Abstract

The internet has opened up new possibilities for scholars to gather data and, in general, to stay updated on rapidly changing developments in the Chinese society. Social media has added yet another dimension as it enables researchers to follow events and public debates as they unfold as well as facilitate engagement and interactivity with informants and other contacts. This article is based on the author's own experiences and discusses the possibilities and challenges of using Chinese social media platforms. It calls for an explicit reflexivity on rapidly changing technologies. The article also addresses the fact that the researcher leaves many digital footprints on the internet and social media, and the advantages and possible dangers in an authoritarian society such as China. The article is written as a reflection piece and a call for more open and systematic discussions on how digital technologies change research practices in and on China.

Keywords


Research Methods and Fieldwork in China: Studies, Experiences, and Questions for the Digital Age

Many of the challenges of conducting research and fieldwork in China have been extensively discussed by scholars from different disciplines (e.g. Heimer &
Thögersen 2006; Carlson et al. 2010; Liu 2004; Cornet & Blumenfield 2016). These scholars have, for example, addressed cultural and political constraints for research, how to obtain access to informants and field sites, how to obtain (reliable) data, the role of gatekeepers, and the researcher’s relationship to the Chinese state (including permissions for different types of research), ethical issues and safety for informants, and how to do research on politically sensitive topics. Today, research is almost always partially digital, including gathering data from the internet, posting information about research online, contacting colleagues and informants through e-mails or social media, and archiving and sharing on clouds etc.; but this aspect and its particular challenges in the context of China has not yet received much attention. I assume that many researchers already actively use and integrate digital technologies and social media into their research methods without necessarily writing about it. For me, the ‘digital leap’ has been an equally, if not more, transformative experience as the one I experienced when I went from more classical Sinology and text-based research to ethnography, participatory observations, and interview-based research (Svensson 2006). The present article discusses some of my recent experiences and concerns since 2010. I believe there is an acute need for more systematic discussions on the possibilities and challenges of digital ethnography and digital methods more generally, and social media in particular, in the special context of China. A discussion of the Chinese case can contribute to the general literature on ethnographic practices in the social media age, and also highlight socio-cultural differences and the special challenges researchers face in authoritarian societies.

The internet, apart from being a fascinating field of study, opens up new possibilities for scholars to get news, gather data, connect with informants, and, in general, stay updated on rapidly changing developments in the Chinese society. Social media adds yet another dimension as it enables researchers to catch up with events and public debates in real-time and, as they unfold, gain valuable insights into the daily life and views among scholars, opinion leaders and informants as well as facilitate engagement with these groups of people. New technological affordances enable interactivity and constant engagement with the field and informants regardless of one’s physical presence in China. In fact, social media becomes an ethnographic place/field in its own right, where the researcher spends considerable time gathering information, observing, engaging, and interacting with different actors. Our understanding of the ‘field’ and what ‘being in the field’ actually means has thus changed with the advent of the internet and social media, as have our ethnographic practices.

The research methods scholars have used when studying the Chinese internet and social media are usually addressed in short methodological sections.
or appendices (for more extensive discussions see Wang 2013 on social media, and Oreglia et al. 2015 on how to study the internet in the countryside). Scholars studying the internet or other digital technologies have also, to varying degrees, discussed their own use of these technologies when interacting with informants (e.g. Qiu 2009; Wallis 2013; Wang 2013). Since social media is increasingly embedded in Chinese people’s daily life and activities, including being used for entertainment, shopping and commerce, intimate relationships with friends and family, professional networking and work, and civic engagement and political protests, it is relevant also for scholars who are not studying social media per se. Even if one does not use social media to retrieve data or information, it can be a useful tool for researchers in order to maintain contacts with informants, and one therefore needs to reflect on its appropriate use and possible pitfalls.

Although some international social media sites initially were possible to access in China, they have since been blocked and require a VPN to access. This has led to the development of domestic social media platforms that have evolved over the years. There are a range of social media platforms, including QQ, Renren, Kaixin, and different kinds of apps such as Momo, but for my own research and interactions with different groups of people Sina Weibo and WeChat have been the most relevant. In 2009, Sina established its microblog, Sina Weibo, and by 2010-2011 it had become an important site for networking, news, and public debates as elaborated upon below. In 2011, Tencent established its messaging app Weixin, known as WeChat in English, that has had a spectacular development and is now used by a great majority for networking, shopping, entertainment, and community building as discussed below. The article takes its starting point in my own socialization into and use of two major Chinese social media platforms, i.e. Sina Weibo (since August 2010) and WeChat (since March 2013), and how they have been incorporated into and had an impact on my research methods. The Chinese internet and social media landscape has developed rapidly. The latest CNNIC report (2016) indicates that some 710 million people, i.e. 51.7 per cent of the Chinese population, now have access to the internet, although there continue to be big gaps within the country, particular between the countryside and the cities and between different age groups. 92.5 per cent of the internet users today access the internet via their smartphones, and almost 92 per cent of them use instant messaging apps such as WeChat (78.7 per cent). The percentage of internet users using microblogs (weibo 微博) is significantly lower at 34 per cent.

In this article, I reflect on my own considerations of why and how to use these different platforms; for example, how I navigate issues of privacy
and publicity, while also stressing the evolving, contingent, and context-based nature of social media use. Given the issue of visibility and danger of surveillance, I pay particular attention to my ethical deliberations when using the two different platforms, and relate my own experiences to other works advocating a bottom-up and inductive approach to ethical issues. I also address the researcher’s digital footprints and the consequences of this increasing visibility for research and researcher-researched relationships. Informants and other people one meets in the field are not only able to read about us online, finding information about both professional work and private lives, and befriend us on social media, they can also publish and share information about us and our research that we cannot fully control or might not even be aware of. In an authoritarian context, visibility on the internet and connectivity on social media raise new potentials for government surveillance that neither researcher, nor informants and other contacts might be fully aware of.

