Face, Social Ties and Positive Energy: an analysis of young Chinese WeChat users' reflections on mediated social relations

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Abstract

The context to this study is the recent modernisation and rapid urbanisation of China has witnessed the widespread dislocation of people from small agrarian communities to rapidly developing cities for work and study. This is a profound social, cultural and political transformation in China. The disappearance of rural communities and the shift from collective to more individualistic society raises concerns about the fate of both traditional Chinese culture and the commitments of collectivism. For centuries, a relational concept of face has provided the intangible hand that orders Chinese people's lives and communities.

Against this background, this thesis presents a study among a group of Chinese students, most of whom have travelled to Beijing for their studies, and focusing on their use of social media to sustain relationships with their parents and their online networks. Through depth interviews and observations of their use of social media, principally WeChat, a multifunction social media platform, a picture emerges of their understanding and reflections on face, social ties and the regulation of online conduct through a discourse of positive energy. The ways in which these young people use social media in their sense of self and their social relationships reveals an engagement with traditional concepts of face *lian* and *mianzi*. Face practices are shown to be essential in managing their mediated relationships and social ties with their family and friends. In addition, the thesis demonstrates the spread of the idea of positive energy online as an important driver of online civility.

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Glossary of Terms

Chi ru xing (humiliation, punishment): this is an ancient Chinese punishment that involved writing or tattooing characters on a convict's face, cutting their hair, or removing a man's beard. (The hair represents an individual's life; the beard signifies masculinity).

Erben/Yiben (second-tier university/first-tier university): these terms denote the rank of a university in China. Universities belonging to the first tier receive funding and support directly from central government, while universities belonging to the second tier are under the management of local government or the education department.

Dao (tao) sheng yi, yi sheng er, er sheng san, san sheng wan wu (Dao generates *yi*, *yi* generates *er*, *er* generates *san*, and *san* generates all the beings): this phrase comes from the book *Dao De Jing*, written by the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi, in which he suggests that people follow the principles of nature and the universe; things in nature are part of a cycle, and old things can be recycled to generate new things.

Diu Ren/Lian/mianzi (loss of personhood/loss of face): describes shameful or embarrassing feelings that an individual may experience.

Dianzan zhijiao (online 'likes'/friendship): where the relationship between two individuals is limited to clicking 'like' on each other's online posts.

Dongshi (understanding rituals): this is a phrase that elders use to describe young people who follow the established rituals of interaction.

Dou/Doubi (amusing/funny) ***Er/Erbi*** (stupid): a way of describing people who have a fun-loving character.

Fan pu gui zhen: the idea that people can only find their authentic selves and the meaning in their lives by removing external distractions and focusing on self-cultivation.

Fan ke zhuang jie you ye, fan you jie xiang ye, fan xiang jie qi ye: the meaning of being, all beings have their own appearance, all appearances are the result of *qi*.

Fen qing (angry youth): the meaning of this phrase changes according to the social context; in this study, it refers to individuals who feel distanced from their social environment.

Fumu zai, bu yuanyou, you bi you fang: Children should not travel far while their parents are still alive, except where they have clear goals and the aspiration to achieve them. This idiom suggests that children should stay close to their parents and serve them as an act of filial piety.

Hao Mianzi (like Mianzi, passionate about having mianzi): individuals who carefully protect themselves from losing face.

Hui Laishi (sophisticated): a taunt used to describe individuals who actively participate in or organise social activities.

Hui Jiaoji (sociability): this can be a term of admiration or a taunt, used to describe individuals who are good at socialising with others.

Hui Zuo ren (knowing how to be a human): describes an individual who is good at managing social relationships.

Hukou (household registration): the name for the Chinese household registration policy that keeps a record of the geographical origins of each individual and defines the rights and welfare that they are entitled to in different places.

Hu Tou She Wei (tiger head and snake tails): high momentum at the beginning, but losing impetus towards the end; frequently used to refer to individuals who lack consistency in doing things.

Guanxi (social relations): the relationship between two people, which can either be individual or collective.

Gan qing (emotional feeling): refers to the sentiment felt towards an individual, collective, or object.

Gao guan xi (knowing how to play with guanxi): frequently refers to individuals who consciously take advantage of the resources that are embedded in their networks.

Ge men (brothers): frequently used of Chinese men to describe their closeness to another person, who can be either a man or a woman.

Gong wu yuan (governmental officer): a person who works in a government department.

La guan xi (pulling *guanxi*): people who actively try to strengthen their relationships with others.

Lao xiang (fellow villager): people who share the same place of origin.

Lian (moral face): frequently used to refer to an individual's moral and ethical consciousness in their social interactions; this is an essential character that an individual needs to be able to function well in the traditional Chinese community.

Luan jia (messy adding): the practice of connecting with strangers on social media platforms.

Lun li (rationale circle): Lun represents the Confucian social order which emphasises the rituals and responsibilities of the inferior towards the superior.

Meinv (pretty girl): used to refer to a good-looking girl; a social greeting used to address a girl.

Mianzi (face): the social face, frequently used to refer to the prestige that an individual can enjoy through social interaction.

Nei yin/Wai yin/Bu nei wai yin (inner reason/outer reason/neither inner nor outer reason): terms from traditional Chinese medicine used to explain the cause of an illness.

Niang (girly): frequently used to refer to a male with feminine social practices.

Jizan (collecting 'likes'): refers to the online practice of trying to get as many 'likes' as possible.

Jia ren (family, kinship): family members or people who are as close as family members.

Qi (energy/air): the actual meaning of this term depends on the context; it can mean air, energy, or anger.

Qi ben ti lun (the ontology of qi): in this research, this phrase refers to the traditional Chinese belief that all living things in the world are the crystallisation of energy.

Qigong (qi practices): traditional Chinese physical exercises.

Qing (feelings): frequently used to refer to the feelings that people have.

Qingli (reasonableness): the suggestion that people should look at an issue from both an objective and an emotional perspective.

Quanzi (circle): frequently used to refer to one's social networks.

Renqing (reciprocal favour): a reciprocal favour; the position of owing or being owed a favour.

Sanguan (three essential traits which include personal values, philosophy, and worldview): frequently used to refer to whether or not people have the same values.

Shai xingfu (presenting happiness): people who create posts on social media platforms to present the happy moments in their lives; usually used to refer to couples who express their love for each other on social media.

Sheng ren/Shu ren: the former suggests people who are not familiar with each other, while the latter refers to people who are close.

Si polian (ripping the face): refers to conflict between two individuals.

Suanming (fatalism/luck): fortune-telling.

Tongzhuo: students who sit next to each other in class.

Wenyi qingnian (arty youth): an idealistic youth or youths who want to present an artistic impression of themselves.

Weishang (WeChat businesspersons): people who promote and sell products on the WeChat platform.

Wang Hong lian (online celebrity face): refers to a face that has been heavily modified, using make up, Photoshop, or even plastic surgery.

Xiaonei (Renren): a Chinese social networking site that is similar to Facebook; it used to be popular among Chinese university students, but has lost its fame due to the rise of other kinds of social media in China.

Xiaojing: (known as *The Classic of Filial Piety*): a significant treatise that introduces Confucius's thoughts on managing relationships between people in an inferior and a superior position.

Xiaoshun/Xiaojing (filial piety): the traditional Chinese virtue that requires children to express respect towards their parents, especially serving them once they are old.

Xinling jitang (mental chicken soup): refers to inspiring information aimed at boosting someone's confidence.

Yang/Yin qi (positive energy/negative energy): corresponding to the philosophy of yin and yang, which can be used to refer to the positive and negative sides of things.

Yang er fang lao: the traditional Chinese belief in raising children to provide for one's old age.

Yang sheng (ways of maintaining good health): people who consciously take measures to sustain good health.

You liang xin (having dignity): refers to a person who has a sincere heart and appreciates the help of others.

Zheng Nengliang (positive energy): refers to individuals or things that have an inspiring effect on others, or a term to suggest that people should take a positive attitude toward things.

Zhong hua er nv/Zu guo mu qin (the sons and daughters of China/the mother country): these terms are frequently used together by Chinese citizens wishing to express their deep feelings for the nation of China.

Chapter 1—Introduction

1.1 Introduction

I started this study with two interests; the dramatic development of social media in China and the societal changes that are happening in China. I wanted to explore the connections between these issues by examining the way that social change is reflected in the use of social media. I was originate motivated by my personal experiences. I was an undergraduate student in Beijing from 2007-2011 when social media started its rapid rise in China. In October 2007, as first-year undergraduate students we were required to complete a computer literacy test. The test involved creating a Word document, typing a paragraph of Chinese characters, and making a table. Most of my classmates failed the test, especially students from rural backgrounds. However, by the end of the year, almost everyone was using social media, especially the most popular one *Xiaonei* (now known as *Renren*).

Renren was based on the relationship between classmates, like the early version of Facebook. Almost all my classmates started using *Renren* to connect with former classmates in 2007. Immediately, it became a trend among Chinese university students to see who would have the most followers and the most people visiting their profiles. These competitive practices were reinforced by *Xiao Yuan Zhi Xing* (Campus Star), a ranking list that recognised students who had the most people viewing their profiles each day at their university. The Campus Star ranking list appeared at the bottom of users' home pages, so everyone could see who had the most profile viewers on their campus. At that time, one way to express friendship was to visit profiles to increase their profile viewer numbers. This trend lost its charm after 2010, with the rising popularity of Weibo (microblogging) and my classmates became more interested in attracting followers on Weibo rather than connecting with classmates. When I reflect on this shift now, I think part of this is because students were getting ready for the job market and networking with professionals. Nowadays most of my classmates communicate through WeChat rather than Weibo and have started sharing their lives using WeChat Moments (like a Facebook profile). In this thesis, rather than exploring why students changed from one platform to another, I am more interested in exploring and understanding their online practices,

especially what they consider to be important and the way they develop or sustain relationships with the use of WeChat.

Goffman's (1959) work on self-presentation is frequently cited in understanding social media users' methods of creating and sharing information. While existing online self-presentation studies prefer explaining how social media users' online practices are intended to create desirable images online, I am developing two strands of Goffman's work that have been relatively neglected in relation to social media: face and mutual social interaction. Other than that, Goffman's interpretation of face as part of the interactional ritual share similarities with Chinese concepts of face, which represent the moral and social aspects of self-identity (Hu, 1944). Therefore, this study combines insights from these two sources with the aim of understanding Chinese young people's practices on WeChat.

It is impossible to talk about people's use of media without mentioning the social changes in China as the country is experiencing extensive modernisation and urbanisation. Recent studies about the new modernity and urbanisation of China have documented concerns about rural villages disappearing, the changing nature of social relations, and the diminishing of traditional moral values. For example, Hwang (2008) states that modernisation in China follows widespread social mobility, with people frequently moving from rural areas and regional cities to larger urban centres. Along with this dislocation of people, it is argued, urban cities break the traditional bonds of blood and social connections (Bender, 1978), which generates a new kind of modern social group, in which people are bound by more impersonal links (Hwang, 2008). The urbanisation in China sacrifices rural villages, as there were 3.7 million villages in China in 2000 and this number dropped dramatically to 2.6 million by 2010. Approximately 300 villages disappear every day in China[1] (Johnson, 2014). A famous Chinese writer once stated, "Chinese culture is traditionally rural-based…once the villages are all gone, the culture is gone"[2] (Johnson, 2014). By inviting Chinese young university students to reflect on their social practices in both online and offline environments, this research captures

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[1] Johnson, I. (1st Feb. 2014). In China, 'Once the Villages Are Gone, the Culture Is Gone'. The New York Times, Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/world/asia/once-the-villages-are-gone-the-culture-is-gone.html (Accessed on 26th Jun. 2016).
[2] As in Footnote 1.

Chinese young people's perceptions toward both contemporary and traditional Chinese culture from different perspectives, such as face, social ties, and positive energy.

By taking into consideration the raising individualism among Chinese youths, this study explores their mediated social ties with family and friends. For instance, participants' parents are the generation who grew up with collectivism and Maoist socialism, were educated to neglect traditional social networks, and embrace the nation-state (Yan, 2010). In contrast, these young adults (aged 18-24) are the generation who have grown up during the period of reform in China and are experiencing the rapid development of social media. Therefore, compared with their parents, the current youth have more opportunities to move and live in large urban cities, which means more chances to interact with people outside their original community (Zhou and Xiao, 2015). Researchers like Gong (2016) suggest that people are aware that the state-directed modernisation programme is challenging the patrilineal system in China and the traditional values imbued in it, such as filial piety and reciprocal intergeneration relationships. Similarly, Yan (2003) notes that rising individualisation is making Chinese people 'uncivil', as they desire to have rights and autonomy and neglect their obligations to traditional community and society. Existing research on social media use in China provides some evidence against these fatalistic interpretations. For instance, research indicates that young people who migrate to large cities try to use social media to connect with their parents and fulfil filial piety by setting parents' mind at ease (Zhou and Xiao, 2015). Correspondingly, researchers also discovered that youth are active in online political participation, especially in defending the national image of China against Western-based media's negative reports, which was an unexpected result (Liu, 2012; Ma, 2018). Additionally, the rising individualism among Chinese youths increases their awareness of autonomy, which motivates them to connect with cross-gender youths who are their age and have similar academic and career interests (Fang, 2016). This study advances the argument that traditional Chinese culture does not disappear with villages, instead, it is being reformed and transformed in a modern context, along with the impact of social media.

One example to support this argument is the popularity of WeChat. One crucial reason that advances the success and popularity of WeChat could be how the developers include traditional Chinese culture. For instance, *peng you quan* is like the home page function on Facebook where an individual can review the posts that their WeChat connections

create or share. Moreover, the invitation of a red envelope encourages people to make an online money transaction is an online extension of an offline traditional interaction gesture. In fact, WeChat appeals to Chinese social media users by naming its online features after the traditional social interaction terms to take advantage of the cultural literacy of its users and create the idea that users' online practices can represent offline interactions. For instance, by transferring money using a red envelope to a friend via WeChat is like giving people a gift in real life, the interaction gesture can be different while the meaning and effect are the same. Moreover, these traditional terms on WeChat also make people with lesser media literacy can quickly become familiar with WeChat features. Hence, this social media platform using traditional social interaction terms in its design is achieving enormous success in China. WeChat is changing people's perceptions about online interactions, their online practices are developing and sustaining connections, and even acting out their desires to be civil in an online environment.

