appeal by including more diversified categories, such as music, beauty makeup, fashion, TV shows, mobile gaming, and celebrities. Its core feature is *danmu*, a real-time commentary subtitle system, which has comments overlaid directly onto the video itself and are synced to a specific playback time so that the comments respond directly to what happening in the video. *DingTalk*, founded in 2014, is an enterprise communication and collaboration platform developed by the Alibaba Group. It supports text, photo, voice and video communication, workflow management and collaboration among team members and companies. It ranked as the most downloaded app in the Apple App Store and MAC App Store, surpassing *WeChat* for the first time due to the COVID 19 pandemic, which made most company staff, schoolteachers and students work at home. *TikTok* (*Douyin* in China), founded in 2016, is an international video-sharing app that allows users to create and share 15-second videos on a variety of topics including lip syncing to music, challenges, dance videos, magic tricks, interesting and funny videos. Its Chinese version, *Douyin* has two added communication functions 'Yuyinshibo' (audio livestreaming) and 'Lianxian' (connect) that allows *Douyin* friends who follow each other to initiate a video call, which has a potential for developing an instant

messaging function among the community of users. *Lang Live*, a popular streaming application in Taiwan, allows the streamers to sing, tell jokes, or chat about a broad range of topics to viewers, who are encouraged to respond by posting comments and making monetary donations.

While each of the papers in the collection examines a particular communicative phenomenon, it is also noticeable that the same platforms and apps often feature across the papers, highlighting not only the diversity of social media platforms and the different forms of communicative modes but also that these exist in a cross-platform environment where users engage across platforms in order to utilize the affordances of different platforms.

5. The contributions to this collection

The papers in this collection pay analytic attention to the multimodal and layered complexity of a range of platforms contributing to the rapidly emerging research interest in Chinese social media as a particular, even unique, site of study. The range of platforms examined demonstrates that this environment is not static but continues to evolve through innovations in forms of technology and forms of engagement. In this regard, Chinese social media not only provides a rich source of study but also highlights the challenge for multimodal analysis in analytically capturing the complex layers of technological affordances and cultural resources that are in constant negotiation within the rich environment and ecology of Chinese social media.

The collection begins with Xiaoping Wu and Richard Fitzgerald's (2021b) *Reaching for the stars: DingTalk and the Multi-platform creativity of a 'one-star' campaign on Chinese social media*. The study sets out to explore mediated forms of creativity and multi-platform affordances used by Chinese social media users and platform producers in a 'one-star' rating campaign aimed at *DingTalk*, an online teaching platform. Adopting a social semiotic multimodal approach, Wu and Fitzgerald focus their analysis on forms of mediated interaction between users and producers across three Chinese social media platforms, *Apple Store*, *Weibo* and *Bilibili*. The analysis highlights that although the 'campaign' was directed at the *DingTalk* platform, the campaign was conducted across a range of platforms, thus highlighting the interwoven ecology of Chinese social media platforms and creative strategies. They show how the technological design and affordances of different platforms are creatively combined with cultural resources through multiple modes of meaning coordinated across platforms. Wu and Fitzgerald's analysis underscores the forms of engagement that characterize Chinese social media within which technological creativity is infused with cultural creativity to produce both situated and transferable meanings that transcend any particular use or medium.

Also taking a multi-platform perspective, Todd Sandel and Yusa Wang's (2022) paper, *Selling Intimacy Online: The multi-modal discursive techniques of China's wanghong*, focuses on the *wanghong* economy, which is based on monetizing identity and performance through the affordances of different Chinese social media platforms. Drawing on social semiotic discourse analysis, Sandel and Wang examine how three prominent *wanghong* celebrities create personal narratives, or back stories, which are then infused into their online selling activities on the platforms of *Weibo*, *Douyin* and *Bilibili*. At the heart of the creation of these mediated selves is the narrative of overcoming struggles in their lives – how they learned to be 'themselves' and to follow their own paths to achieve success. While this may be a familiar trope in personified online selling practices outside of China, within China these constructed narratives can implicate particular – and less familiar – cultural discourses in an environment of constantly shifting political, economic, and social rules and policies. In their analysis, Sandel and Wang highlight how the affordances of different platforms enable diverse forms of mediated performance, while facilitating? and trading upon mediated forms of intimacy and familiarity. Through examining the reflexive layering of technological spaces and affordances and mediated interaction, they show how each *wanghong* creates a safe, online place, where it

is acceptable to have mundane skin problems, where choosing to be a single, divorced woman and mother is acceptable, and where it is a safe place to express a non-conforming sexual identity.

Livestreaming and online selling is also examined in the next paper, *Authenticating discourses of 'being oneself' on monetary-motivated live-streams*, where Chi-hua Hsiao (2022) examines the way identity and authenticity is produced by performers for fans on a monetarily motivated live streaming broadcast. Focusing the analysis on performances on *Lang Live*, a Taiwan-based but globally available streaming platform, Hsiao examines the interactional work of performers who respond to fans' comments and requests to demonstrate that their performance is genuine, authentic and reflects their 'true selves'. The analytic approach takes its cues from Tolson's (2006) ethnographic form of media discourse analysis that—rather than being a specific approach in itself—draws on and combines a range of discourse approaches relevant to the data and particular focus of analysis. The analysis of discursive performance of celebrity and authenticity connects this research to a rich tradition and theme of analysis, showing how it can be applied to the multimodal interactive context of live streaming. Hsiao's analysis highlights that, while particular forms or actions that celebrities engage in may be mediated through different platforms or in different cultures and language, the work to be perceived as 'authentic' is a recurring feature of this form of celebrity performance. That is, there is no set of standard features or actions in performing authenticity, but rather the performance is shaped through technological and cultural affordances contingent on and made operative in the in-situ interactional work of the streamer and her fans. Thus, in *Lang Live* authenticating work is oriented to maintaining a consistent performance of a personal 'authenticity' that is directed at monetising the performance through the 'gifts' given by those fans who judge and decide if the actions that they see are truly authentic.