Digital Ethnography: Social Media as an Ethnographic Field

There are many articles and books that discuss digital methods and ethnography for the internet, although they mostly focus on Western social media platforms (e.g. Hine 2000, 2015; Kozinets 2010). An increasing number of works today, however, also pay attention to other cultural contexts and social media platforms (e.g. Hinton & Hjort 2013; Horst & Miller 2012; Miller et al. 2016; and chapters in Pink et al. 2016 and Sanjek & Tratner 2016). Although I am not claiming that digital methods or ethical issues necessarily are culturally unique or area specific, it is obvious that one must be aware of the social, cultural, and political contexts in which one works as this affects both one’s socialization into a new social media environment and also gives rise to specific ethical considerations. Scholars using digital methods in China thus face different issues and ethical concerns, including censorship and government surveillance, than scholars working in democratic societies.

Social media is a site for ethnographic fieldwork that creates new types of daily routines, ethnographic practices, and relationships with informants (Postill & Pink 2012; Pink et al. 2016). Many scholars of social media, including weibo, approach it as a research site filled with texts/data to be retrieved for content analysis/data mining, or as a site that reveals interesting connections between users, lending itself to social network analysis. Thus, they confine themselves to the online environment, which, furthermore, they take no active part in. Anthropologists (e.g. Horst & Miller 2012; Pink et al. 2016), however,
see the digital more as a field in which researchers ‘practice’ as much as they analyse, and thus focus more on their own research practices and researcher-researched interactions, which is also the focus of this article. Whether one treats social media as a site filled with data, or sees it as a field where researchers practice and interact with informants, has practical, methodological, and ethical consequences (cf. Lunnay et al. 2015).

There are two dimensions to my own socialization into and use of Chinese social media. On the one hand, I felt it was necessary for a deeper understanding of social media use in China, while, on the other hand, it also rapidly became an important ethnographic method. To know how it feels to be on social media, one inevitably has to experience social media oneself and go beyond reading posts and conducting interviews to interacting with informants both on the platforms and offline. By immersing oneself on social media, much as one would in a physical space, a thicker understanding is gained in terms of how, why, and with what consequences and gratifications Chinese people use and experience social media. If informants spend a considerable period of their day online, social media also becomes an important ‘place’ where one can ‘meet’ them. Therefore, engagement with many groups of informants can no longer be confined to direct contacts (interviews, participatory observation in offline situations), but increasingly also has to embrace different types of digital engagements, including interactions and participatory observation on social media. Social media thus becomes an ‘ethnographic place’ (Pink 2009) that traverses online/offline boundaries and gives rise to more interactive, open, and intimate interactions. Scholars have described networked research or digital ethnography as a sensory and embodied engagement with digital technologies (Pink 2009), and adaptive ethnography that involves both online and offline engagements (Hine 2000).

The way the online is embedded in the offline and in many people’s daily routines is also central to understanding the role and impact of social media. It is therefore important to ‘look beyond the digital’ in order to understand how the digital is embedded in everyday life (Pink et al. 2016). Digital ethnography is by definition ‘multi-sited’ as it involves both online and offline ethnography, which also means that many of us have become ‘multi-sited researchers’ (for examples see Pink et al. 2016 and Sanjek & Tratner 2016). This gives fieldwork a new dimension and also requires more of the researcher in terms of constantly checking in and engaging with informants and others on social media. The researcher’s ability to move between and blend online and offline observations and interactions with informants is thus a crucial aspect of digital ethnography.
I began to use Sina Weibo in August 2010 while doing research on investigative journalists, as I discovered that this group was among the earliest and most enthusiastic adopters of weibo (although there were differences among them).\(^1\) Weibo is inherently a public forum for sharing and gathering information where you can read and follow any user you want without their permission. When I opened a Sina Weibo account in August 2010, I was not convinced of its usefulness for my research, or terribly excited about the platform, nor did I understand its potential and growing importance in Chinese society. But, like many Chinese citizens at the time, I quickly got hooked and incorporated weibo into my daily routines for getting news and staying updated on the hottest topics. Currently, I have 1074 followers (although some might be zombies), follow 1333 people and institutions, have 298 overlapping friends (i.e. we follow each other), and have posted a total of 1687 posts. Most of my postings were done before September 2013, however, when my weibo activity dropped – as it did for many others – when the crackdown on weibo made public debates more muted and less interesting, and as many people instead turned to WeChat (Svensson 2014). The group of ‘overlapping friends’ includes people I know from initial offline contacts, a few I first met online and later in real life, and quite a few I have never met. Initially, I followed mainly media institutions, journalists, public intellectuals and Chinese colleagues, all of whom were early adopters of weibo. Later, I added a growing number of individuals, such as lawyers and independent documentary filmmaker, two other very tech-savvy groups, and other individuals and institutions as weibo was picked up by a growing number of Chinese individuals and as I also started some new research projects. A project on legal and media empowerment among marginalized groups, for example, turned my interest to migrant workers and people with grievances, and to NGOs working with these groups of people. These groups turned to weibo much later (around 2011-2012) and their lower use and limited number of followers made me aware of different patterns of use, the complex relationship between individuals with high social status and cultural capital and those without as well as other issues related to voice and impact on weibo (Svensson 2014). It is important to be aware that not all social groups or informants use social media, or the same

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1  For information about the project and my findings see Svensson (2012), Svensson et al. (2014), and Svensson (2014).
platforms, and that they often use it in very different ways (cf. McDonald 2016 and Wang 2016). My own socialization into and use of Chinese social media has been influenced by the user patterns of my friends, Chinese colleagues, and informants, but also by the strangers I followed on weibo and by the more closely knitted communities on WeChat. While there was already a danger of homophily on weibo, this danger is bigger on the more closed networks on WeChat, where most of your contacts are people you know. However, given my rather wide range of research interests, I have a quite diverse circle of ‘friends’ on WeChat and thus often encounter diverse views on many issues.