The aim of this study is to investigate Chinese young people's online social interaction practices as reflecting broader social and cultural change in contemporary China. The research aims to answer two research questions, one is what are Chinese young adults' understanding and uses of traditional social interaction terms, such as *lian* and *mianzi* in the context of social media interactions. The second is how do Chinese young people manage their social relationships through WeChat. By conducting qualitative research among Chinese young university students, this research captures young participants' understanding of face, their strategical practices in managing mediated social relationships, and their internalization of civility in online environment. The following sections explain the rationale behind this study.

1.2 Initial thoughts on Goffman and face concept

Goffman (1959) emphasises that people constantly adjust their social practices by interpreting the information that they receive from social situations, with the aim to impress others by presenting a favourable image. A mainstream communication study shares the dyadic conception, such as senders and receivers, writers and readers, while Goffman teaches us that a social interaction can imply many roles that link "multiple participants or society as whole" (Livingstone and Lunt, 2012, p.76). Therefore,

Goffman's study about face-to-face interactions is helpful in comprehending people's online practices and exploring their social context (Livingstone and Lunt, 2012). Inspired by their work, this study adopts Goffman's work on self-presentation and facework to understand Chinese young adults' online practices and their reflections on mediated relations.

According to Goffman (1959, 1967) people consciously protecting each other's face from decreasing in a defined social situation. He notes if a social interaction is like driving in traffic, then facework is like the traffic light that ensures the traffic can flow without knowing the destinations of the cars. Later researchers like Brown and Levinson (1987) considered Goffman's definition of face literally and understand it from politeness perspective. While in the nation where face plays an essential role in guiding people's social and personal practices, it includes more meanings than simply being polite to each other so to make a social interaction flow. For instance, researchers suggest understanding face requires two terms in Chinese, which are *mianzi* (social face) and *lian* (moral face) (Hu, 1944; King and Myers, 1997). Hwang (2006, p. 277) further notes that moral face is the 'baseline of one's integrity of personality' and social face represents the "status achieved by one's talent, endeavours, or ability", or even the status ascribed to an individual by this 'consanguineous relationship'. Therefore, the concept of face in a Chinese context includes more than social elements, as its moral and civil effects also play essential roles in making it a necessity in Chinese people's social life.

Due to the social and moral effects of *mianzi* and *lian*, the Chinese concept of face is dynamic and context related. For instance, Yan (2009) found that extortion, which is behaviour that can cause stigma and impact an individuals' face in the social context, is increasing in China along with its modernisation. He explains this phenomenon as "modernization often involves changes in behaviour norms, values, and moral reasoning" (Yan, 2009, p. 9). In contrast to the concerns about a weakened moral consciousness is the raising interest in social achievements. For instance, Zhai (2013) notes that even though the traditional norms and the government encourages people to be morally upright and make individual sacrifices for the benefit of their country and the community, the reality is that people who neglect moral face and focus on gaining personal successes and use social resources are more likely to lead a prosperous life. Increasing research about face and consumption in contemporary China also tend to note that the Chinese people

are passionate in gaining *mianzi* through conspicuous consumption, and ostentatious achievements

Due to the social and moral effect of *mianzi* and *lian*, the Chinese concept of face is dynamic and context related. For instance, extortion which supposes to be conducts that can stigma individuals' face in the social context, while Yan (2009) finds there is a rising number for extortion cases in China along with its modernization. He explains this phenomenon as "modernization often involves changes in behaviour norms, values, and moral reasoning" (Yan, 2009, p. 9). In contrast to the concern of weaken moral consciousness is the raising interest in social achievements. For instance, Zhai (2013) notes that even though the traditional norms and the State encourages people to be morally upright and making individual sacrifices for the benefit of the State and the Community, while the reality is people who neglect moral face and focus on gaining personal successes and occupy social resources are more likely to lead a prosperous life. Increasing research on face and consumption in contemporary China also tend to note that Chinese people are passionate in gaining *mianzi* through conspicuous consumption, and ostentatious achievements (Siu, Kwan, and Zeng, 2016). Hence, it seems like Chinese people place different importance on social face and moral face with the transformation of the social context. Moral face used to be the baseline that an individual needed to be a member of a community, while the modernisation and social transformation in China now emphasises prosperity rather than one's obligation in the community (Yan, 2010). Therefore, people might experience anxiety when faced with a social exchange, especially when the traditional social norms regarding challenges and morality have not been established. Yan's (2010) notion of the social change in China is like Giddens' (1999) explanation about the anxious feeling that people have when losing ontological security. Against this context, this study aims to present the contemporary social context in China by exploring Chinese people's reflections on the traditional social terms regarding 'face' and social practices.

1.3 Social Relationships

Other than the moral and social characters, the relational character of Chinese face is also worth further exploration. The relational character of face not only suggests the sharing

of face among individuals in the same community but also refers to the reciprocal nature of social relationships. For instance, Ho (1976, p.883) notes that "face is the reciprocated compliance, respect, and/or deference that each party expects from, and extends to, the other party." Hwang's (1987) work on Chinese social ties, introduced three kinds of reciprocal social ties that exist among Chinese people, which are expressive ties, instrumental ties, and mixed social ties. Hwang (1987) noted in his work that there are different kinds of reciprocal principles based on the social tie differences. For instance, an expressive tie includes an action and expressive reciprocal event, instrumental ties use the short term and equality principles, and the mix tie includes the predictable reciprocal relationship. Hwang (1987) also provides detailed examples by indicating that expressive ties frequently exist between family and close friends, instrumental ties occur between people who participate in instrumental exchanges and mixed ties refers to relationships with general social connections. Decades after Hwang's (1987) research, the social context has changed dramatically in China, this drives me to consider whether Hwang's (1987) statements about different social ties are still applicable in contemporary China. Therefore, this research aims to explore Chinese young people's perceptions about the social ties they have and how they manage their relationships with others in a mediated social context.

Mindful of these changes, some researchers conducted research in rural communities in China and noticed that the use of social media affects the way people develop and sustain social relationships. McDonald (2016) conducted an ethnographic study in Anshan to learn about social media use in rural China. He found that Chinese parents who live in the village tend to forbid their children from having mobile phones and access to the internet, as they consider the use of the internet will distract their children from their studies, and they believe that online information may mislead their children. In contrast, in migrant families, in which either parents must leave home for employment or their children leave to study in cities, mobile phones and social media help to create a virtual co-presence for children and family, which also works as the main way for children and parents to communicate (Zhao and Xiao, 2015). Zhao and Xiao (2015) interviewed students in urban cities and their parents and found that children enjoy being able to contact their parents through social media, but also experience pressure from realising that their parents are lurking online to monitor them. In this study, I will discuss the relationship between children and parents and the tactics children develop to manage their

parents' online monitoring, as well as their ways of fulfilling filial piety to set their parents minds at ease (Chapter 6).

Connecting with friends and family and having access to online information are among the main reasons that motivate people to use social media (Chambers, 2013). Social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook encourage users to create information, share their real names, and make their contact list public. Online connections are named as 'friends', who have traditionally been an essential part of individuals' identity and self-presentation, as well having privileged access to them (Chambers, 2013). Back to the Chinese context, the most popular social media platform is WeChat, which includes similar features as Facebook but is also unique. WeChat is known as the platform that enhances interactions to promote offline strong ties, as its main features benefit mutual connections more. For instance, people who are mutual friends can see each other's online interaction practices, which is information that is not available to people who are not mutual friends. WeChat also provides private spaces for friends to communicate, although some people take advantage of these features for commercial benefits. As Chambers' (2012) points out the commercialisation, trust, and privacy would be the themes to shape future online friendships in the context of social media. By investigating participants' reflections about their mediated relationship with parents and friends, especially their strategies in managing relationships with them, this research finding echoes Chambers' (2012) statement (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7).

1.4 Be a Good Netizen in China

One of the themes that appear in this research is people's internalisation of cultural concepts and how the state's political instructions affect their online practices. The State of China advocates that Chinese internet users should spread positive energy online, so as to create a 'clear and clean cyberspace' and realise the China dream.[3] Meanwhile, the state urges the mainstream news portals and major commercial websites to participate in "strengthening management, developing healthy trends, pooling positive energy and

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[3] XinHua Net. (10th Sep. 2013). Luwei Zai Di Wujie Zhongying Hulianwang Yuanzhuo Huiyi Shang Fabiao Zhuzhi Yanjiang (in Chinese). Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2013-09/10/c_132706197.htm (Accessed on 23rd Jan.2016)

contributing to the China dream" (Zhou. 2013)[4]. The state also conducts internet celebrity forums to encourage online personalities to take advantage of their social responsibilities to safeguard the interest of the nation and promote positive energy[5]. Furthermore, the Cyberspace Administration of China listed four "haves" that each Chinese good netizen should follow: "a high degree of security awareness; civilized network literacy; law-abiding behaviour, and necessary protective skill" [6](Xinhua Net, 2015). These four 'haves' specifically refer to safeguarding internet security by not logging onto public Wi-Fi without care; not downloading unknown online patches; being careful about phishing websites; practice socialist values by spreading positive energy, promote Chinese cultured lifestyle, eliminate online rumours and vulgarity; realise that an online space is not an isolated virtual world but an extension of the offline world; attain the necessary literacy and protective skills to understand the internet and make good use of it [7] (Zhang, 2016). Through these four haves, the government aims to promote the responsibility of being a good netizen on individual internet users in China.

This research reveals the fact that Chinese young adults consciously align their social practices with the state's call, which is to spread positive energy in social life. The term *Zheng Neng Liang* (positive energy) first appears as a slogan that calls for the unity of the Chinese people to against the anti-Chinese forces during the London Olympic Torch Relay in 2012. It became the most popular catchphrase on Chinese internet in the same year, then the Chinese government agencies adopted this term with the aim to shape people's social practices, especially online practices. This research captures this government guided and individual internalised online practices through analysing Chinese young WeChat users' reflections on their online practices. This finding also reflects a trendy political strategy in regulating people's online practices in China, which replaces meanings of certain terms that social media users use, and then encourages them to conduct online practices according to the new definitions. This concept replacement

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[4] Zhou, Z. (30th. Oct. 2013). Chinese websites to 'spread positive energy' (In Chinese), CHINA DAILY. Available at: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-10/30/content_17069677.htm (Accessed on. 23rd Jan. 2016)
[5] [5] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (14th, Aug. 2013). Lu Wei Zai Wangluo Mingren Shehui Zeren Luntan Shang Tichu Liudian Xiwang he Qitiao Dixian (In Chinese).
[6] http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-06/01/c_1115473371.htm
[7] http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/982759.shtml

gesture is so hidden that even young social media users with relatively high media literacies would not notice the government's involvement (Chapter 8).

1.5 Youth in China

Youth or young people means *QingNian* or *Nian Qing* in Chinese, and *QingNian* means young and green literally (Liu, 2011). This meaning reflects Chinese people's attitude toward young adults, as they consider young people to be brimming with youthful vigour and the hope of the future (Liu, 2011). As the first Chinese president, Mao ZeDong said, "young people are like the sun at eight o'clock in the morning, the world belongs to you and us, but the world will eventually be yours"[8]. His words further indicate a positive image of youth in a Chinese context (Liu, 2011).

As Chambers (2013) notes, social media companies design platforms and provide services, and users are the people who utilise their services and define the evolution of the social media platform. Similarly, Liu (2011) claims that Chinese youth and the internet are the main driving forces for the social changes in China. She further notes there is no homogenous 'net generation' across the world nor a 'universal' internet because internet users' online practices are embedded in their social-biographical situations, as "their online self-presentation reflects their everyday life actualities embedded in the larger 'glocal' context of their societies" (Liu, 2011, p. 181).

Liu (2011) suggests that media studies about Chinese youth should distinguish individuals from rural and urban areas. She believes that, compared with their urban peers, rural youth experience a greater struggle when facing the 'glocal' context'. For instance, Chinese youth, in general, tend to romanticise culture in Western developed countries, especially the lifestyles and perceived freedom that youths in those countries enjoy. In reality, rural youth, as the victims of the *hukou* system [9]and social inequality, need to face the life discrepancy with both their counterparts in both Western developed

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[8] Ren Min Newspaper (13th Oct. 1977). "Shijie Shi Shuyu Nimen de"—Mao Zedong Dui Qingnian ren de Guanhuai Yingxiang Zhijin (in Chinese). Available at:
http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/252/7955/7958/20020422/714354.html (Accessed on 12th Nov. 2015)
[9] Hukou, household registration system, is a government system of household registration.

countries and in Chinese urban cities. Moreover, as the nation that has the tradition of valuing and prioritising education, a key difference between rural and urban youth in China is their access to educational opportunities. For most Chinese families, especially middle and lower class families, children's academic achievement represents the chance for enhancing their social position or for upward social moving (Zheng, 2017). Therefore, most Chinese families tend to spend an enormous effort supporting their children to pursue academic success, with the expectation that children can make an upward move for him/herself as well as for the family, most importantly, being able to stand out in an unequal and competitive society (Liu, 2011; Zou, Anderson, Tsey, 2013).

Meanwhile, the increasing university student enrolment also signifies that young people have an increased opportunity to attend university than their parents. For instance, according to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, there were 1.02 million university students in China in 1979, which ranked 113 among 142 countries and nations in the world (Feng, 2012). Between 1980 and 1990, the number of Chinese students who participated in *gao kao* (college entrance test, CET) increased from 1.64 million in 1984 to 3.33 million in 1990, and the number of students enrolled in higher education rose from 0.28 million in 1980 to 0.67 million in 1988[10]. To give a sense of the pace of change, the number of students who took the CET in 2008 reached 10.50 million and 5.66 million of them are enrolled in Chinese universities[11]. Although the number taking the CET has decreased since 2008, enrolment kept increasing until 2013. For instance, 6.98 and 7.0 million students are enrolled in Chinese universities in 2014 and 2016 respectively[12].

The importance parents place on their children's education makes them forbid anything that might possibly distract their children from studying, especially the use of the internet. Liu (2011) notes children in rural areas of China tend to use the internet for entertainment, meanwhile, their parents fear internet addiction and believe it will distract from learning. Interestingly, Chinese students share similar idea that the internet and social media activities are distractions, and schools in rural areas also tend to forbid students from

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[10] Liu, N. (6th Aug. 2016) *Quanguo 1977-2016nian Gaokao Renshu he Luqu lv Tongji (in Chinese).* Available at: http://www.gaosan.com/gaokao/70941.html (Accessed on 23rd Oct. 2016).
[11] As Footnote 9.
[12] As Footnote 9.

bringing mobile phones to school (McDonald, 2016). Apparently, compared with rural peers, especially middle school and high school students, university students face fewer restrictions from parents and officials that can interfere with their access to mobile phones and the internet. Notably, for young people who migrate from rural and small cities to large urban cities like Beijing, social media's role in their life is also worth further exploration. Hence, this research fills this research gap by focusing on Chinese young adults who are studying at universities in Beijing and who use the social media platform-WeChat to communicate and interact with their social connections.

