

Book Review

Global Media and China

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Yujie Chen, Zhifei Mao, & Jack Linchuan Qiu, *Super-Sticky WeChat and Chinese Society*. Bingley, UK: Emerald, 2018. 151 pp. £40(paperback), ISBN: 978-1-78743-092-1, eISBN: 978-1-78743-091-4

At the centre of this concise book lies an exploration of Tencent WeChat evolution in the Chinese society. The authors bring forward the main argument that WeChat is unique in the social media landscape due to its stickiness. They mean by that the app offers a wide range of functions and services to users that in turn become glued to the meta-platform (pp. 5–6). This stickiness is also embodied by a series of culturalised designs that are developed to attract users permanently and keep them from leaving it. By looking at historical data, technical evolutions, official statistics and case studies, the authors retrace the specific steps that led WeChat to become China's most popular mobile app and look at the ways it impacted the social practices of its users.

The first chapter sets the stage by looking at the historical, cultural and social preconditions in China that led WeChat to overtake its sister app QQ with over 1 billion monthly users. The key aspect that stands out here is the complicated relationship between Tencent – the holding company owning WeChat – and the Chinese government. In a country where State surveillance and censorship are important features of the media landscape, the private company developed some sort of mutually beneficial relationship with the government. In exchange for operating without too much hindrance, Tencent supplies data for the government's social control machinery (p. 32). In light of the popularity of the social media, especially their unprecedented power in finance, small business and social services (p. 44), the authors argue that the government is probably as much stuck to the meta-platform as the users themselves.

The second chapter is more descriptive and outlines different functions available on WeChat. With a focus on the three super-stickiness emblematic functionalities of WeChat-Moments, Official Accounts and WeChat Pay, this chapter provides an overview of the expansion of WeChat from a communication tool to the all-in-one platform as of today. For instance, the mutual availabilities of Moments encourage private communication among close ties (p. 56). The quasi-standalone interface of Official account makes it function like an App for its administrators to disseminate information and provide instant online services. The WeChat wallet is the most interesting one as it explains how the app is not only informational and social, but also transactional (p. 67). In that regard, the reproduction of the Red Envelope social practice with the Red Packet function helps depicting the social use of WeChat. Even though we learn some interesting facts, like the fact the WeChat is more popular for professional communications than emails, this chapter will be not be found insightful for the readers who already have a basic knowledge about the app.



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The third chapter gives concrete illustrations of the use of WeChat for social movements. In a country where the organisation of civil society is hindered, three case studies show how the social media can play a certain role in initiating, supplementing or extending protests (p. 80). Notably, we learn how the use of WeChat is not limited to China's borders but is also part and parcel of the digital life of the Chinese diaspora in other countries. While within the Chinese context, authors note although the super-stickiness features of the platform enable the bottom-up collectives social activities. However, the top-down governmental and platform censorship and users' self-censorship limited WeChat's role in initiating major social events (p. 99).

Put together, the three chapters offer comprehensive insight into the dynamics of WeChat. We learn more about the social use of media by the Chinese population, about the development of a multinational company such as Tencent in a State-centred regime and about the uniqueness of WeChat which founder Pony Ma likes to call the utility of the digital age. Whereas the authors rely on a lot of data, the book falls short in making them useful for the readers. The use of data visualisation tools would have helped greatly in making sense of the numerous figures that sometimes make paragraphs abrupt.

One of the main strengths of the book is that it can reach a large audience. First, the stickiness of WeChat and the realisation of building one mega-platform in ways Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp have dreamed of will be of interest for readers interested in social media. Second, students and researchers of China studies will find in this book an interesting depiction of social media use in the Chinese Society and how one affects the other. Finally, it is worth mentioning how the book can be easily understood by a Western audience. Indeed, the authors strived to always give context, illustrations and comparisons for potential readers who are not familiar with WeChat and with the Chinese society more broadly.

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