The first decision I faced when opening a Sina Weibo account was whether to use my real name or not. At this time, real name registration was not requested and many users were using pseudonyms or internet names (wang-ming 网名), although most of the journalists and scholars I knew were using their real names or well-established pen names. I decided to use my real, albeit Chinese name that I use in China (which is also printed on my name card together with my Swedish name and university affiliation). I clearly identified myself as a professor from Sweden studying Chinese law, media, and culture, and adjusted my settings so that everybody would be able to send me a personal message. It was important for me to be transparent and easily identifiable to the people I followed. I knew many of the journalists and scholars that I first started to follow, and also told them that I followed them on Sina Weibo. My criteria for following people, apart from a selection bias towards people I knew and major actors within media, academia, and cultural life, was to add people whose postings had been reposted by people I knew and trusted and that I found interesting, although this undoubtedly gave rise to the homophily or echo chamber so common on social media. To discover that somebody was followed by my friends served as a kind of endorsement and sign of trustworthiness, in some ways similar to being introduced to a person by people one knows and trusts.

Apart from using weibo to get news and stay updated on hot topics, I primarily followed journalists as a way to keep up with their work and understand how they embedded weibo into their daily routines and work practices. Observing and engaging with them on weibo also enabled easier contact and interaction (including, in some cases, through the private message function), and it improved follow-up interviews as I had a deeper understanding of their work and recent developments and could refer back to their posts in my

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2 The background to and debate about real name registration as well as the difficulties of implementing the policy are discussed in Jiang (2016). Although I provided my e-mail and a QQ number at the time of my registration I did not have to provide any other identification.
interviews. I thus mostly used information gathered through reading their weibo posts as a way to provide me with information and ideas that I could probe further in my interviews, and as a way to triangulate information from other sources and from interviews. I have, in most cases, avoided directly quoting from or referencing their weibo postings, with exceptions such as famous cases also discussed in other publications. By following journalists and observing who they followed and whose posts they re-posted, I also became aware of their networks and contacts with other groups in society such as lawyers and scholars. This knowledge was not only due to the many hours I spent on weibo, however, but also a result of my interviews, participation at different off-line events, and through reading their works. It is important to remember that so-called articulated networks, i.e. those resulting from people specifying their contacts through technical mechanisms and digital platforms (i.e. befriending and following each other on social media) are based on a range of different considerations and do not necessarily imply close and sustained contacts. People may follow a range of people with whom they have both strong and weak ties, such as close friends, colleagues, distant acquaintances, strangers, celebrities, and public figures as well as random contacts. Likewise, ‘behavioural networks’, i.e. communication patterns and social media interactions such as texting each other, commenting on and liking each other’s postings, or forwarding them (Boyd & Crawford 2012: 671), are not necessarily equivalent to personal relations and offline networking, nor do frequency or public articulation indicate tie strength or depth of relationship. The extent to which people comment on and like each other’s posts has a lot to do with personality and netiquette, or may be a sign of attention-seeking, and also varies over time depending on how busy people are.

Although my first postings were made just to familiarize myself with the platform, I soon became more active and was caught up in the excitement. I was not a ‘lurker’ (somebody who is observing or gathering information without making oneself known or posting or interacting on the platform), but an active user who posted and also interacted with others. My postings reflected my research interests (law, media, cultural heritage, gender) and personal interests (film and art), and constituted a mixture of professional and personal aspects of my life in China and in Sweden. I wrote posts, uploaded images (more easily and frequently after beginning to use a smartphone in China), re-tweeted posts from people I followed on hot topics, important media reports, and news from different organizations such as NGOs and cultural institutions as well as commented on others’ postings.

Although some of my posts were rather personal and provided information about my interests, life, and whereabouts (an occasional photo from Sweden,
information about books, films, and art exhibitions I liked), they were not very private. My postings were more related to my professional life as well as current social issues. I never posted photos of myself or family and friends, and I never posted information about Chinese people I met or interviewed out of concern for their privacy and safety. My posts were rarely reposted and did not receive many comments, although people I knew would occasionally repost and make comments. I sometimes commented on others’ posts and also occasionally ‘@people’ if there was information that concerned them (for example, saying something positive about a director’s film or about a journalist’s report). In a few cases, I contacted strangers through private messages and later met them. I also occasionally exchanged private messages with both friends and informants, but was careful about who I contacted and what I said, and would also delete the message as soon as the exchange was over.

Given the public nature of the platform, my own interests and values, and taking my cue from what people I followed posted, many of whom were quite outspoken, I also quite quickly became engaged in and posted and reposted on more sensitive issues. It would have been strange to hold back on issues that I was concerned about. For example, I wrote posts on Liu Xiaobo getting the Nobel Peace Prize, and forwarded information on the arrest of Ai Weiwei and Chen Guangcheng and news about restrictions of the media, including the Southern Weekend incident in 2013. This meant that I was able to share with others the quite uncanny experience of having some of my posts censored. I also learnt first-hand that images, puns, and words written in English were more likely to escape the eyes of the censor. Bandurski (2014: 22) has written eloquently about his own experience of being censored:
Like the Chinese users I conversed with, I too could experience state censorship. That, more than anything, enabled me to feel the borderless power of microblogging. It was exhilarating at first, the dexterous deployment of my ideas to fool the blind Cyclops of state censorship, like an Odysseus tying his ideas to the bellies of sheep. How could I express this or that idea while avoiding sensitive keywords? After a while, however, the frustration was more keen than the challenge. It was unsettling that the Cyclops could have such a grip on my mind.

For many users, it became almost like a game to try to escape the censors and many became emboldened by the perceived freedom on weibo as having one’s postings deleted seemed to be a small price to pay. But the arrest of people for spreading rumours on weibo in 2013 and the trial of Pu Zhiqiang in 2015 for spreading ethnic hatred on weibo revealed that critical expressions were not without danger, which served to make public debate on weibo more constrained after 2013 (Svensson 2014).