The degree of displacement of people in contemporary China is high and the student population is a significant example. This research focuses on Beijing because it has the most universities in China but also because young, highly educated migrants are increasing. For instance, in 2015, 28.9% of the migrant population in Beijing held a bachelor's degree and 2.6% of them held a master's degree, which is 11.3% and 1.2% higher than the numbers in 2011 (Li, 2017). Li (2017) although under-educated (middle-school level or lower) migrant workers still make up the majority of the migrant population, individuals with higher-education experience is increasing gradually every year. By investigating Chinese young adults who migrate to Beijing to receive higher education, this research gives an insight into their social practices, which helps to understand their cognition of self, their perception of social relationships, and their internalisation of social, cultural, and political terms in managing social practices, with a focus on their online social practices.

1.6 Intensive Internet and WeChat Use among Youths in China

The kernel reason of exploring Chinese young people's use of the internet and mobile phones is because the technological development and industrial expansion have made great strides in China in recent years. The China Internet Network Information Centre's (CNNIC) published the 41st Statistical Report on Internet Development in China in January2018. The report notes there were 772 million internet users in China by

December 2017, which is 40.74 million more than the number last year[13]. Notably, 97.5% Chinese internet users access it via their mobile phone, which is 2.4% higher than the use in 2016. Meanwhile, the internet penetration rate is 55.8%, which is 2.6 % higher than it was in 2016, surpassing the global average standard in by 4.1% and 9.1% than the average in Asia (CNNIC, 2018)[14].

The report also shows that instant messaging services (IMS) are the most popular internet application as its usage rate reached 93.3%. Notably, 694 million internet users access IMS via a mobile phone, which includes 92.2% of internet users by December 2017 (CNNIC, 2018). The report notes the multimedia functions on WeChat and QQ, which are two IMS leading applications that contribute to the flourish of IMS industry in China (CNNIC, 2018). Meanwhile, Chinese internet users also show strong interest in online social networking, as 87.3% and 64.4% of them have used a 'friends circle' on WeChat and 'QQ Zone' on QQ respectively by December 2017 (CNNIC, 2018). The 41st CNNIC report notes the online social networks are evolving into an ecosystem that 'connects everything', from timely communication, live video, gaming, news searching, and public services, within one social application. WeChat is one of the most popular social media platforms that combines both instant messaging, social networking, and multiple small applications.

WeChat, called *WeXin* in Chinese, is a mobile-based social media platform developed by Chinese technology company Tencent Holdings in January 2011. Founded in 1998, in the booming city of Shenzhen located in the southern part of China, by 2017, Tencent has become one of the top 10 largest companies in the world by its market value, the only Chinese company that has achieved this rank (Yang, 2017). According to the 2017 WeChat Statistical Report, published by Tencent, WeChat has 902 million daily users and more than 200 small applications on its platform to provide services that range from transportation and online consumption to small tools and IT technology[15]. As McLauchlin

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[13] China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), (2018) *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China (in Chinese).* Available online: http://www.cac.gov.cn/2018-01/31/c_1122347026.htm (Accessed on 23rd Mar. 2018)

[14] As Footnote 13.

[15] China Big Data Industrial Observation, (2017) 《*2017 Weixin Shuju Baogao*》*Fabu, Zhege Shuju Hen 'Da'! (in Chinese).* Available online: http://tech.huanqiu.com/news/2017-11/11370623.html (Accessed on 3rd Jan. 2018).

(2017) notes "WeChat has found ways to infiltrate corners of Chinese society on an unparalleled scale" instead of merely replicating Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram for the Chinese market.

The popularity of WeChat is also shaping people's ways of living in China (Fouly, 2017). People in China use WeChat for instant messaging and sharing along with to calling a taxi, renting a public bike and making payments (Fouly, 2017). The 2017 WeChat User and Ecological Research Report indicates that there are 889 million monthly active users on WeChat, 34.6% of them spend more than four hours a day on WeChat and 45% of them have more than 200 connections on WeChat[16]. The report also notes that connections on WeChat are based on social ties among family and friends, and extends to weak ties with colleagues[17]. 74.3% WeChat users state most of their new WeChat connections are colleagues or counterparts in their industry, professional connections have become an essential part of the WeChat ecosystem. Other than social connections, more than 60% WeChat users consider a *peng you quan* (friends' circle) as their private space, where they prefer updating daily issues and expressing personal opinions[18]. In addition to individuals' online information creating and sharing, there are also 3.5 million monthly active public accounts on WeChat that generate content for the platform[19]. Chen et al., (2012, p. 345) describes WeChat as an "information-rich environment" that allows its users to express opinions even on political issues. While McLauchlin (2017) argues, WeChat is a tool for the government to consolidate its power rather than a platform for free political expression.

Although the number of older (aged 50-70) WeChat users is increasing and reached 50 million by Dec. 2017, young adults still make up the majority of WeChat users[20]. By conducting qualitative research among Chinese young adults WeChat users, the research collects data and offers interpretations of participants' reflections on their own and others' social practices in both online and offline environment. The thesis presents participants' understanding as well as their confusions especially as they attempt to balance traditional and contemporary social values as represented in their relations with family and friends

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[16] As Footnote 15
[17] As Footnote 15
[18] As Footnote 15
[19] As Footnote 15
[20] As Footnote 13.

respectively. Participants explain how features on WeChat shape their online strategies in managing social relationships with parents and friends. Finally, participants' notion of positive energy reflects their internalization of civil responsibility under the State's influence. The following sections explain the key features on WeChat that participants frequently mention and the structure of the thesis.

1.7 WeChat Versions and Functions

There were nine mobile versions of WeChat by Jan 2016: iPhone, Android, Windows Phone 7, Windows Phone 8, Symbian S60V3, Symbian S60V5, Blackberry, Blackberry 10, and Series/40 (WeChat Web, Jan. 2016). The differences between these versions are minor and the general MIM and social networking services are the same. Features on WeChat update with time, the research mainly refers to its Andrioid and iPhone 2015 versions which were current when the empirical work for this project took place.

1.7.1 Mobile Instant Messaging

There were nine mobile versions of WeChat by January 2016: iPhone, Android, Windows Phone 7, Windows Phone 8, Symbian S60V3, Symbian S60V5, Blackberry, Blackberry 10, and Series/40 (WeChat Web, Jan. 2016). The differences between these versions are minor and the general instant messaging and social networking services are the same. Features on WeChat update with time, the research mainly refers to its Android and iPhone 2015 versions which were current when the empirical work for this project took place.

The mobile instant messaging is a fundamental service of WeChat as it provides "real-time one-to-one and group text messaging with multimedia functions" (Lin and Li, 2014, p. 3), such as text messaging (visual image and verbal text), video and audio messaging, geo-location sharing, name card sharing, and money transferring (online bank transfer and red envelope). These multiple features are convenient for users to manage online interpersonal communication, meanwhile, some of these features also closely related to traditional Chinese culture.

A red envelope is called *hong bao* in Chinese. The tradition is that Chinese people put money in a red envelope and give to family members and friends during the Chinese Lunar New Year or on special occasions such as a wedding. Chinese people believe a red envelope represents luck and fortune, which is also a way to present care and love to others. WeChat launched its red envelope feature in January 2014, but it did not achieve its success until 2015. After the Chinese Spring Festival Gala distributed red envelope on WeChat on the Lunar Chinese New Year's Eve, one billion red envelopes were sent via WeChat that evening[21]. The significant change that WeChat created was to convert a ritual for special occasions into a symbol of kindness and care for everyday social interactions. For instance, as a birthday gift, as a wish of good luck, as a treat for clicking on an advertising link. According to the Tencent report, 46 billion red envelopes were sent during the five days after the Spring Festival Eve in 2017. The popularity of red envelopes on WeChat also reflects the influence of traditional Chinese values on its people's online practices. Other than the social part, commercial companies and media organisation also gift WeChat users with red envelopes so to motivate people to take part in their online activities or register with them. Homes, Balnaves, and Wang (2017) explain how the evolution of the red envelope indicates the social media development trend is toward traditional Chinese values rather than towards Western-style democracy. Findings of this study echoed this statement, while with the awareness of the modified traditional Chinese values.

Other notable features on WeChat include its online transfer and snippet audio and video functions. For the bank transfer, WeChat users can link their WeChat account with their bank card, then they can make online bank transfers through WeChat. This function was popular back in 2015 when the research took place, participants in this study also mentioned selling products on WeChat platform and receiving payment via WeChat transfer. While when researcher travelled to China in April 2018, the virtual payment via WeChat was so widespread that some commercial places did not even accept cash. Recent research data also indicates that the mobile trade volume in China was 12.2 trillion RMB in 2015, this number increased to 98.7 trillion in 2017, and there were about 0.5 billion mobile payment users in China in 2017, which matches 69.4% of Chinese mobile phone

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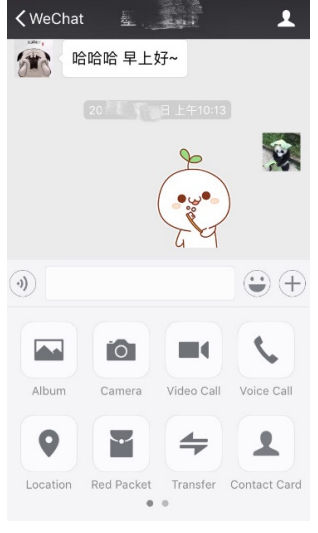
[21] Zhi, J. (2015) *Chuxi Ye Weixin Hongbao Shoufa 10 Yi (In Chinese)*. China Daily, 19th Feb. Available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/hqcj/xfly/2015-02-19/content_13259914.html (Accessed on 12th Feb. 2016).

users (Li and Deng, 2017). Even though the focus of this research is not on the online transfer process, this research does consider the convenient mobile payment methods encourage the commercialisation of a mediated relationship. Additionally, group chatting, snippet audio, and video messaging make WeChat appealing to its users. The following table includes screenshots and brief explanations about messaging features on WeChat.

Other notable features on WeChat could be its online transfer and snippet audio and video functions. For the bank transfer, WeChat users can link their WeChat account with their bank card, then they can make online bank transfer through WeChat. This function was popular back in 2015 when the field work took place, participants in this study also mentioned selling products on WeChat platform and receive payment via WeChat transfer. While when researcher travelled to China in Apr. 2018, the virtual payment via WeChat is so widespread that some commercial places do not even accept cash. Recent research data also indicates that the mobile trade volume in China was 12.2 trillion RMB in 2015, this number increase to 98.7 trillion in 2017, and there were about 0.5 billion mobile payment users in China in 2017, which makes 69.4% of Chinese mobile phone user (Li and Deng, 2017). Even though the focus of this research is not on the online transfer, while this research does mention the convenient mobile payment methods encourage the commercialisation of mediated relationship. Additionally, group chatting, snippet audio and video messaging as make WeChat appealing to its users. Following table includes screenshots and brief explanations of messaging features on WeChat.

Table 1: WeChat Messaging Features
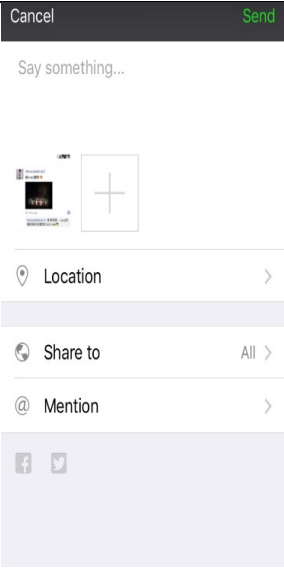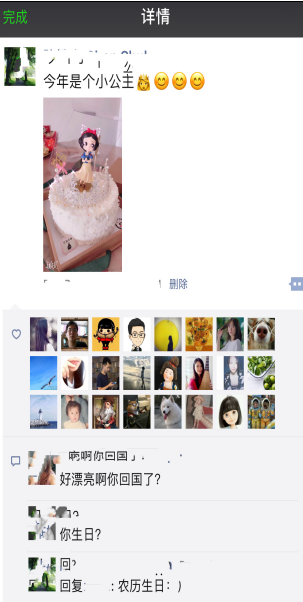
Name	Messaging Chat List	Messaging Chat	Messaging Chat
Visual Reference			
Features:	In this chat list, the first one is WeChat news, the second one is a chat with another individual user, the third is a chat group, and the fourth is a public account.	This image is the chat page. The user can chat by video, voice, and emoji, as well as exchange red envelopes and manage online transfers.	The choices people have when communicating with others through instant messaging.

The multiple innovative features of WeChat make it unique and different from other MIM services like WhatsApp. This research is particularly interested in the social networking features of WeChat, as its posts creation and sharing features make it different from other social networking service sites such as Facebook.

1.7.2 Social Networking Services
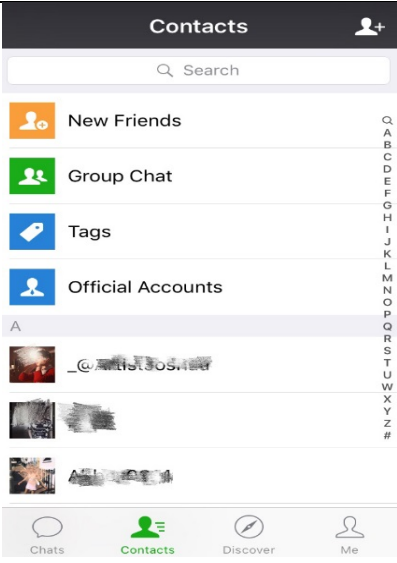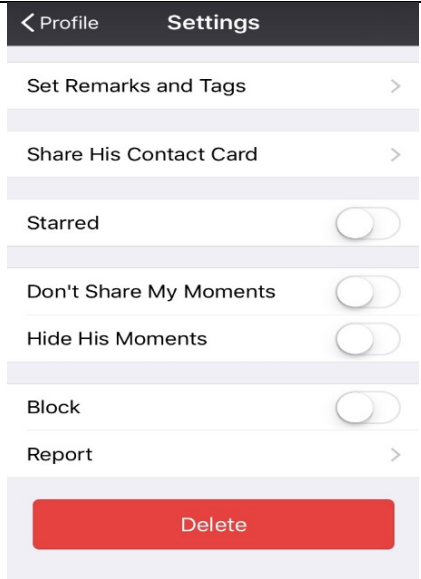
WeChat provides social networking services on its WeChat Moment or *peng you quan* (friends circle) in China. This shares similar features with Facebook, which enables its user to create posts to share images, videos, and online links. WeChat users can interact with others by clicking 'like' or commenting on others' posts. Meanwhile, WeChat users can also decide with whom to share these posts, such as public, specific friends, groups, or to oneself.