While the previous papers focused on the multimodal aspects of Chinese social media, Man Teng and Brian Hok-Shing Chan's (2022) paper, *Collective colouring in danmu comments on Bilibili*, focuses on the semiotic use of one mode, colour, as used in *danmu* (bullet screen, or flowing text comments) on the *Bilibili* platform. Drawing on a social semiotic multimodal analysis, the paper explores the creative uses of colour (in videos and images) and coloured *danmu* that are posted to and flow across the screen—in response to the events on a playing video and as a means to enact fan engagement—thus expressing judgement and affect. Coloured *danmu*, therefore, is a way for users to make their comments distinguishable from other users, and to tie *danmu* comments together—in what can be an overwhelming barrage of comments. Going further, Teng and Chen's analysis shows how the uses of particular colours are contextually situated to draw upon and reflect different layers of meaning. Colour can be used to invoke semiotic and cultural meaning and to provide a way for users to collectively display fandom, attitudes, and forms of emotion on screen. Therefore, colours are not subordinated to the text, but create a prominent mode of meaning making at particular points or moments during the course of on-screen action. As such, the primacy of the colours on the screen act as contextualisation cues to marshal on screen comments into a collective action, to produce and project a collective sentiment onto the screen. Teng and Chan, however, also emphasize that colours—even on the same platform—do not have fixed meanings, but rather that meaning is contingent on the collective action directed towards a particular video, or a particular moment in the video. The analysis shows how the in-situ use of colour as a resource is afforded by the technology embedded in this form of engagement, which in turn draws upon layers of cultural resources related to the on-screen action, including fan culture and common social knowledge, reflexively indexing colours with forms of behavior and action. The analysis of this semiotically rich environment, therefore, demonstrates how colour can be used as a semiotic mode and interpretive frame for collective action and interaction with other users. From this, we gain a glimpse of not only the multiple modes of action on this platform, but also the multiple layers of meaning-making through

the uses of colour and users' collective actions on a digital screen.

Yuhong Yang's (2021) paper, *Making sense of the 'raw meat': A social semiotic interpretation of user translation on the danmu interface*, also focuses on Bilibili and danmu commenting technology to explore collaborative user translations, or the 'wild subtitling' of an English language video uploaded to Bilibili. Drawing on van Leeuwen's (2008) notion of semiotic regimes, the analysis focuses on the semiotic regimes that are enabled by the affordances of the technology and made manifest through collaborative translation work, such as professional translation practices and regulatory discourses, in translating 'raw meat' videos being made 'edible' or 'cooked' for the benefit of viewers. Yang's analysis explores how the interface allows the collaborative creation of translation, clarification, contextual information, and comments that provide layers of meaning on the screen. The analysis also highlights that when danmu comments and translations are added to the video, this adds to the potential cacophony of the bullet curtain, and users adopt ways to connect and engage with previous comments to create 'threads' linking comments and translations over an extended, asynchronous period. Yang's study not only highlights this platform as an example of knowledge-based user participation and technology-driven grassroots solutions to media accessibility, but also provides an important focus on novel spaces of translation. Therefore, it broadens the scope of non-professional translation studies as situated in the wider practice of participatory viewing on video-sharing sites in China.

While the previous papers in this collection examine platforms and apps that are regionally located, highlighting how particular technological affordances are combined with cultural resources, Ron Darwin's (2022) paper *Design, resistance and the performance of identity on TikTok*, focuses on the global platform, TikTok. Darwin analyses data collected on TikTok from Hong Kong uploaders and situates the success of the platform by interrogating its platform architecture for generating memes – where the memetic logic is based on the type of content rather than the identity of the users themselves. In service of this logic, the platform mitigates routine forms of sociality prominent in other platforms such as comments and the following of messages, instead to promote the curation of an 'algorithmic culture', based upon content and connection through repetition. Drawing on multimodal discourse analysis, Darwin shows how users deploy the interplay between the platform architecture and creative production to curate forms of identity and community. While the sociotechnical structures and algorithms that constitute the platform have the power to encourage specific modes of production, users can resist such programming and assert themselves as creative agents. Specifically, the analysis demonstrates how users utilize forms of reserialization of the body and space, as modes to engage in identity work and to serve their own communicative intentions in the production of context-situated memes. The study provides an important step in the rapidly emerging research interest in this platform: It shows how users can co-opt the designed algorithmic culture to fashion one controlled by users through the design and logic of the platform, in order to construct and connect with communities through creative assemblies of linguistic, sound and embodied and semiotic resources.

6. Summary

In summary, taken together this collection aims to focus attention on the exceptional context of Chinese social media in which cultural and political influences, together with technological affordances, combine to produce a vibrant and richly creative digital environment. At the heart of the rapidly emerging research interest in Chinese social media is the engagement between cultural resources and technological affordances that produce rich multimodal and multi-layered forms of communication within and across the range of platforms examined within this collection. While, on one hand, the collection highlights the rich complexity of user engagement, on the other, the range of platforms examined emphasizes that this environment does not remain static but continues to evolve through innovations in forms of technology and

forms of engagement. In this regard, Chinese social media not only provides a rich source of study but also highlights the challenge for forms of discourse analysis (see also Rasmussen and van Leeuwen, 2022) to sufficiently and subtly capture the complex layers of technological affordances and cultural resources that are in constant negotiation within the unique ecology of Chinese social media.

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