Privacy and Publicity on Weibo: Different Actors and Contexts

One important issue, much discussed in the context of Twitter and Facebook (e.g. Zimmer 2010; Sin 2015), is whether the public nature of a platform implies that all information posted can be treated as public, or whether all users are aware of the consequences of this public nature. People’s views and practices on these issues reflect their digital literacy, still very weak when people first began to use weibo, and their social and cultural status and specific reasons for using the platform. We therefore need to ask ourselves if posts on Twitter and Sina Weibo are to be considered as public information, treated as texts/data, or associated with an individual person and thus needing consent. We also need to discuss what kind of data is gathered (whether it includes personal information) and for what purposes. Finally, we need to think about whether these posts and data can cause individuals harm today or in the future, a difficult issue since the situation can change very rapidly. There are no self-evident or simple answers to any of these questions. Some scholars (e.g. Sin 2015) have emphasized the need to take into account the user’s own views of what is seen as public or private, and thus look beyond laws and corporate policies. The ethical issues are also of a different order if one is engaging in large-scale data mining or if one simply uses posts to serve as background for interviews or to corroborate information gathered elsewhere.
The journalists I knew and interviewed were very aware of and attracted by the public nature of weibo, but they, like other weibo users, including myself, had to learn how to navigate this new public domain. There were some heated debates and some resistance among them to Sina’s practice of ‘verified user’ status, illustrated with a V, and real name registration (cf. Jiang 2016 and Tong 2015). Some of my informants choose not to reveal their identity as a journalist or their affiliation in order to preserve a space where they could discuss without being constrained by their professional identity. The platform offered freedom for journalists to express themselves beyond the confines of quite restrictive traditional media institutions, where they had to conform in order to get published. Thus, it helped them to find a new voice and, in some cases, also turned them into important opinion leaders with large numbers of followers. The boundary-spanning behaviour of some investigative journalists, who began to express views and become engaged in different events, public debates, and NGOs, illustrates both the pent-up need among journalists for more autonomy and the technological affordances of the platform itself at the same time as Sina encouraged users to become involved in public debates (Svensson 2012). The public nature of weibo created a situation where journalists and media institutions had to grapple with the issue of how to balance private and professional roles on social media. Like in Western societies, new professional guidelines on how journalists should use social media were adopted by different media organizations, although they were not always enforced.

Even when people choose to use their real name, or used well-known pseudonyms, the question remains whether the information they post should be treated as public. Is the information public because it is in the public domain (on weibo), or is it public for all purposes and contexts? Should different groups or individuals be treated differently in this respect? It can be argued that public figures, including opinion leaders, scholars, and journalists, are aware of the public nature of weibo, and actively seek public attention and want their voices to be heard and acknowledged, and that therefore exposing their identity and using direct quotes would be permissible. However, given the rapidly changing political environment in China, some issues and postings may later become a liability and lead to problems (as was the case for Pu Zhiqiang). In general, I would argue that it is permissible to reveal the identity and use direct quotes from famous bloggers, even without their consent, especially if one can infer from their postings or other sources that they are aware of and see their postings as public and no different from other types of published materials (such as academic works or newspaper articles).
This is also my motivation for translating postings by Yu Jianrong, a vocal scholar who quickly came to take advantage of weibo and hail its public communication function (Pils & Svensson 2014). I would, however, not have wanted to analyse his social network on weibo (or comments and repostings) as this would expose other potentially more vulnerable people who, in some cases, were seeking his help. One thus has to take the individual's specific situation and vulnerability into account as well as the issues discussed and their possible sensitivity, when deciding what and whose posts to quote, something which is also in line with general ethical guidelines that pay particular attention to vulnerable individuals and groups. I would also argue that one needs to be careful of making direct quotes on sensitive issues, and even hiding the person's identity might not be enough as one could make a search based on a direct quote (although using translations would make this more difficult). In general, I would argue that consent from individual users would not be needed for an analysis of certain issues (for example, a study of postings related to Chai Jing’s film *Under the Dome*), since you are not collecting personal information on the individuals who post them. The boundaries are, however, fluid and need to be discussed on a case-by-case basis.

**Immersion vs Lurking on Weibo: Sharing the Excitement and Gaining a Thicker Understanding**

The practice of not only ‘lurking’ on weibo, but posting and interacting on the platform, however modestly, enabled, I believe, a ‘thicker’ understanding of Chinese citizens’ uses of and gratification from weibo. The period 2010-2013 was an exciting time to be on weibo as so many issues were exposed and hot topics discussed on the platform. For many Chinese citizens it was a new experience to be able to express themselves, connect with a range of people, including strangers, and become engaged in social and political issues. In meetings and public events, I observed many people almost obsessively checking weibo and uploading postings. My weibo experience was a valuable one as I shared their excitement and could identify with the way people incorporated weibo into their daily routines, as I also spent several hours every day on weibo. The time and space compression led to a strong sense of being connected, regardless of whether I was in China or not. I was able to stay updated on friends’, colleagues’ and informants’ activities and views, and could, to some extent, also see the ‘backstage’ of their lives and their broader interests. It was a privilege to be able to share people’s thoughts and concerns to an extent...
that I had never experienced, despite my many years of doing research on and in China.

The rapid adoption of weibo illustrates how technological affordances, socio-political contexts and needs, individual agency and the skilful adoption of early users combined to create a very unique environment. The pushing of the boundaries of what constituted private, professional, and public domains, particularly in the Chinese context where people traditionally and due to political considerations have been more guarded in their speech with strangers, was a radical shift. But it took place under the watchful eyes of an authoritarian state that after a slow uptake quickly learnt how to manoeuvre and upgrade its censorship and control system to the web 2.0 environment (Svensson 2014). It also meant that more people were exposed to and became victims of censorship as their posts were deleted, or 'harmonized' (bei hexie 被和谐), as the practice came to be known. The workings of the censorship system as a result became more visible to, and more criticized by, a broader group of Chinese citizens.