Table 2: The WeChat Moments Features

Name	Post Creating	WeChat Moments	Online Like and Comment
Visual Reference			
Features:	Post creating page, users can decide with whom they want to share the moments, mentions, and whether to attach their location or not	The WeChat Moments People can share pictures, video, and hyperlinks. This page includes online links and pictures.	WeChat posts only allow users to like or comment on each other's posts, and the content of comments is available to mutual friends.

Some functions differentiate WeChat from a Facebook profile page. Online comments and likes on WeChat are not open to all who have access to individuals' online posts. WeChat users cannot forward others' online posts, and can only share others' links. WeChat provides a desktop version, while WeChat Moments is only available to mobile phone users. WeChat encourages picture, video, and link sharing rather than just verbal text. WeChat users cannot create verbal texts without attaching a picture or video, although some users found a way to create verbal only texts although this feature is not obvious on WeChat nor popular among its users. WeChat also allows users to block others posts from appearing on his/her WeChat Moments or make their WeChat Moments not available to certain WeChat connections. Finally, different from other SNSs like Facebook, the friend contact list on WeChat is only available to the individual user.
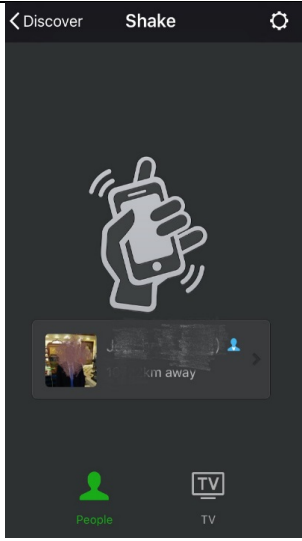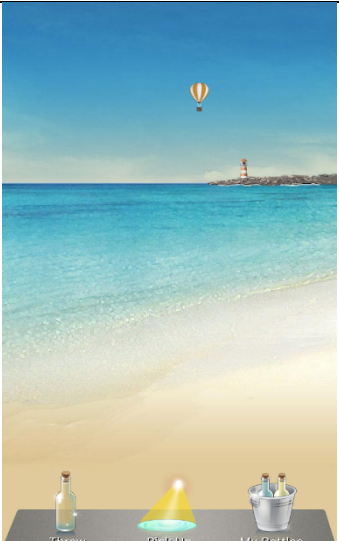
Table 3. WeChat Contact List and Connection Settings

Name	Contact List	WeChat Connection Settings
Visual Reference		
Features:	WeChat users can only access his/her own WeChat Contacts List.	By selecting one connection from the contact list, people can set it to starred: so as not to receive others' messages. Hide their Moments from them, or even block or delete them.

Making the friend contact list not public makes it inconvenient for people to connect with others with whom they have mutual friends, as people can only connect with others by searching their WeChat account name or scanning their WeChat quick response (QR) code. Other features on WeChat enable its users to communicate with strangers through: Shake, People Nearby, and Pick up a bottle.

Table 4. Connect with Strangers

Name	Messaging Chat List	Messaging Chat	Messaging Chat
Visual Reference			
Features:	By shaking the phone, a contact card of other WeChat users will appear who are also using the shake function on WeChat.	Search People Nearby: It shows WeChat users who use the same function, and limits to 20 miles from each other.	By clicking "throw a bottle" people can create a text message and throw out to the 'sea' By picking it up, a user can pick up strangers' bottle, check their messages, and then decide whether to reply or not.

1.7.3 The Debate about WeChat as a Social Networking Site

Ellison and boyd (2007, p. 2011) define social network sites (SNS) as

> "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site"

This definition of a social network site requires a public profile, articulating a list of connected users, and transverse connection within the system. Ellison and boyd (2007, p. 2011) note that they prefer to describe the concept of a social network site as opposed to asocial networking site" since 'networking' emphasises the initiation of relationships especially among strangers and that while it is technically possible for people, "it is not the primary practice on many of them", nor what makes the site different from other kinds of computer-mediated communication.

Based on Ellison and boyd's (2007) definition of SNS, some researchers argue that WeChat is not SNS, because it does not publicise lists of connections to others, nor enable people to view and traverse others' list of connections (Wei, Chen, and Bai., 2015). Meanwhile, interactions with others are only visible to mutual friends. For instance, if A and B are both C's friends on WeChat, while A and B are not friends, then if B likes or comments on C's posts, A would not see that. Therefore, instead of encouraging its users to connect with others through online social networking, researchers note that WeChat is a social media platform that is based on an individuals' offline ties (Wei, Chen, and Bai, 2015). However, I would like to argue that limited access features on WeChat might strengthen individuals' interactions with mutual friends although it eliminates their chances to extend their social networks with friends' social connections. Therefore, WeChat is the platform that enables people to sustain and enhance relationships with existing social ties.

In 2013, Ellison and boyd stated that technology development created new functions and access to SNSs, which also challenged their previous definition of SNSs. Therefore, by reflecting on the existing features change on SNSs, they redefine SNSs as:

> A social network site is a networked communication platform in which participants 1) have uniquely identifiable profiles that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; 2) can publicly articulate connections that can be viewed and traversed by others; and 3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with streams of user-generated content provided by their connections on the site (Ellison and boyd, 2013, p.157).

Compared with their previous definition from 2007, this description places more importance on networked communication, content generating and sharing, online connection public viewing and traversing, as well as information consuming, producing, and interacting among online connections. WeChat might not have these features as obvious as Facebook promotes, but these practices are possible on WeChat. For instance, a WeChat chat group creates publicity of its members among group members. Similar to a Facebook group, WeChat chat group is like online communities where users can consume, produce, and interact with content that is generated by other members. While different from a Facebook group, which only allows an individual to observe which connection is in the same group as them, WeChat group members can access the group member lists and connect with other members. Additionally, WeChat might not allow a user to share others' posts directly, but it does mimic Facebook for allowing individuals to follow the public account to receive information. WeChat users can also share public content on their WeChat Moments. Both individual, public, and commercial organisations can create a public account to attract followers, which eventually generates commercial value. Research data shows that there were over 12 million public accounts on WeChat by October 2016, which is 46.2% more than in 2015 (Xinhua Wang, 2017). Only 10% of these public accounts receive continues attention from their subscribers, and homogeneous content reduces their subscribers' interest (Xinhua Wang, 2017). Instead of making a further comparison between features on typical SNSs and WeChat, this research will explore Chinese young people's reflections on their own and others' social practices in both the online and offline environments.

1.8 Structure of the Thesis

By using multiple qualitative research methods, the researcher notes that Chinese adults have a complex attitude toward the traditional interaction concept of face. Their anxiety also appears when describing their social relationships and social network, especially migrant youth who want to work and live in large urban cities, e.g. Beijing. Chinese youths try to seek the balance between their inner self and social self by consciously adjusting their online practices. The inner self represents Chinese youths' desire to be individualistic and seek their personal identity, while the social self requires them to build effective social networks that can meet their expressive and instrumental needs. Young

participants' explanations about their online practices made this researcher notice that the rationale behind their online social practices is actually modified traditional social theories. Most importantly, this research sheds light on the online civility among young participants, they consciously manage their online practices as to advocate the state's call for being civil and positive in the online environment. The following chapters (2-4) include detailed explanations about the theoretical and methodological rationale for this study, then the rest of the chapters (5-9) present an in-depth discussion about the research findings and the conclusion of this work.

Chapter 2 contains a discussion of the academic literature on the concept of face and self-presentation, current online self-presentation studies, and a brief introduction about the modernisation and individualisation in contemporary China. The chapter starts with the distinction of *lian* and *mianzi* and develops an account of the relational character of the Chinese face concept. I then discuss the impact of modernisation and urbanisation in China has had on the Chinese people's cognition of self and social practices. To enrich the understanding of face, I then discuss Goffman's writings on facework and self-presentation, as well as the application of these theories in this computer-mediated communication (CMC) studies. The literature review process enabled the researcher to develop one objective of this study, which is to understand Chinese young people's social practices in both online and offline world, with a focus on their perception of traditional interaction terms.

Drawing on the relational character of the Chinese face concept, Chapter 3, which introduces social ties in Chinese culture, was inspired by Fei's (1948) work on the pattern of difference sequence. By reviewing Bourdieu's (1986) study on cultural and social capital, this chapter helps the researcher to establish the other objective of this study, which is to identify the strategies Chinese young people adopt in managing their social relationships with the use of WeChat.

Chapter 4 outlines the methodological framework and empirical methods used in this study. The chapter starts with reflections on previous research methods in the study of face and social media, followed by detailed explanation of the methodological framework of this study. The methods used were focus groups and in-depth face to face interviews as pilot studies which enabled the researcher to develop the research questions for this

study: what are Chinese young people's reflections on their social practices in contemporary Chinese social context? Two sub-research questions: 1) What are Chinese university students' perception of the traditional social interaction terms *lian* and *mianzi*, and how does this affects their social practices in both online and offline environments. 2) How do Chinese university students manage their mediated social relationships through the use of WeChat.

Chapter 5 presents an analysis of the Chinese face concept theme. This chapter includes participants' reflection on the face practices they have conducted or experienced in both online and non-mediated environments. Participants discussed the changing nature of face and its relation to the widespread use of social media. This chapter explains participants' complex feelings toward their own and others' face practices in both online and offline interactions, which ranges from traditions within the family and community to relationships with friends and online acquaintants.

Consequent to Chapter 5, Chapter 6 includes an in-depth discussion about independent Chinese young adults' mediated relationships with their smothering parents. Participants' awareness of traditional filial piety motivates them to create a virtual co-presence with parents who are geographically far away. Due to media literacy discrepancies, participants develop multiple online strategies to manage their mediated relationships with their parents, so to set parents' mind at ease.

Chapter 7 continues the analysis of social ties by examining weaker online social ties that participants have in their social life. Participants prefer creating reciprocal relationships with others, normally their peers, and often their classmates. Participants develop different online rituals to develop and sustain relationships with others, as well as tactics to manage relationships with close friends.

Chapter 8 discusses a theme that emerged during the data analysis process based on the term 'positive energy', which participants frequently mentioned. By reviewing existing literature about positive energy from both traditional Chinese philosophy to the Chinese government's recent policies about online civility, I developed the analysis in this chapter. It presents Chinese young participants' understanding of individuals' online practices from the perspective of the opposition between positive and negative energy, as

well as shed light on the State of China's role in changing online catchphrases into civil regulations to influence Chinese people's online practices.

At the end of the thesis is Chapter 9, the conclusion chapter. This chapter includes a summary of the key findings of this study, reflections on the contribution and limitation of this research, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2—Chinese Face Meets Online Self-Presentation

2.1 Introduction

My Ph.D. study began with the intention of understanding the online practices of young Chinese by exploring how private topics become public through online social interaction. During my reading, I came across Goffman's 1959 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which he adopted the ethnographic method to explore the metaphor of social interaction as dramatic performance. Two central ideas in the book appeared particularly relevant to understanding social interaction online: performance and impression management. In Goffman's idea of social interaction, I also saw drama parallels with the Chinese phrase '*ren sheng ru xi*' (life is like a drama). Goffman's work can be read, for example, as understanding people as cynical strategists for whom face-to-face interaction is akin to a game of mutual deceit (Manning, 1991). Yet, if the idea of social life as drama is applied to explain online relationships, then social media provides participants with new means of acting out their identities through online interaction, which more closely resembles a shared social practice rather than a managed and controlled presentation. The potential relevance of impression management came to my attention during an employment training workshop that trained participants to be aware of small gesture they made during job interviews. To me, Goffman's ideas appear to have strong face validity as a means of understanding online social interaction.

The direction of this research became clearer when I came across Goffman's (1967) work on facework. As I read Goffman's thoughtful paper on face, I was struck by the familiarity of the idea to that of face in Chinese culture and everyday life, in which face is understood through two concepts: *mianzi* and *lian* in Chinese. I was fascinated by the possible relation between these concepts, which are deeply embedded in Chinese culture and everyday life, and Goffman's ideas, and wondered how face may relate to online self-presentation and social interaction. Lin (1935) suggests that *mianzi*, destiny and favour are the three goddesses that control the lives of the Chinese and that *mianzi* is more powerful than the other two. Lu (1934) describes two kinds of *mianzi*: one relates to an

individual's social status, in that those with higher social status have more *mianzi*. The other *mianzi* is equivalent to *lian*, a baseline that must be maintained in social interaction. He further argues that, among the Chinese, the benefit of caring about *mianzi* is that it encourages *yuan ji huo fa* (a strategical way of living), which is flexible and governed by the sense of *bu yao lian* (shame) if face is lost.

Goffman (1967) understands face as the emotive representation of self that may result in negative feelings and damaged reputations if diminished. To ensure the interaction flow, Goffman (1967) suggests that a person has an ethical responsibility to maintain a definition of the situation as a common agreement on how to proceed and to prevent the other from losing face. Complementing Goffman's approach to face, Chinese studies focus on personal face and relational face and how these can be gained, sustained, diminished or lost.

There are differing accounts of the key characteristics of face in Chinese culture. For example, the moral and social character (Hu, 1944); reciprocity and relational character (Ho, 1976); social exchange character (Hwang, 2006). The focus on the definitions of face has changed over time, although there is consensus on certain aspects of face. Zhai (2011) notes that the Chinese give higher praise to those who are adept at socialising than to those who adhere to social norms, as the ability to socialise enables the development of wide social networks with associated favours and commitments. The favours granted are not necessarily based on the individual's moral character or social achievements, but rather on *renqing* (people's emotion), which is unpredictable and difficult to measure in empirical work, but which is critical in affecting people's lives. In this chapter, I focus on aspects of personal face such as the personal attributes or characteristics appreciated and valued in the individual's desired face and the face granted to them by others in social interactions. Chapter 3 discusses social connections and *renqing* in China in greater detail.

Self-presentation and impression management are inseparable from face and facework. From Goffman's (1959) perspective, the premise of social interaction is to define the situation, and then participants can act out their roles according to both personal expectations and that of others, adjusting personal practices according to the definition of the situation. Goffman states that after defining the situation, participants must then

become a certain kind of person. An individual has the responsibility of managing the impressions they make on others by controlling their expressions. However, the individual also feels that they have the moral right to demand others 'to value and treat him in the manner that persons of his kind have a right to expect' (Goffman, 1959, p. 24). Therefore, this situation-defining and definition-sustaining process involves both face-claiming and facework practices. Myers (2008, p. 71) explains self-presentation as 'our wanting to present the desired image both to an external audience (other people) and to an internal audience (ourselves), and we work at managing the impressions we create'.