### Socialization and Intimacies on WeChat: Friending and Sharing Moments

My adoption of WeChat in the spring of 2013 illustrates how different technological affordances give rise to new practices, socialization patterns, and forms of interactivity (on WeChat, see also Harwit 2016; McDonald 2016; Tu 2016; Wang 2016). Initially, I saw WeChat as a better, more efficient and cheaper way to contact people compared to SMS, phone calls, and e-mails. With WeChat you can send text messages, record voice messages, and also send photos and videos to individuals in your address book, simply adding those whose phone numbers you already have and waiting for them accept your WeChat request, or scan their QR code. Today, it is common to get requests from people one meets to exchange contact information on WeChat, and this practice has almost replaced the exchange of name cards. According to Tencent (2015), 60 per cent of the users are between the ages of 15-29 years old and have an average of 128 friends. My own experience and expanding circle of friends, however, reveal that the app is used by people of all ages with different social and economic backgrounds. My oldest WeChat contacts are in their seventies. Currently, I have a total of 187 contacts in my WeChat circle, not counting people in different WeChat groups that I do not have a one-to-one relationship with. This is a rather modest figure compared to a media scholar I know who has 3907 contacts, a Chinese journalist who has 1214 contacts, and an NGO activist who has 1083 contacts. Given their profession, wide circle of contacts
due to work, and higher number of Chinese friends and relatives, their greater numbers are, however, hardly surprising.

You can set up or be invited to WeChat groups that have become very popular among family members, old school mates, colleagues, and interest groups, and which allow for many-to-many communication within a bounded group. There have been different regulations on the size of such groups, but currently the maximum size is 500 members. Family members use it to update each other about family events and post photos of grandchildren, and schoolmates can re-connect and more easily stay in touch. Many work places, including universities, have set up their own WeChat groups for sharing work related information and news. I am member of several WeChat groups, including a small group of good friends from my student days at Fudan University in the late 1980s. One of the more interesting WeChat groups is a group whose members share an interest in the history and heritage of their hometown (Svensson forthcoming). Many media organizations, government bodies, NGOs as well as scholars, lawyers, and journalists, have set up official and public WeChat accounts with large followings, although the exact size is not published and, unlike weibo, these accounts do not facilitate interactivity among followers.

Of particular interest is the function called ‘moments’, where one can share feelings, thoughts, information, photos, and videos as well as forward information from public WeChat accounts and from the internet. It is possible to block people from seeing one’s postings on ‘moments’ without them knowing this, while still being able to send them private messages. A user of WeChat may stay content with just using the platform to contact people, not posting anything on ‘moments’ herself and only reading others’ posts, and perhaps follow some public accounts. It is thus possible to tailor one’s use of WeChat according to needs and personality. The frequent practice of exchanging WeChat contacts raises the question of how intimate you want to be with a person. While it is not a big deal to allow somebody to contact you via WeChat, much as you in the past gave somebody your phone number, the question is whether you want that person to see your postings on ‘moments’, given, of course, whether you use that function and the nature of your postings. I have decided to be equally open and transparent to all my WeChat contacts, regardless of my relationship with them, whether they are old friends, new acquaintances, or informants; this, however, influences what I share on ‘moments’ and how I navigate this ‘semi-public intimacy’. It should be noted that, in contrast, to Facebook, WeChat is a more private platform as you cannot see other people’s postings unless you are friends with them, and you only know about their other friends if you also are friends with them and they comment on each other’s postings. This also means that some of the ethical concerns that arise
when researchers use Facebook – for example, related to informants’ privacy, ability for others to search and trace quotes, or danger of other’s finding out that you are part of an informants’ social network – is less problematic in the case of WeChat (on Facebook, see for example Côte 2013; Henderson et al. 2013; Sin 2015; Zimmer 2010).

The first question for me was why I should want to post on ‘moments’, and what I wanted to or should or should not post. From this followed the question of what posting actually means in terms of sociality, intimacy, and personal relations, and what kind of expectations exist in terms of interactivity, reciprocity, and engagement among ‘friends’ on WeChat. My first postings, some photos from Hangzhou, got some likes and comments from friends and informants, and I rapidly realized that WeChat was a more intimate platform than Sina Weibo, with more exchanges and interactivity among friends. This is due, in part, to the smaller number of contacts/friends on WeChat compared to weibo, and because postings are not public and can only be seen by those you know and with whom you have established some kind of contact and trust, however superficial. In some respects, my patterns of posting reflect that my Chinese social media use is strongly related to my professional life, i.e. a high number of re-postings of media reports, academic works, and cultural events. But it is much more personal than Sina Weibo as I post about my daily life, including photos from my home environment, and even occasional photos of myself, family, and friends. In retrospect, I realise I have been taken in by and adopted the ‘sharing culture’ among many of my contacts, although this is also the result of some conscious decisions.

A general and complex issue is whether one should ‘friend’ one’s informants on social media (discussed by Coté 2013; Reich 2015; Sin 2015). It might be awkward and even impossible to reject such requests, but one must be aware of the ethical and practical issues involved. One problem is that friendship ties on some social media platforms become visible to others, albeit less so on WeChat, which might expose informants to dangers and jeopardize their anonymity (as discussed by Coté 2013 in her research on Indonesia and Sin 2015 on Thailand). One can try to limit visibility through different privacy settings, and also limit oneself to private messages to informants rather than make postings about meetings open for all to see (an approach I followed with weibo and WeChat while also being careful about the content of private messages). It is possible to have two accounts, one for personal use with family and friends and one for research in order to separate private life from research, although many researchers decide against making such a distinction (e.g. Kraemer 2016). Another issue is that by ‘befriending’ informants on social media one also becomes privy to many different aspects of their life, which is not the
case through traditional, non-digital friendships, interviews, and participatory observation (Reich 2015; Sin 2015). One way to solve this problem is, of course, to only rely on information obtained from interviews (practice triangulation) and ask for permission if using data from social media platforms. The other issue, and here the situation is reversed, is that one also has to be aware of the fact that the informant gets to know a lot more about the researcher by ‘befriending’ them on social media (to be discussed more below).

Co-present Visuality and Affective Engagement on WeChat: The Ubiquitous Role of Images and Emoticons

From the outset, WeChat, in contrast to Sina Weibo, was developed for smartphones, which has facilitated and encouraged easy sharing and interactivity on-the-go. Images have become central and ubiquitous on most social media platforms, including on WeChat, where they are used to create affect, connectivity, and intimacy. The mobile and locative nature of new digital technologies enables what several scholars fittingly call ambient, intimate, and co-present visuality (see, for example Pink et al. 2016: 83-85). They draw attention to the visuality of connectivity on social media and its mobile, embedded, and embodied nature. WeChat is a very visual platform where people post photos of themselves, family and friends, daily events, and moods (on visuality on Chinese social media more generally, see also McDonald 2016 and Wang 2016).

Although Sina Weibo is quite interactive in character (and new features have been added since 2009), there is more emphasis on likes and comments, and unwritten expectations of reciprocity on WeChat, due to its bounded and more intimate nature. When Tencent provided a link in January 2016 so that one could check one’s past year on WeChat, it enabled me to calculate the number of ‘likes’ I had received – 580 – which was not much compared to my media scholar friend with more than 20,000 likes. Not liking or commenting on other’s postings may seem cold, indifferent, and asocial, whereas interactivity indicates that you are present in others’ lives and concerned about what they are doing and feeling. These kinds of sympathetic nods and gestures mirror small talk in everyday life. On WeChat, it can be expressed through words and result in short exchanges, but is often limited to different emoticons. The most common and easy to use is the ‘liking’ (zan 赞) sign, which on WeChat is symbolized by a heart. There are also a whole range of emoticons and stickers, such as happy and sad faces, thumbs up, hugs, kisses, and symbols and images such as rose, beer glass, and sun, to indicate different emotions, gestures, and physical situations. WeChat also has many different stickers that are,
for example, used during Chinese New Year, and it has developed a number of so-called showering symbols such as birthday cakes, which are triggered by writing ‘Happy Birthday’. Another prominent feature on WeChat is the use of ‘red envelopes’ (envelopes with money), which builds on traditional gift-giving, but which people can now give to others via WeChat. These emoticons and stickers have become an important part of intimacy and netiquette on WeChat and you become socialized into using them, although I must confess I still have some difficulties using some emoticons that I perceive as rather too ‘cute’ for my taste and personality (e.g. the crying faces).

Among my 187 contacts, some are more ‘social’ and spend considerable time uploading photos, reflecting on daily events, and liking and commenting others’ postings. Some use ‘moments’ more for professional purposes, whereas others mix their professional and private lives. In general, WeChat lends itself to a more intimate, personal, and emotional form of expression and affective connectivity than weibo. The platform helps sustain and deepen already existing connections and communities with a strong offline basis, but the creation of WeChat groups also enables people to create new bounded communities that share similar interests and concerns. WeChat can thus help strengthen existing ties as well as create intimacy between strangers who, after an initial meeting, are quickly able to get insights into each other’s life on ‘moments’. In some ways, it is strange to become ‘intimate’ and privy to a person’s life and daily habits so quickly when you have only met once and not talked much offline. This kind of ‘intimacy’ might, however, be somewhat illusionary, since to know a person’s food habits and daily life or exchange ‘likes’ do not equal real closeness and intimacy.

Staying Connected on WeChat: Multi-sited Fieldwork and the Visible Researcher

The ability to quickly get information and news through friends’ and informants’ postings and through different public accounts is very valuable, and today WeChat has replaced Sina Weibo as an important source of information for me. WeChat also enables me, much more so than Sina Weibo, to stay in touch with friends, informants, and colleagues in China and follow what is happening in their lives while I am away as well as making it easier to reconnect when I am back in China (cf. Jackson 2016; Reich 2015; Sin 2015). The researcher is no longer somebody who disappears from view as you never really leave the field (depending, of course, on the extent to which informants themselves use social media). Since I post on moments, it also provides my informants and
others with a glimpse of my life and work in Sweden that they would otherwise not be privy to, and it reminds them of my continuing presence in their life, which I feel makes our relationship much more transparent and equal. This is also one of the reasons why I post as much as I do, which shows how social media affordances create new habits and ways to interact with others, including informants. Choosing to use WeChat also means that I have to pay attention to and sustain my relationships through posting, liking, and commenting on a continuous basis. In the pre-social media age, fieldwork only began when I arrived in China, but today it is more embedded into daily life and takes up more of my time. WeChat thus becomes very useful when engaging in longitudinal and multi-sited research. Although my own experience and research differs from that of Postill & Pink (2012), my ethnographic practices on social media, like theirs, include many different dimensions, including catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting, and archiving. Like them, I also emphasize the importance of interactivity and reaffirming interest in informants’ doings through liking, re-posting, commenting, and using emoticons. They describe their digital/social media ethnography as mobile and fluid in character and as shifting in intensity over time and space, something that I also experience. But this connectivity also raises the issue of whether I can ever leave WeChat or un-friend people I have befriended during different research projects. On WeChat, I am ‘friends’ with some of the journalists I interviewed in my earlier project, and we continue to exchange comments and likes and have, in some cases, also met up after my project ended. I am not actively analysing their postings, although I find the news reports that they post quite useful in order to stay updated on general issues, and I may be able to re-activate these contacts more easily should I choose to embark on a follow-up study.