Despite the close relationship between face and self-presentation, there is a lack of research exploring their interplay in online social interaction. Most research tends to focus on self-presentation rather than facework. Even in China, where face practice is ubiquitous, studies are limited to consumption and marketing research. Regarding online self-presentation, Goffman's work remains at the forefront. I would like to note the bias in applying research findings from one culture to all, and misinterpretation of Goffman's original work can create confusion for other researchers. For example, I find it puzzling that most researchers suggest that Goffman's study of self-presentation helps people present positive impressions to others. As Goffman (1959) did not make this statement nor link personal self-presentation to impression management, in fact, he is discussing team and teamwork while mentioning the term impression management. This research begins with two aims: to understand the online practices of young Chinese through the lens of the Chinese face concept and Goffman's study on self-presentation and facework.

2.2 The Chinese Face Concept

Xun Lu (1934) is well-known for his biting sarcasm on Chinese politics and Chinese characters in the 20th century. In his article '*Shuo "Mianzi"'* (talking about face), he notes that *mianzi* is used so frequently in everyday talk that it appears to be understood intuitively, and little time is spent thinking about its meaning. *Mianzi* is the *zhong guo jing shen gang ling* (guiding principle of the Chinese mind); although foreigners try to understand the term, they tend to underestimate its complexity (Lu, 1934). In the article, Lu provides an example of the ambiguous face practices of the Chinese.

He writes that in the Qing Dynasty, foreigners would approach the *zong li ya men* (the Foreign Ministry of Imperial China) to submit requests, and after resorting to threats of force, *Qing* officials became yes-men and complied immediately. However, when the officials saw these foreigners off, they would walk them through a side door rather than the main door to show them that they had no *mianzi*. With *mianzi*, the Chinese could remain in a position of advantage.

Lu (1934) suggests that Chinese people from different social statuses have a kind of *mianzi* or *lian*. Individuals lose *mianzi* or *lian* by conducting practices below the line, and gain *lian* and *mianzi* by conducting above-the-line practices. For example, in China, the side door and the back door are mainly used by subordinates. People who enter through the side door thereby signal their low social status relative to the home owner. Lu (1934) also notes that compared to those with low social status, people with high social status have more to lose. For example, the wealthy and educated man loses *lian/mianzi* by picking fights with others in public, while the poor and undereducated would not lose *lian* nor *mianzi* by doing so. Further, Hu (1944) notes it is accepted that the educated and those who hold a high rank in society have a higher sense of morality.

Lu (1934) once noted that caring about *mianzi* is good, but is concerned that having *mianzi* is understood as tact, skilful speech or repartee. Ironically, his concern that *mianzi* might be pursued through deceitful means or by taking advantage of one's social position while being ignorant of the importance of being morally upright appears to reflect the worries of the Chinese in contemporary times. Zhai (2013) notes that inequalities in social resources can force the discarding of either *lian* or *mianzi*, or even the use of both to improve one's social position. Another notable issue is the increasing importance placed on *mianzi*, as expressed through conspicuous consumption and extravagant achievements. For example, Li and Su (2007, p. 242) define face consumption as the "motivational process by which individuals try to enhance, maintain or save self-face, as well as show respect to others' face through the consumption of products". Siu, Kwan and Zeng (2016) also find that brand image and reputation are paramount in the face consumption of young Chinese people, as the youths tend to bestow social value on the brand that can enhance their social images and gain them social approval.

Face is a dynamic concept that is closely connected to context and the situations in which interaction takes place. The Chinese concept of face is akin to an intangible hand that controls the lives of the Chinese and is almost impossible to define (Lin, 1935). It 'is abstract and intangible, it is yet the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated' (Lin, 1935, p. 45). Instead of providing a precise definition of the Chinese concept of face, Chang (2008, p. 303) claims that the 'Chinese concept of face is a conceptualisation of a competent person in Chinese society'. Therefore, understanding the kind of person the Chinese value as competent may shed light on the meaning of having *lian* and *mianzi*.

In the following section, I discuss the Chinese concepts of *lian* and *mianzi*. In the discussion of *lian*, I focus on the overlap between *lian* and *mianzi* and how social changes affect understanding thereof. What emerges is that *lian* may not be a universal 'birth right', but the minimum standard by which individuals are judged as social beings. Complementing this, I relate face to the shame culture in China, discussing the link between *lian* and social sanctions, and claim that Chinese shame culture includes the emotional feeling of guilt, which creates a deterrent that encourages the development of internalised sanctions to avoid public ridicule. In the discussion of *mianzi*, I begin with hierarchical differences and relational self to argue that the *mianzi* an individual can claim depends greatly on their social position in certain contexts. Individuals can share the *mianzi* of others, and vice versa. This mutual sharing can occur with or without the individual's permission, while the ideal situation would be to create a reciprocal relationship with others. This allows an individual to claim more social resources from others and enhance their position in the community.

2.2.1 Understanding *Lian*

Hu (1944) analyses 25 Chinese phrases to argue that the concept of face involves two terms: *lian* and *mianzi*. She argues that 'face' in English can be translated to either *lian* or *mianzi* in Chinese, but that *lian* and *mianzi* have different meanings in Chinese. In the Chinese language, *mianzi* has a longer history than *lian*, and includes the symbolic meaning of the self in social interaction. *Mianzi* is closely related to social position and status. In contrast, *lian* originally developed from the northern Chinese dialects for

describing physical appearance. Over time, its meaning has been enriched to include the representation of face an individual must have and protect in social interactions. In Chinese, *lian* can represent the physical face, but most often it refers to 'a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalised sanction', the loss of which renders it impossible for an individual to function well in the community (Hu, 1944, p. 62).

The most notable discussion is whether *lian* is an ascribed characteristic of an individual. Hu (1944) considers *lian* an individual's birth right that everyone within the community can claim for themselves, as an assumption of having an honest and decent face. By supporting the notion of *lian* as a birth right (Hu, 1944), Ho (1976) argues that all individuals can claim the same amount of *lian*, and only lose it when their conduct is immoral and unacceptable in the community. Ho (1994) updates his statement on *lian* by considering it from the humankind perspective, considering contexts or certain cultures in which the potential for individuality is missing or severely constrained. For example, slaves or concentration camp inmates are treated as numbers rather than humans. Their individual identity is reduced to the identity of the collective, and their views or thoughts are ignored, which turns them into objects or tools to be managed and manipulated. Therefore, Ho (1994) suggests that describing people as being without *lian* does not always reflect their being immoral or ethically flawed, but could also indicate the lack of humanity and civil rights in their context. Earley (1997) argues that even if one cultural group is considered inferior to another, this does not prevent *lian* from being an individual's birth right, affirmed through moral acts.

In fact, the human perspective of *lian* that Ho (1994) and Earley (1997) note reflects the individual's social characteristics and the overlapping of *lian* and *mianzi*. Hu (1944) also mentions humanity or personhood in her work and considers the loss of *lian* as equivalent to *diu ren* (loss of person/personhood/humanity). By adopting *diu ren*, Hu (1944) attempts to highlight the importance of moral character for the individual, the loss of which can result in them lacking personhood and being unable to function well in the community. Fei (1938) notes that, compared to industrial and nomadic life that moves with seasonal changes and market needs, respectively, Chinese culture stems from agriculture. Agricultural communities value the occupation of land and a settled life. The traditional patriarchal clan also enhances the belief that the individual must stay within the clan to develop their identity and sense of self. This belief still influences Chinese

rural residents, as people who value face may commit suicide when they become aware that their moral face is lost (Wu, 2009). Returning to *diu ren*, Wu (2009, p. 121) states that '"loss of personhood" often refers to both. Loss of personhood is sometimes equivalent to the loss of the minimum requirement for being a normal and a moral person; and it can also be like the loss of image of one's social role'. For example, students may feel *diu ren* for being unable to answer a teacher's questions in class.

The feeling of *diu ren* relates to the emotional character of face. There are two types of rules in traditional Chinese culture: one refers to morality and law and the other to the rules that govern individuals' interaction practices, such as politeness and etiquette (Goffman, 1983). Referring to the interaction ritual, Goffman (1967) discusses the feeling of embarrassment when an individual experiences loss of face or being out of face. In China, shaming or guilting a person is a form of punishment for being morally faulty and breaking the law. For example, *chi ru xing* (humiliation punishment) was an ancient Chinese punishment that involved writing or tattooing characters on a convict's face, cutting their hair, or removing a man's beard (hair represents an individual's life; the beard represents masculinity). The individual was then made to walk through the city wearing a yoke on which their name and crime were carved (Wei, 2007). These punishments were used to punish royalty or government officers who committed a transgression, with the aim of publicly ridiculing the individual so that they would feel shame and reflect on their actions (Wei, 2007). The shame culture in China aims to develop the individual's self-consciousness, using the experience of shame, guilt, humiliation and even shyness to encourage self-sanctioning and avoid further public ridicule (Zhai, 2016).

2.2.2 The Understanding of *Mianzi*

Hwang and Han (2012) suggest that *lian* is akin to personality and that *mianzi* is akin to the title of an individual, in that one can only have one personality but may possess different titles. Hu (1944, p. 45) defines *mianzi* as '(the) reputation that achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation'. To distinguish it from *lian*, which Hu (1944) considers a birth right, she describes *mianzi* is a kind of 'prestige that is accumulated by means of personal effort or clever manoeuvring'. Therefore, one who

wishes to have *mianzi* must participate in social interaction and receive recognition from others. The reason prestige is emphasised is to suggest that an individual's achievements should be sufficiently significant to distinguish them from others in the same community, as only in this way will others recognise the individual's achievements and consider them as having *mianzi* (Zhai, 2005).

Hu (1944) uses the example of a peasant and a landowner to suggest that a peasant has *lian* but not *mianzi*, as the peasant social achievement is insignificant compared to others in the same community. However, if the peasant becomes a landowner and possesses sizeable land and wealth, then the villagers would consider him as having *mianzi* and being successful. Compared to peasants, landowners possess more material and social resources and therefore are in a position to exchange resources and favours with others. Hu (1944) also discusses an exception: individuals who may not have resources but are still respected and admired in their community, such as scholars, who expend effort and time learning and exploring matters unfamiliar to others. Scholars can live in poverty but are still respected because they have abilities that others do not, and they gained these skills through personal effort. These face-related examples by Hu (1944) may appear dated, but I believe that even if social roles have changed considerably, there remains a kernel of truth in the idea and that social face remains. For example, the passion for occupying social resources and positions of prestige, the importance placed on education, and the need to participate in interpersonal interaction remain essential features of everyday life in modern China.

2.2.2.1 *Mianzi* in Interpersonal Interaction

In discussing interpersonal interaction and *mianzi*, I would like to begin with the sense of belonging or the need thereof. Hu (1994) suggests that to have *lian*, an individual must be accepted by their community. Individuals occupy a place in the community by being members of that community and by following the appropriate social rules and norms. However, merely having a place in a community is insufficient to feel a sense of achievement, which often requires interaction with others and participation in social exchanges to gain a social position in the community.

In traditional Chinese culture, it is impossible for individuals to talk about themselves without mentioning their family and the places from which they come. Even in contemporary China, strangers begin conversations by asking where their *lao jia* (hometown) is, as it is believed that a person's hometown provides the best explanation of their character and capabilities. For example, in ancient China, people with distinguished ancestry tended to be respected, as it was believed that individuals from good stock had a high consciousness of *lian*, which meant they had good moral character. In addition, people from such families tended to have greater resources than ordinary people, providing them a greater chance to participate in social exchanges and build a wider reciprocal social network. These traditional notions of ancestry no longer have as much influence since the Chinese revolution, although belief in family and its central role in enhancing *mianzi* remains as a remnant of this past.

The traditional proverb *fu chao wu wan luan*[22] (no egg stays unbroken when the nest is overturned/no one escapes unscathed when disaster happens) is the best example for explaining the relationship between individuals and their families.[23] Consequently, the Chinese are willing to work to enhance their family's *mianzi* as a means of securing their personal position. The question of the detraditionalisation (Yan, 2010) of Chinese society and of how much influence traditional beliefs retain, especially for young Chinese who leave their hometowns for the cities, as played out in their online social relationships, is one of the key questions addressed in this thesis.

Ho (1976) develops the idea of face as relational self–reflecting reciprocal social relationships. Ho (1976) argues that relational self describes how face can be enhanced or lost through the practices of others via direct or indirect association. For example, one can lose face because of misconduct by relatives or when relatives are not treated according to an individual's expectations. The proverb *da gou kan zhu ren* (check who the owner is before you beat the dog) suggests that an individual's social relations should be considered before they are criticised or sanctioned, and individuals may also be judged based on their social connections. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, *mianzi* is a resource

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[22] Liu, Yi Qing (403-444), South Song Dynasty, *Shi Shuo Xin Yu·Yan Yu*.
[23] Cao, Xue Qin. Qing Dynasty, *Hong Lou Meng* (Dream of the Red Chamber).

embedded in social networks that enables people to benefit from it by connecting them with others with this resource.

People frequently have the option of deciding with whom they want to develop reciprocal relationships, while also being in the passive position of deciding who can benefit from their *mianzi*. For example, Mo Yan, the first Chinese to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, was not very well known in China before his win, but as soon as it was announced, the government in his hometown refurbished his parents' house, in which they had lived for almost 50 years, invited his uncle, a peasant, to speak with journalists, and the villagers were proud to say that they came from the same village as Mo Yan.[24] No one sought Mo Yan's permission to share his *mianzi* and to develop the city into a tourist destination by capitalising on his name. Instead of feeling offended, the Chinese are passionate about gaining *mianzi* so others with whom they are connected can benefit from it. The individual receives compliments, appreciation and positive evaluation from others, which can enhance their self-esteem and reputation and eventually enhance their *mianzi* (Zhai, 2005). Ho (1976, p. 883) defines face as:

> … the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself/herself from others, by virtue of the relative position he/she occupies in his/her social network and the degree to which he/she is judged to have functioned adequately in that position as well as acceptability in his/her general conduct… Face is the reciprocated compliance, respect, and/or deference that each party expects from, and extends to, the other party.