My use of WeChat means that I have to navigate my personal and professional life in relation to my informants in a new way, and that the boundaries between informants, colleagues, and friends have become blurred. By posting information about a whole range of issues, including re-posting more critical articles dealing with, to take a recent example, the arrest of three Chinese feminists in 2015, I may alienate some of my informants and undermine the trust I have built up (cf. Reich 2015). For all of its advantages, social media do not encourage in-depth discussion and explanations of one’s views, which means that short postings or re-postings can give rise to misunderstandings as much as they can create deeper understanding and intimacy. Still, it would feel unethical and problematic to hide important aspects of myself and my views and concerns, so I aim to reveal as much as I think is advisable, while also making sure never to post anything that can be problematic for informants and others.
In contrast to Sina Weibo, WeChat is not a public platform (apart from public accounts that have minor interactivity) but a private network where you are either invited (even if by default) to share people’s ‘moments’, or invited to become a member of a WeChat group. Those I am connected to on WeChat know me as a scholar of China, and I remind people of that identity through my different postings. For me, as in the case of Sina Weibo, WeChat is more a tool to get information about news and to stay connected with people that also provide me with insights that I can further elaborate on in conversations and interviews than it is a platform that provides me with data. By using the platform, I am also exploring its different functions and affordances, in a sense becoming my own study object (thus engaging in some kind of auto-ethnography), and my use, participatory observation, and interaction also turn the platform into a central place for fieldwork. This can be illustrated through my membership of one WeChat group. I first went to Taishun County in 2007 for traditional fieldwork on cultural heritage issues where I also interviewed different people. There, I got to know a man who, in 2001, had set up a website dedicated to his hometown and its heritage. In 2014, I was invited to the WeChat group he had set up that focused on the local heritage. This has enabled me to follow the group’s engagement and activities on an almost daily basis as well as receive news about the county. Since then, I have got to know more people in the group and travelled with some of them to different sites in the county, travel that has been amply documented on both their public WeChat account and in the WeChat group. I have also interviewed some of the members on their attachment to the hometown and the role of social media for this engagement. The founder and others have introduced my research on the platform, and I have also made postings about my research and myself. The founder of the group has agreed to me analysing postings, and I have promised anonymity to individual members. So far, my published material derives more from my interviews and travels, and postings have only been used for describing general patterns and to help guide my interviews and follow-up on certain topics (Svensson forthcoming).

It is worth emphasizing that my access to this WeChat group has come about as a natural outcome of my offline fieldwork and through knowing the founder and at least some of the other members before being invited to the group. This also means that I engage with members both offline and online, and, in a way, I have followed them to the platforms and places where they are. The offline interactions facilitate my ability to explain my research and get consent from individual members. As discussed in the general literature, researchers of private or membership-based online communities need to seek approval from the group moderator and also introduce themselves and their research to
the whole group. Although some would keep the name of the online community anonymous, others have decided to reveal it but keep the individual users anonymous (discussed, for example, by Tratner 2016). Boellstorff, in his study of the Second Life site (2008), used pseudonyms and also paraphrased quotations in order to make them difficult to identify through search engines (not a problem with WeChat though). Given the often very fluid nature of online communities, it might be difficult to get informed consent from all members. Schrooten (2016) solved this issue by only quoting those people he had been able to approach and get permission from (but still keeping them anonymous) and only used other postings for general observations, an approach I also follow. Scholars have, furthermore, emphasized that the idea of informed consent, given at one time, may not fit the social media age and that consent should be seen as an ongoing process in which informants can continue to reflect on changing circumstances for their consent, something that has been described as participative consent (e.g. Nunan & Yenicioglu 2013).

Lessons Learnt: Bottom-up Practices and Reflexivity on Ethical Issues

There are a number of overriding ethical guidelines laid down by national research bodies and different disciplinary associations. All research ethics share some basic values, such as the need to respect individuals’ dignity, privacy, and safety, and to minimize harm, with particular attention and obligations towards vulnerable individuals and groups of people. Informed consent, respect of privacy and confidentiality are thus central in all types of research. One needs to consider ethical issues through all stages of the research – prior to beginning the research, when trying to get access to individuals, gathering and managing data, and representing and disseminating information – and one needs to reassess and continue to reflect upon ethical considerations throughout the research process as new situations inevitably emerge and new technological platforms develop. Although universal in character, ethical considerations also need to take into account and be informed by local circumstances on a case-by-case basis.

The new ethical challenges in the digital age is aptly summarized by Schrooten (2016: 80):

The easy access to online data, the ability of a researcher to record these data without the knowledge of participants, the complexities of obtaining informed consent, and the question of guaranteeing the respondents’
anonymity fuel the need for directive guidelines for ethical online ethnographic research.

There are, as yet, however, no specific guidelines regarding internet research ethics, nor have the special circumstances and issues that arise when doing research on the internet or with digital technologies, such as social media, been incorporated into already existing ethical guidelines. The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR 2012) has adopted recommendations that address both research of and on the internet, but they refrain from providing specific guidelines and instead emphasize that each individual researcher needs to reflect on and shoulder responsibility while being aware of changing technologies and diverse contexts during different stages of the research process. AoIR's approach is based on a belief in the need for a ‘dialogic, case-based, inductive, and process approach to ethics,’ which, although more open, is nonetheless still anchored in long-standing ethical considerations. Researchers have discussed both general ethical issues related to the internet and social media (e.g. Henderson et al. 2013; Sin 2015; Stevens, O'Donnell, & Williams 2015) as well as issues related to specific online environments, including public platforms such as Twitter and more private platforms such as Facebook and diverse online communities (e.g. Boellstorff 2008; Schrooten 2016; Tratner 2016; Zimmer 2010). There are obvious differences when doing research on public platforms in contrast to membership based online communities, and there are also differences between big data/quantitative research and ethnographic research.

With respect to ethical issues, most scholars on China seem to limit themselves to simply mentioning the fact that they guarantee the anonymity of their interviewees, and, in some cases, also discuss why, for ethical reasons, they refrain from providing direct quotes or references to the actual blogs (for recent representative examples, see Tong 2015; Jiang 2016; Pissin 2015). I believe that also in the context of China AoIR’s ‘dialogic, case-based, inductive, and process approach to ethics’ is the best starting point for ethical reflections and discussions. It is crucial throughout the research process to reflect upon how you interact with different groups of people on different platforms, what information your share, and what information you can use, how to obtain consent and respect privacy, while also being aware of the special nature of different platforms and technologies (including their privacy settings). Furthermore, one needs to take into account the special and often changing cultural and political circumstances in China and how they affect research and security issues. Personally, I feel more comfortable doing research while also engaging with informants offline as this makes issues of informed consent,
respect for privacy, and avoiding harm easier. It also provides informants with a better chance of getting to know me and my research, while having the additional advantage of enabling me to put informants’ social media use in a wider context.