This definition indicates that face is a dynamic and contextual based social term rather than a fixed standard. It also reflects that there is a need for reciprocity, respect and deference in social interactions. While Zhu (2005) notes that *mianzi* is the result of a hierarchal society, in which there is clear social distinction between different social groups. Differences in hierarchy mean that those who are low on the hierarchy may be

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[24] BBC China (2012). *Ying Mei: Mo Yan Jia Xiang bo Ju Kuan Jian Lv You Qu* (in Chinese). Available at: http://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese_news/2012/10/121019_press_moyan.shtml (Accessed: 23rd Jan. 2016).

despised, and those from an 'inferior' class may receive less respect and might not care about their face in social interactions. Also, there might be indifferent to the face of an individual with a low position in the social network, which reinforces inequality and unfairness in a society. Those in higher positions set more rules and develop more norms in support of their *mianzi*, while those in relatively low social positions must sacrifice their needs to meet the expectations of others, exchanging social resources and making a living.

2.2.2.2 Modernisation and Individualisation in China—Contemporary Discussions of *Mianzi* and *Lian*

Miller et al. (2016, p.9) state that people once lived in communities that were underpinned by the intensive relations in the system of kinships, while the implementation of "capitalism, industrialism, and urbanisation" resulted in the decline of these social forces. Similarly, Hwang (2008) states that the rapid modernisation and urbanisation in China led to widespread social mobility, with people from rural areas and subordinate cities frequently migrating to large urban cities. The high mobility and large floating population in China forms a kind of modern social group in which people are connected by loose impersonal links (Hwang, 2008). Furthermore, Miller et al. (2016) suggest that the decline of traditional social forces promote the development of autonomy and individualism among people on the one hand, and led to loneliness, isolation and social fragmentation on the other hand. Yan (2003) supports this argument, suggesting that the socialist state-guided reform and urbanisation make youths become uncivil, who are keen to pursue individualism and autonomy while ignoring their personal obligations and responsibilities towards the communities and others. As the social interaction terms were based on traditional Chinese agrarian communities and the character of the communities and the social context changed, it is worth exploring the new meanings that people attach to the social interaction terms. Before continuing to examine the contemporary discussion on the *mianzi* and *lian* in the contemporary Chinese context, it is essential to discuss the modernisation and individualisation in Chinese context, as it is vital for people to be aware of the multidimensional character of modernity and individualisation (Beck, Beck-Grensheim, 2010).

As Beck and Beck-Grensheim (2010, p.xv) state, Europeans tend to see themselves as the centre of the innovation regarding individualisation and see it as the European path to individualisation as the universal path. This narrow-sighted perception of individualisation has been annulled in the second modernity discourse, as compared to the emphasis on superiority of European in the first modernity, the second modernity encouraged regions in the global world to interconnect, cooperate and communicate (Beck and Beck-Grensheim, 2010, p.xv). Therefore, it is crucial for people to understand that not all the nations share the same institutional form, have the same biographical pattern or are facing the same contradictions and conflicts (Beck and Beck-Grensheim, 2010). By comparing the nations from three perspectives, "economic production and reproduction (capitalism), the nature of political authority, and sociocultural integration (individualisation, cosmopolitanisation and religion)", Beck and Beck-Grensheim (2010, p.xvi) suggest that there are four types of modernity: European, US American, Chinese, and Islamic. Among them, they define Chinese modernity as "state-regulated capitalism; post-traditional authoritarian government; truncated institutionalized individualization and plural-religious society" (Beck and Beck-Grensheim, 2010, p.xvi). Researchers such as Yan (2003; 2010) also emphasise the Chinese state, especially the government's role in developing the Chinese characterised modernisation, most importantly in the name of social communism rather than capitalism.

Referring to the existing research on the discussion of the modernisation and individualisation phrases in China (Yan, 2010; Lu, 2014), I prefer discussing the modernisation and individualisation in China in three phrases. The first phase is from the first Opium War (1839–1842) to the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949), the second phase is Maoist socialism during the period 1949–1976, and the third phase is from the reform and opening up of China (1979) to the present.

There are two phases in the modern Chinese history (1840–1949) that are worth mentioning. The first phase is from the First Opium War (1839–1842) to the end of the Qing empire (1919), and the second is from the Revolution of 1911 to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (1949) (Lu, 2014). The Qing bureaucrats suggested that there was a need to learn the modern technology from Western European countries to prevent their invasions into Chinese territory. The Chinese intellectuals led the Revolution of 1911 and the May Fourth Movement in 1919. The Revolution overthrew

the Qing imperial dynasty and the May Fourth Movement emphasised the importance of science and democracy (Lu, 2014). These two phases are also the period when the Chinese people suffered a series of wars, from the invasion of Western European countries during the first (1839–1842) and second (1850–1860) Opium Wars to the conflict with Japan during World War II (1938-1945) and the second civil war between the Nationalist Party and Communist Party during the period 1945–1949. Chinese people experienced tremendous social, political and economic changes during this period, while it was also the starting point of the modernisation of China under the influence of Western European countries. Ssu-yu and Fairbank (1954) even claim that the modernity of China is the response to the impact of the West. However, they ignore the fact that the modernity of one nation can also happen internally, and the external impact can happen in a more civilised way rather than through an invasion. Chinese people frequently refer to the Chinese modern history as the humiliation history, which indicates that modernisation is key in protecting its land from being invaded by other imperial nations. Moreover, this period of history is frequently described by the Chinese state as the fundamental reason for promoting nationalism and patriotic education among its people, as well as initial reasons to march toward modernity, so to gain more rights to speak in international affairs and prevent the impact of external aggressive power.

If the modernisation in the first phase is the result of internal movements and external power enforcement, the modernisation from the founding of the People's Republic of China (1949) to the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of China (1966–1976) was under the strict instructions of the Leninist Chinese Communist Party with the application of Communist ideology (Yan, 2010). The land reform and the collectivisation campaign in the 1950s ended the family ownership of the land and encouraged young people to opposite the traditional feudal ideology, for instance, the feudal patriarchal power. Meanwhile, the Chinese state highly emphasised individuals' role in the collective community and suggested that people should contribute to the benefit of the collective community rather than individual families (Yan, 2010). Most importantly, the planned economy, household registration system and classification of people according to their political classes dramatically changed the social structures in China. For instance, as mentioned earlier, people valued the wealth and education level of the individual and consider them as having mianzi (Lu, 1934; Hu, 1944), whereas wealthy and educated individuals were frequently labeled as capitalists and feudalism ideology spreaders and

discriminated against and oppressed (Yan, 2010). Furthermore, in the household registration system, everyone was assigned either an agricultural or a non-agricultural hukou based on his/her mother's registration status (Han, Huang, and Han, 2011), which initially created two classes of citizenship (Chan, 2010; Han, Huang, and Han, 2011). People who held rural agricultural hukou were normally considered as peasants, who are supposed to stay in the countryside to provide the surplus to the urban citizens and enjoyed far few social welfare benefits than urban people with non-agricultural houku, such as medical insurance, pensions and education opportunities for their children (Chan, 2010).

As Yan (2010) notes, various practices in Maoist socialism disembed, detraditionalised, and re-embed individual from traditional individual-family (ancestor) social relations to be part of the party-state, whereas, it does liberate youth and women from living in the shadow of their ancestors and have the chance to challenge the patriarchal power. Therefore, Yan (2010, p.494) notes, individualization is merely a discourse among intellectual elites before 1949, it is only in the Maoist era that actual social structure changes and impact individuals' life, which makes it the first stage in the "Chinese path to individualization". Similarly, Lu (2014, p. 154) state even some radical movements in this period caused great social suffering among the Chinese people, while "free of women from patriarchal control has given China advantages over some other developing countries, such as India and Indonesia."

As a reflective correction on the radical mistakes in the Maoist era, the new party leader Deng Xiao Ping (1904-1997) suggests moving away from Maoist path to modernity, instead to carry out reform and opening up Chinese market to foreigner investment, import new technologies, establish special economic zones, and advocate people to start private business (Yan, 2010; Lu, 2014). The success of private business disintegrates collective institutions, especially the state-owned factories. Meanwhile, the household registration system that once aimed to limited peasants' movement toward the urban areas, has shifted to encouraging rural peasants to work in the foreigner and private factories in the urban cities. The private sectors and labour market disembed individuals from traditional social communities by treating them with work opportunities. While as Beck and Beck-Grensheim (2010) suggest the sound welfare service and democracy are the basis of individualisation and modernisation in European countries. Whereas, in

China, this is not the case, as most of the times individuals need to take full responsibility to ensure their living in the social groups. Meanwhile, the State party still advocate individuals' obligations toward the nation. Yan (2003, 2010) notes, Chinese youths are being selfish and proud and there is the increasing number of immoral cases happens in China. For instance, people who extort others who have helped them. He does not consider this phenomenon suggest the moral crisis in China, instead, he considers it as normal for developing countries at the transformation stage to modernity. In fact, the researcher is considering whether this is the impact of detraditionalization in the second phase of modernity in China, and the Chinese state's passion in requiring its people to contribute to the benefit of the collectivism and nation without providing sound welfare services. As Giddens (1994, p. 91) states "modernity destroys tradition", while the "collaboration between modernity and tradition was crucial to be the earlier phases of modern social development". Hence, this research is taking the path to explore Chinese young people's perception of traditional social interaction terms, so to understand their attitude toward the modernisation and individualisation in contemporary China.

Hwang's 1987 work on face, favour and power games compares face practices in social interaction as social exchange. This social exchange is based on reciprocity rather than equality, and the aim of face practices is long-term social relationship development rather than the one-time benefit. Based on an analysis of the functional differences in social relations, Hwang (1987) suggests that there are three kinds of ties among the Chinese: expressive, instrumental and mixed. Therefore, when an individual decides whether to give face to others, they judge the type of relationship they have with that person and then evaluate whether that person has the capability to return the face desired. Zhai (2005) explains this as the psychological position that individuals present to others. Hwang (1987) suggests that only when an individual develops a relationship with those who have the resources does the individual have the chance to receive resources and gain capital in the power game. Therefore, individuals can claim mianzi simply by occupying a high psychological position in the minds of others.

Impression management is used to win the psychological position of others in the same community. The image the individual presents becomes their lian, and the psychological position they occupy in the minds of others becomes their mianzi (Zhai, 2005). Lian is the basis for an individual to achieve mianzi, and the mianzi the individual has determined

the likelihood that others will want to interact with them and exchange resources. Zhai (2013) suggests that in contemporary China, being a competent person means being good at developing social networks. For example, an individual who builds a relationship with people with resources can then share their mianzi, which can be more effective and sufficient than what the individual could have achieved through personal effort. The potential benefits of expanding one's social networks and enhancing mianzi jeopardise people's consciously of self-cultivation and personal development, which Zhai (2013) notes the Chinese are increasingly becoming individuals with mianzi but not lian. In this study, I am interested in exploring the importance that the Chinese attach to lian and mianzi under social transformation in China.

Jiang (2006) studied face and consumption in rural China and suggests that the Chinese value mianzi as a symbol of success. Material goods are objects to which the Chinese have growing access, and they increasingly value ostentation as a mark of success and prestige in society. Zhang and Kim (2013) conducted a survey among Chinese consumers and found that women have higher brand consciousness than men, preferring luxury and expensive international brands and regarding these as symbols of success, prestige, status and prosperity. Research also indicates that the Chinese can be thrifty in private but spend lavishly in public, so to gain face (Lin, Xi, Lueptow, 2013). Accompany with the Chinese's ostentatious consumption is the increasing importance they place on individuals' physical appearance.

2.2.2.3 The Link Between *Mianzi* and Physical Appearance

Earley (1997) discusses the way in which possessing culturally endorsed physical attributes allows a person to feel that they have *mianzi*. A beautiful appearance and objects possessed can make an individual feel that they have *mianzi*. In China, the rising *wang hong* beauty also reflects culturally endorsed beauty standards. A beautiful physical appearance is important for the net celebrity of Chinese women, especially those involved in online broadcasting and product promotion for online stores. The *wang hong* face known as *wang hong lian* (net celebrity face) suggests the face "to be heavily mediated: made-up, photoshopped, and rebuilt through surgery", which share high physical

similarities such as, large round eyes, a V-shaped face, high nose bridge and fair skin[25] (Nguyen, 2018). Women has *wanghong* face capitalise on their physical attributes to interact with consumers on social media and generate profits. Therefore, physical beauty becomes a resource from which women can profit. This thesis presents Chinese young adults' reactions toward this trend and their perception of the relations between physical attributes and face.

In addition to physical attributes, there are subtler individual attributes and ascribed roles that can enable an individual to have *mianzi* (Earley, 1997). For example, people from high-ranking universities may feel that they have more *mianzi* than those from low-ranking universities. Similarly, people in certain professions may feel that they have more *mianzi* than those in other professions. For example, the Chinese who work in government offices would consider migrant workers who work in the construction field as low-level workers and feel that they have more *mianzi* than them. However, the notion of Earley (1997), i.e. positive personal characteristics allow individuals to claim *mianzi*, can also be a trick of 'acting beautifully' (Chang and Holt, 1997). For example, people who do not have all these characteristics may be seen to act in a calculated manner to give others the impression that they do possess these characteristics.

Chang and Holt (1997, p. 70–71) propose similar arguments by suggesting three ways by which an individual can have *mianzi.* These include being part of an organisation through physical attributes and characteristics and by acting well in front of others. I believe that claiming *mianzi* through physical attributes and characteristics is similar to the notion of physical characteristics by Earley (1997). The suggestion of presenting a stylised version of oneself in an organisation and acting well in front of others is reminiscent of Goffman's work on facework and self-presentation. In addition to the discussion by Chang and Holt (1997) on acting well, numerous researchers suggest that social media provides individuals with a platform to strategically manage their online impressions (Mango et al., 2008) and present a virtual self (Kultan and Schmidt, 2012) to encourage self-expression and self-promotion (Dijck, 2013) and to develop or sustain a relationship (DeAndrea and Walther, 2011). The present research aims to examine the online practices

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[25] Nguyen, D. (2018) *Opinion: Beauty Codes Are Changing as China Embraces "Noble Face",* Consumer, 9 April, Available at: https://jingdaily.com/beauty-codes-noble-face/ (Accessed on 23rd May. 2018).

of young Chinese through the lens of their perception of the Chinese concept of face. This will be done by exploring their understanding of *lian* and *mianzi* to understand their online practices. As the face-related examples by Hu (1944) reflect social lives and contexts in the 1940s or earlier, this work provides evidence of people's reflections on their social practices through the use of social media and the broader challenges of living in contemporary China. As Goffman's work provides inspirational ideas in relation to this topic, following sections include existing studies on facework and online self-presentation.