Digital Footprints and New Relationships: The Visible Researcher

Many researchers might not reflect much on how the internet makes their research more visible, not only to colleagues, but also to informants and to governments and other agencies. There is very little written on researchers’ new visibilities in the age of the internet and social media (see, however, Reich 2015). Most researchers today have more or less elaborate pages on their academic institution’s homepage that include a CV with information on their academic career, research grants, and publications. Many scholars also include descriptions of ongoing research projects and lists of recent talks and conference presentations, and some also include information about fieldwork sites and more personal information, including photos. It has become increasingly common for researchers to provide drafts of work in progress on their website or on special websites such as Academic.edu, Research Gate, and SSRN. In addition, some scholars have their own personal websites with more information, write blogs, or have a presence on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter as well as on Chinese social media sites, where they might post more information about current research as well as more informal thoughts and reflections on various topics. Researchers are, in addition, often interviewed in the media and information about their research may also be gathered from conference websites or funding agencies websites. There is also a growing pressure from funding agencies and academic institutions that researchers should be more transparent and provide information about their research on social media and also publish with open access.

New technologies enable researchers to blog from the field and many also believe that this is a more democratic and open way of doing research. In the context of China, for example, Tricia Wang has written eloquently on her use of ‘live field notes’, whereas researchers within the UCL Global Social Media Impact Study kept a quite extensive blog from their respective field sites in China and other countries. On the special research blog within the Digital China project I write about different topics and general developments in China.

See Wang (2013: 59-61), and http://ethnographymatters.net/blog/2012/08/02/writing-live-fieldnotes-towards-a-more-open-ethnography/; for the UCL blog, see http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/
but I do not provide information about ongoing fieldwork or refer to interviews with informants. My posts on weibo can be read as a kind of open digital field notes or archive that reveals some aspects of my thinking, reading, and doings, although for reasons of privacy and safety I do not discuss my fieldwork. I do not use either Twitter or Facebook.

Many informants today have access to the internet and can thus more easily get to know about the researcher’s previous and current research and other more personal information. One of my informants on the Chinese countryside, for example, surprised me by revealing that he had looked me up on Baidu (although he would have found much more on Google). The fact that one may conduct research on diverse topics over one’s academic career, including more sensitive topics, and also meet and interact with very different informants, may be surprising and perhaps problematic for some of them. I have, to date, not encountered any difficulties, but scholars in other countries have testified to the complications that can arise, and how informants’ may object to previous research topics or results, or find information about a researcher’s private life and connections problematic and strongly disagree with her or his views (for examples see Reich 2015). The fact that we leave a trail of digital footprints means that we carry visible luggage that may prevent or create problems when embarking on a new research project and when trying to build trust and get access to new informants.

Informants and other people you meet while doing fieldwork may also publish information about your visit and research on the internet and social media. The previously mentioned WeChat group has, on several occasions, featured information, including photos, about my visits. It would have been difficult to refuse publication of this information, although, as a scholar, one might want to keep the field site anonymous or not widely known until the research has finished, or at least refrain from posting information and photos online. Even when you protect your informants and do not reveal anything about your meetings on social media, your informants may publish this information and you might not have any control or even be aware of this. This can, however, be seen as a shift in power and a possibility for more democratic and equal researcher-researched relationships (cf. Reich 2015 and Sin 2015).

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4 See http://digitalchina.blogg.lu.se/ (last accessed 18 November 2016).

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4 See http://digitalchina.blogg.lu.se/ (last accessed 18 November 2016).
Embracing Social Media in China: Navigating Transparency and Surveillance

It is difficult to refuse social media altogether since many informants today use it themselves. If you want to connect with and ‘meet’ them, you need to at least partly embrace social media. Whether to use social media at all, or how and for what purposes, whether to accept friend requests from informants, or self-initiate such contacts, and how much to reveal about your research and yourself on social media, are difficult and complex questions that require constant and serious reflection. In the case of an authoritarian society such as China, the possibility of surveillance on social media platforms, even when you do not engage in sensitive research, is a risk you need to be aware of and try to minimize. One should be careful about what one writes on social media and never reveal anything about meetings or interviews with informants. Although one’s WeChat ‘moments’ are only public to contacts, one needs to be aware that Tencent, and by extension the Chinese authorities, are able to access one’s account, including posts and contacts, if they want to. Recent studies of censorship on WeChat have revealed the extent to which both one-to-one messages and group chat postings are being monitored (Ng 2015), and that this also extends to users abroad (quoted in Harwit 2016). Even if you are careful when you post, your network of contacts is possible to access and map, although that also goes for your ordinary telephone contacts. All researchers, including, in particular, researchers who incorporate social media into their research toolbox, inevitably leave many traces online. So far, scholars working on and in China seem rather unreflective about their digital footprints, and neither have they written about their social media use and its implications for research (it is of course not only scholars’ use of Sina Weibo and WeChat but also of Twitter and Facebook that needs to be discussed).

While the pitfalls that come with the increasing visibility of the internet are many, it should be acknowledged that it creates more transparency as the general public now have greater access to current research. Furthermore, it promotes more equal relations between researcher and informants as the latter may be able to question or challenge the research results through social media and other means. A great benefit of using Chinese social media as a researcher is that it enables you to better understand how Chinese citizens integrate social media into their everyday life, resulting in a ‘thicker’ understanding and more ‘embodied’ experience of what it means to be living in the Chinese (digital) society. My own socialization into Chinese social media and shared experience with informants has been very helpful for exploring new
issues and formulating research questions. But it has necessitated a constant reflection on how and why I use social media and its practical and ethical challenges, which has motivated the writing of this article, and which I would like to further discuss with colleagues.

References