2.3 Face in Western European Countries

Goffman (1967, p. 5) suggests that face is "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact". Here, face combines both a claim by the person seeking the face and the support or recognition of others (Goffman, 1967). Deutsch (1961, p. 897) suggests that "face is one of an individual's most sacred possessions". Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2015, p. 77) also state that every modern person is a 'sacred object' with 'sacred characters' that must be 'protected, affirmed, and maintained'. Therefore, as part of the everyday social interaction practices, facework must be adopted to construct and define the faces of an individual and others in social interaction.

Goffman (1967, p. 95) considers facework a ritual in mundane everyday social interaction, which he contrasts with "ceremonial agendas involving long strings of obligatory rites". Ritual is the microscopic celebration of the commonalities of people in everyday life, continuously producing social orders and structures to regulate social interaction in modern society (Goffman, 1967). He further explains facework as an interaction ritual:

> I use the term ritual because I am dealing with acts through whose symbolic component the actor shows how worthy he is of respect or how worthy he feels others are of it… One's face, then, is a sacred thing, and the expressive order required to sustain it is, therefore, a ritual on (Goffman, 1967, p. 19).

Goffman (1967) notes that facework is the condition rather than the objective of interaction; he even describes facework using a traffic rules analogy, in which rules must be understood and obeyed in order to maintain traffic flow rather than determining the direction of traffic. Jacobsen and Kristiansen (2015) claim that the goal of interaction rituals is to mutually protect or save face in social interaction, as the obligatory rites in rituals establish the moral standards and etiquette for interaction. For example, mutual respect must be shown in social interactions, and social etiquette protects against conflict. This prevents an individual from placing themselves in the wrong position and feeling embarrassed, even when others do not treat them in the manner they expect. Social interaction is a form of social practice, and the skills of facework must be developed (Goffman, 1967). Recognition and acceptance by others is needed to claim face, and the individual must perform to meet the expectations of others to maintain personal face; thus, individuals must comport themselves in the appropriate manner to indicate that they are worthy of receiving the recognition and respect of others and that they respect the face of others (Jacobsen and Kristiansen, 2015). Furthermore, the individual must strategically adjust their practices to protect both their own face and that of others whenever there are potential face-threatening acts (FTA).

Inspired by Goffman's work, Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that politeness is an effective strategy for eliminating potential FTA in social interaction. They define face as "something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p. 61). They distinguish between positive and negative face: 'positive face' refers to self-esteem, the desire to have a positive self-image and to be liked and respected; 'negative face' refers to the desire to act freely without restriction from others. Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 83) further claim that their theory is the universal principle of politeness and that the practice of these principles "differs systematically across cultures, and within cultures across subcultures, categories and groups". Although Brown and Levinson's (1987) work reflects Goffman's work regarding face as social etiquette; while ignore the profound ways of practicing face in different cultural contexts, and the notion that the value attached to face is more than merely being polite to others.

Compared with Goffman's work, Brown and Levinson's definition of face is more self-centred; they ignore the social feature of face. Goffman (1967, p. 42) has an idea of shared

face: 'In many relationships, the members come to share a face, so that in the presence of third parties an improper act on the part of one member becomes a source of acute embarrassment to the other members'. Spencer-Oatey (2007) compares the definition of identity with face and suggests that although both face and identity relate to self-image and the social attributes of identity, while face mainly reflects the positive attributes that individuals wish to claim for themselves. Face is part of the practice of dyadic or multi-participant interaction, while identity is an individual phenomenon (Arundale, 2005). For instance, face sensitivities emerge when there is discrepancy between an individual's expectations and the reactions of others towards them in situational encounters (Spencer-Oatey, 2007). Correspondingly, an individual has both personal and social identity, the former derives from an individual's self-cognition, while the latter is the self-concept that he/she derives from his/her knowledge of his/her membership in a social group and the emotional significance he/she attaches to this membership. While face has the relational character, as it can belong to individual and to collectives, and yet it also applies to interpersonal relations (Spencer-Oatey, 2007).

Chang and Holt (1994, p. 126) argue that the "Western understanding of facework is very much influenced by the idea of impression management, reflecting the dominant individualistic characteristics of Western cultures". This is a contrast with the Chinese conception of *Mianzi*, which places more emphasis on the nature of interpersonal relationship. Therefore, compared to the Chinese concept of face, the Western concept is more self-directed and individualistic; concurrently, it is more rational, and people give each other face through the information they have about others and the role they play in social interaction (Chang, 2008). Gao (2011) criticises Hu (1944) for ignoring the context and effect of the situation on the idea of face that the Chinese have. He praises the term 'facework' proposed by Goffman (1967) as a 'subtle style' of social interaction that exists in every culture to maintain poise, avoid embarrassment and maintain an impression of self-respect, which refers to "the strategies, social manoeuvres, and/or coping mechanism an actor/actress employs in face dynamics" (Ho, 1994, p. 2). This relates to Brown and Levinson's (1987, p. 57) argument that the "culturally specific usage" of face varies while the underlying principles are the same. The different notions of personhood and the concept of face are practiced through interpersonal communication in different cultures. Nonetheless, this research is not a cultural comparative study, instead, it focuses on capturing Chinese young adults' reflections on their interpersonal communication by

taking face and use of social media into consideration. Goffman's study of self-presentation and impression management combines the Western and Eastern concepts of face to examine both the strategic and relational aspects of identity as realised through social interaction.

2.4 Goffman's Self-presentation and Impression Management

The social machinations of a society are reflected in the social interaction among small groups (Goffman, 1959). The culture of a society can be observed by observing the dynamics of interaction practices, such as the courtesies used to greet, interact and part ways. Every gesture made during social interaction contains cues for understanding for the other participants, and these cues also become information for researchers to understand a culture, its values and even its beliefs (Ling, 2008). Conducting ethnography research on a Scottish island, Goffman (1959) observed social interaction practices in daily life, focusing on co-presence, conscious and unconscious interactions and the information exchanged (Solomon et al., 2013).

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman (1959) adopts a dramaturgical approach to explain social interaction. He begins with an individual who enters the presence of others. In this instance, people will not begin interacting directly, but will observe and evaluate the information the person gives and gives off. Goffman (1959) states that through a subtle social exchange, people define the situation they are in, allowing others to know what is expected from them, what they can expect from others and to mutually adjust actions through social interaction. During interaction, an individual uses previous experience and observations to infer a stereotypical impression of a person, which can then be moderated in line with the individual's conduct. Goffman (1959) believes that when people present themselves to others, they have an interest in maintaining the interaction and controlling the response of others. Consequently, people express themselves to present an impression to others whilst also adapting to the identity needs of the others.

Goffman's writing on the presentation of self closely relates to the study of symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1962). Symbolic Interactionism is a sociological perspective that

emphasises the importance of interpersonal interactions. Symbols are used in communication to enable interaction, and the self is constituted through communication and interaction (Blumer, 1962). Blumer supports Mead's (1934) argument that symbols can be language, gestures and expressions. However, in contrast to Mead's interpretation that interaction is a symbol-giving and symbol-receiving process, Blumer argues that the flow of interaction involves dynamic production and reception in a dynamic reciprocal interaction. Goffman (1959, p. 8) defines social interaction as the "reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence".

Goffman (1959) understands that the self is not an essence, but something constructed in and through everyday social interaction as participants in social encounters present their selves to each other. This notion is greatly influenced by Mead's (1934) writings on the self, in which he states that the self is the combination of 'me' and 'I' in social interaction, or the social self and ego self. 'Me' represents the self that the individual forms through interaction with others, interpreting the symbols involved in social interaction. 'I' represents the ego self that reflects the individual's perception of self and the self they would like to be. Goffman (1953) states that Mead's study suggests that we pursue our actions in social interaction by considering the evaluations and actions of others.

Myers (2008) expands on Goffman's ideas and argues that an individual adjusts their performance in relation to their perception of others' impression of them. If an individual's performance is sufficiently sincere or accurate, the people with whom they interact will believe the image presented. If others respond in the expected manner, a person may come to believe that they are what they have presented to others. Goffman (1959) cites the example of a restaurant owner with working-class origins but who takes on middle-class mores in the restaurant and comes to think of themselves as middle-class. Positive affirmation by others of an individual's performance constructs that individual's self-perception. Two processes occur concurrently in face-to-face interaction and impression management. The individual collects information through observing and interacting with others to define the situation in order to predict what others expect from them. Concurrently, the individual will give and give off information to others to manage the impression they wish to leave on others as well as express what they expect from others, i.e. impression management.

In real-life contexts, the material setting of the scene for interaction is important. For example, Goffman notes that hotel décor and an individual's clothing and deportment create a 'personal front' that complements information exchanged in social interaction. The front is an essential element in the dramaturgical metaphor of Goffman (1959, p. 22), which he defines as "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance". He further defines personal front as "intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes" and suggests that appearance and manners are two elements of the personal front (Goffman, 1959, p. 34). Giddens (1987, p. 117) adopts a body idiom to explain the non-verbal cues in social interaction, and explains,

> The body is not simply an 'adjunct' to communication in situations of
> co-presence; it is the anchor of the communicative skills which can be
> transferred to disembodied types of messages.

If the setting provides the scene of interaction, the appearance and manner of the participants construct their character. Successful self-presentation practices must create consistency among setting, appearance and manner, as contradiction between them can expose inconsistencies in self-presentation (Solomon, et al., 2013).

There have been several criticisms of Goffman's work on the presentation of self and social interaction. Manning (1991) argues that practices of self-presentation reflect the idea that people are strategic or cynical actors hiding behind masks and seeking to manipulate their impressions on others to pursue personal gain. Raffel (2013) also criticises Goffman for ignoring individuals' moral character by describing them as performing strategically in social interaction. Garfinkel (1976) states that impression management is not as important as Goffman claims, as not everyone cares what others think about them or always performs to create a positive self-image. It is true that Goffman was fascinated by the strategic, manipulative and cynical side of self-presentation. For example, his work on teamwork (1959) includes the example of sales people in a store, who cooperate as a team to persuade customers to buy their products. Further, in his work on facework (1967), he describes the manner in which people have

a perfunctory attitude towards others in social interaction, especially when the individual wants to hide their actual evaluation of others. However, Goffman's work also reflects the positive and sincere side of social interaction. For example, team members work together to achieve the team's aims and ambitions, and team members must trust each other and demonstrate their sincerity towards their team. Similarly, for people who lack confidence and seek the validation of others, lip service or compliments may help them develop a positive self-image and enhance their self-confidence. Goffman's work indicates the confrontation between cynicism and trust, which was present in his Ph.D. thesis (Manning, 1991). Goffman describes self-presentation as "a natural aspect of human relationships that in many ways can make interactions flow more smoothly and enable individuals to meet their personal and professional goals" (cited from Ellison, 2013, p. 4). Therefore, this study presents discussions on Chinese young adults' perception and reflections on their sense of self and how they present it through interacting with others on social media platform.

2.5 Online Self-presentation

In his work on self-presentation, Goffman (1959) suggests that performers have some control over the expressions they present to the audience. He argues that audiences construct impressions of performers through the verbal and physical cues they receive or notice during the interaction, and provide a corresponding reaction according to the performers' expectations. The difference between a play in a professional theatre and Goffman's account of everyday social life as drama is that in a theatre, interaction between the audience and the performer is not always necessary. However, in face-to-face interaction, people must not only remember what they want others to know, but also respond to what others want to know. Therefore, both parties have a responsibility to protect each other's face, maintain the definition of the situation and ensure that the interaction proceeds smoothly.

In his study of face-to-face interaction, Goffman (1959, p. 15) emphasises physical co-presence and suggests the presence of 'reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence'. However, he also provides examples to suggest that the co-presence of people in social interaction is not

equivalent to face-to-face interaction. For example, for people who work in the radio broadcasting and television industry, their momentary presentation may have a profound influence on the audience's impression of them, thus they will work hard to establish a relationship with their audience (Goffman, 1981). Similarly, the development of social media provides a platform for self-representation; without the need for intermediaries, people can 'represent themselves' online and participate in social interaction (Thumim, 2012).

Initially, in the study of online self-presentation, it appears that the defining features of online environment is the high degree of control. Goffman (1959) demonstrates that in face-to-face social interactions, people are highly exposed to scrutiny, and that this is an important part of social interaction in which people can monitor each other and reduce the potential for deceit or cynicism. Turkle (1995, p. 26) praises the advantages of the internet, suggesting that "computer screens are the new location for fantasies, both erotic and intellectual". The use of the internet enables the exploration of possible selves, development of new ways of thinking, formation of friendships and the sustainment of relationships (Turkle, 1995). Whereas, Turkle's early positive attitude towards Internet use ignores the initiative for presenting the 'possible self' online, and the well-edited 'possible self' may ultimately develop into a false self for different purposes.

Goffman (1959) contrasts performative contexts such as theatre, wherein the audience forms impressions of performers with the fluidity and dynamism of face-to-face interaction. Online impressions formed mainly based on static online profiles presented textually and through images contrast with self-presentation in interactional contexts. In the early stages of Web 1.0, online contacts were established through posts and profiles. Thus, the problem of how the representation of self could be conveyed in detail was both a problem for authentic self-presentation and enabled the creation of online footprints that were pure inventions, albeit with positive potential (Turkle, 2011). Similarly, Mehdizadeh (2010) notes that a 'possible self' can be created online by withholding information, hiding undesirable physical attributes and conducting role play. An interesting early form of this, which anticipated aspects of social media, was online dating websites. Kalinowski (2009) argues that compared to other social media platforms, online dating websites are a space in which to invent or fabricate personal information. Women lie about their age and edit their beauty, and men lie about their height and income.

Kalinowski explains that the personal aspects women and men lie about online are what people care about most in offline dating. Therefore, people fabricate or lie for the same reasons in either the online or offline environment. More positively, social media use presents the opportunity to create virtual identities, which creates the opportunity for expansive or creative claims about the self. However, online dating website is a specific social media platform in which users are frequently strangers in the offline environment, reducing the ability to examine the validity of identity claims.

In contrast, in a SNS such as Facebook, individuals' online connections are heavily based on their offline friends, relatives, work relations and acquaintances, so that the identities a person presents online can often be compared with their identities in offline environment (e.g. Davis, 2011; Ellison and boyd, 2013). In Baker's (2009, p. 15) work on rock fans' online presentations of self, she adopts the notion of blended identity to refer to "online self-presentations that include both online and offline aspects of individuals". By considering an individual's offline context and online performance, researchers and other social media users can gain a well-rounded view of the 'mixed mode relationship' developed in both online and offline environments (Baker, 2009). Similarly, Kultan and Schmidt (2012) propose the concept of the 'composed identity', where what individuals present in the virtual world merges with their real identity, although people may 'perfect' their identity in the virtual world rather creating a completely new online identity. Such research appears to indicate that the expanded use of social media enables the conflation of the "outward-facing ego needs such as self-expression and self-presentation" with "private ego needs such as self-development and recreation", and "the result is an intrusion of the false-self domain into the true-self domain" (Balick, 2013, p. 74).

Davis (2011) interviewed 25 young people to discover their attitudes towards multiple online identities, and found that most participants would feel upset discovering that their friends presented multiple online identities, although they could still accept the inconsistency between their friends' online and offline identities. Moreover, some participants even noted that they would want to confront their friends if the identity inconsistency was too dramatic. Davis's finding underscores boyd's (2010) statement that the interpretation of an online identity always relies on the offline context.

I believe that aspects of the manner in which individuals present or express themselves online reflect part of who they are, in addition to their aims in joining social media and their evaluation of the online context. For example, job-seekers may present a professional aspect by listing their achievements at work. People who connect with friends and families on SNS may share travel pictures, interesting quotes and jokes to start a conversation. Shy people can be active in a Bulletin Board System (BBS), helping others solve technical problems. These examples represent different dimensions of the individual rather than asserting a dichotomy between true and false identity. In the present research, I develop a discussion with young Chinese about their reflections on their own social media use and how this reflects their understanding of face and identity and their social ties.

2.5.1 Online Audience

An aspect of Goffman's work on self-presentation that has developed beyond the question of whether online identities are true or false is the exploration of the manner in which people act as audiences on social media and the manner in which personal posts reflect assumptions about the audience they address.

Inspired by Goffman's work on 'front stage' and 'back stage' and Meyrowitz's (1987) work on 'no sense of place', Marwick and boyd (2010) suggest two interesting concepts for understanding the relationship between performers and audiences in social media. The social media environment does not have a visible, co-present audience, so a person posting addresses an 'imaged audience'. Furthermore, the usual subtle distinctions between social situations, such as the difference between social interaction with friends and with family, are blurred in the 'collapsed context' of social media. These are two affordances (Hutchby, 2014) of social media that complicate the definition of the situation online as Goffman (1959) had conceived of it in his work on the presentation of self in everyday life. Marwick and boyd (2010) claim that social media contexts, in which there are no physical boundaries between front and back stage, require the construction of quasi-public and private spheres to address the imaged audience. One result is that the nuance provided by different social contexts in the offline world is not available online, so it is 'difficult for people to engage in complex negotiations', especially when they must

conduct different identity presentations, manage different impressions and save face in front of mixed audiences (Marwick and boyd, 2010, p. 10).

Social media users develop a variety of strategies to compensate for the differences between social contexts in the offline world. On profile-based social network sites, for example, profiles are used as personal ads, and users are very attentive to their audience (boyd, 2006). Respondents to Marwick and boyd (2010) considered their 'friends' their online audience, but the meaning of 'friends' varies and is encumbered with different meanings. For example, 'friends' can be people with whom one interacts in an offline context, but can also be the strangers they connect with on social media or a particular person that the respondent cares about in the online world.

Developing the idea of the manner in which different audiences and social contexts are distinguished in social media, Berg and Lennes (2010) suggest that the lack of an 'audience segregation' feature on social media platforms limits the performance of partial identities on the same platform. By taking Facebook as the example, on which users can only assume a unitary identity, Berg and Lennes (2010) argue that Facebook users can connect with a wide variety of friend categories: colleagues, relatives and online acquaintances. Users have intimate and close relationships with some contacts, but distant and loose connections with others, so it would make sense to share information with selected Facebook connections. For example, students may wish to share party pictures with friends or classmates that they would not want to share with parents or other family members, and employees may want to share information with colleagues rather than close friends. Facebook users, however, can only elect to show their posts to friends, friends of friends, or themselves. Additionally, users cannot make online information available only to specific audiences, as Facebook lacks an online network member category feature in which groups of friends can be selected for particular posts. Facebook users cannot classify their 'friends' into groups, such as acquaintances, colleagues, classmates or best friends. Berg and Lennes (2010, p. 1113) argue that 'audience segregation' would enable the presentation of a 'rounded character' through the playing of different roles, while only a 'flat character' is possible in the conflated online context.

An innovative part of the Chinese social media platform WeChat is the option of creating an enclosed space for interaction with sub-groups of contacts using a membership

category system. Users can selectively identify the contacts with whom they wish to share particular posts. Moreover, and again in contrast to Facebook, WeChat users can only read online comments from mutual friends. These are significant differences in the affordances of social media, and in the present study, I will examine the reflections and attitudes of young Chinese social media users on the implications of these affordances. In this manner, I aim to question the boundaries between the public and private and how this is reflected in their accounts of their online social media practices.

2.6 Face and Social Media

Goffman's work on the presentation of self has influenced much of the research on social media, which explores the possibilities for self-expression, the relation between privacy and self-disclosure online and the affordances of digital media for control over self-presentation. However, following the earlier discussion of the relationship between face and identity, and the importance of face for Chinese social identity and social relations, I propose to explore this aspect of Goffman's ideas with participants in my research: the character of face. It appears that face is also a potentially valuable concept for understanding online practices. For example, face presents the positive attributes of individuals in a context of reciprocal civility (Goffman, 1967), which appears consistent with social media users' intentions of presenting the favourable aspects of self online (Rui and Stefanone, 2012). In face-to-face interaction, the Chinese expect others to care about their face, and appreciate others giving them *mianzi* (Zhai, 2013). In Goffman's (1967) terms, people have the responsibility to provide recognition of each other's claims for face and to work together on recognising the definition of the situation. In the present research, I will explore how these different conceptions of face and social relations are played out in the context of the affordances of WeChat.

A number of researchers have moved beyond self-presentation to examine facework on social media. For example, Lim and Basnyat (2016) suggest that the observability and transparency of online social networks complicates and compounds communication, as online friendship ties are visible and overlap with offline social networks. However, social media platforms only provide limited features for expressing affiliations, affirmation and affection. For example, clicking 'like' or sharing posts is an expression

of agreement and provides affirmation to others. Similarly, comments on posts about bad or sad news constitute a form of empathy. Sharing the sorrow of others, expressing sympathy and responding to online calls for assistance can also be interpreted as the magnanimous gestures that signal care about an individual. These activities can, according to Lim and Basnyat (2016), be interpreted as means of gaining and giving.

Hayes, Carr, and Wohn (2016, p. 171) suggests 'cues in social media that require a single click (e.g. Like, Favourite) as paralinguistic digital affordances (PDAs)'. They interpret PDAs as phatic communication based on Malinowski's (1936, p. 313) concept of 'phatic communion', in which he suggests that the function of apparently 'free, aimless social intercourse' is to bind people together and to create a sense of belonging and togetherness. As Malinowski (1936, p. 316) claims:

> phatic communion serves to establish bonds of personal union between
> people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does
> not serve any purpose of communicating ideas.

In communication with familiar others, phatic communion is a simple means of greeting and for maintaining and developing the relationship. For example, in China, a common greeting is *chi fan mei you* (have you eaten?); although it is in question form, no one really wants a detailed answer. The reply can simply be *chi guo le* (yes, I have eaten), even if the individual has not. Phatic communion is a ritual of politeness that functions to maintain relationships. Similarly, Hayes, Carr and Wohn (2016) point out that PDAs are designed into social media through the options to click 'like' or comment as online phatic communions.

Through analysis of focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews among university students, Hayes, Carr, and Wohn (2016) found that social media users ascribe different meanings to the PDAs they receive on different platforms. For example, participants who are Facebook users tended to consider the amount and content of PDAs as a measure of the success of their online posts. This finding is consistent with Lim and Basnyat (2016) arguing that online feedback from others is valued. Facebook users delete 'unsuccessful' posts when they do not receive sufficient PDAs (Hayes, Carr and Wohn, 2016). If I consider the participants' practices from the facework perspective, people

correct their online practices to receive face recognition from others. Other examples are Twitter users who keep the PDAs they receive and Reddit users who consider the PDAs they receive 'internet karma'. Lim and Basnyat (2016) similarly suggest that online 'likes' of others' sorrow are an expression of sympathy regarding loss or failure. These phatic communions online resemble people wanting to break the ice with a stranger, starting a conversation using phatic communions and leaving the option for the other to reply with phatic communion out of politeness. Understanding this from the face perspective, by responding to each other's phatic communions, the definition of the situation is maintained and face in social interaction is protected.

The Chinese state media *Ren Min Ri Bao* (People's Newspaper) published a commentary recently to advise readers that online 'likes' given out of politeness should not be used frequently nor have too much importance attached to them (Bei, 2017). The piece goes on to argue that too much online liking renders interpersonal communication fragmentary and confusing. In addition, the trend to ascribe too much value to 'likes' should not be followed, nor should one be upset or angry when they do not receive the number of 'likes' expected (Bei, 2017). In fact, WeChat had as early as 2014 published new rules to block public accounts (the WeChat accounts of social organisations) that started online 'likes gathering' activities on the platform[26]. WeChat forbids users from gathering 'likes' online to prevent online fraud. Therefore, both the state media and the WeChat platform do not encourage the gathering of online likes and both are concerned that WeChat users may attach too much importance to online likes, either using them to evaluate the strength of a friendship or believing that online likes can yield profits.

This raises the question: if people feel forced to click 'like' on posts, then how could this phenomenon last for so many years and remain popular on WeChat? From the face perspective, I would claim that people are clicking 'like' as a form of *facework*. People who gather likes on WeChat have the confidence that their online connections would give them face by clicking 'like'. At the same time, a person's online connections, especially people whom they are close to, may consider it a responsibility to click 'like' to prevent the person from losing face. Therefore, the 'likes gathering' activity is a marketing

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[26] Sohu, I.T. (2014) '*Weixin Jinzhi Gongzhong Zhanghao 'ji Zan' Xingwei Xianzhi Pengyouquan Yingxiao*' (in Chinese), SOHU.com, 6 June [online]. Available at: http://it.sohu.com/20140606/n400523559.shtml (Accessed: 21 June 2015).

strategy that takes advantage of people's perceptions of face and the interpersonal relationships between Chinese WeChat users. This study presents how Chinese young people manage their mediated social relations by taking both traditional and contemporary social rituals into consideration through the use of WeChat.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter presents an in-depth discussion on the notion mianzi and lian in both traditional and contemporary Chinese context. As a comparison, this chapter also includes explanation the concept of face and facework in the Western context, with a focus on Goffman's study on self-presentation and interaction ritual, and their application in contemporary media studies. Following two section include two points that reflect the focus of this study.

The modernity and face concept. The differences in face concepts vary between cultures and between contexts. Comparing the traditional Chinese concept of face, *lian* serves as the moral face that acts as a sanction in the traditional community; *mianzi* serves as the social face, which enables the exchange of resources and the development of social connections. With new modernity and urbanization, the traditional small agrarian communities are losing their place to cities. People are moving from rural areas to urban cities, and contemporary research tends to express concern for the traditional values, as it appears that they are losing their roots. It also appears that the people of China also face the dilemma of either ignoring moral norms and playing the role of personal sociability to the hilt to occupy more social resources and to be in higher social positions, or insisting on being morally upright while facing the risk of living an unprosperous life. My study explores the thoughts of young Chinese on this question through their reflections on face concept and social relations.

The presentation of self. Zhai (2005) once suggested that *lian* is the impression an individual leaves on others, while *mianzi* is the psychological position others concede to the individual. Therefore, the decision that one makes whether to give *mianzi* to a person or not is based his/her *lian*. Moreover, he argues that impression management in China is relationally based rather than individually managed, as discussed by Goffman (1959). In

fact, Goffman's (1959) study on self-presentation also emphasizes teamwork, the cooperation between team members to create an appropriate image in social interaction. Bearing this in mind, I aim to understand the online practices of young Chinese also from the relational perspective, which means not only focusing on their online self-presentation but also being aware of the manner in which they manage different social relations in this process.

Chapter 3—Social Ties and Mediated *Guanxi*

3.1 Introduction

Zhai (2013) argues that it is impossible to talk about Chinese face without mentioning *guanxi*. *Guanxi* denotes a special relationship between two individuals or institutions involving *renqing* and *mianzi* (Hwang, 1987). *Renqing* means reciprocity between individuals, and when *guanxi* achieves a certain level, people accept the responsibility of giving favours to others, with those who have received the favour being obliged to reciprocate (Yang, 1994). As we saw in the last chapter, *mianzi* is a social product that needs to be given by others, reflecting their evaluation of the impression that an individual presents to them (Zhai, 2011). Others' impressions of an individual determine the strength of their *guanxi* and the levels of favour that are due to them according to this. For instance, consider the following hypothetical scenario. A student wants to borrow £200 pounds from a friend who agrees to lend them only £100. In this case, the friend agrees to lend money to the student reflecting the general commitment of *renqing*, but the amount they agree to lend reflects their sense of what the student is due and the *mianzi* that they want to give. People give *mianzi* (respect or social face) to each other not only because their expressive feelings towards each other, but also to sustain a reciprocal relationship of obligations. Therefore, *renqing* and *mianzi* are different aspects of the reciprocal processes of trust and respect. *Renqing* relates to whether or not the two people are in a reciprocal relationship and *mianzi* guides the nature of particular exchanges, reflecting how much people respect each other and the importance of the relationship (Hwang, 1987). In this way, face and the obligations of reciprocity play an important role in structuring the social ties between members of a community. Given the mass movements of people in China, their dislocation from their traditional communities and their engagement with social media, the question I address here is whether young Chinese people's online social relationships reflect this traditional structure of reciprocity.

Chang (2008, p. 306) states that Chinese face is 'relationally based, other directed, and morally-laden'. Chinese individuals who want to be accepted and respected by others in their community need to build social connections with people. To do that, individuals need to follow the social norms of their community and play according to the rules of

social interaction (Fei, 1948). In Chinese culture, the individual is not defined by personality, character or personal identity, to the same degree as in the west. Instead, Chinese individuals are the 'locus within a social context', for example, X's husband, Y's spouse, Z's brother, and M's friends, so people can lose face by violating the propriety of these relationships (Chang, 2008). When Chinese people meet they frequently ask about each other's hometown, and if they happen to come from same province, they call each other *lao xiang* (locative friends). If they happen to come from the same village or same school then a new acquaintance can immediately become a close friend and part of their innermost social zone.

The obligations inherent in *renqing* are overlaid by a structural metaphor that describes peoples' personal networks as *cha xu ge ju* (differential patterns) (Fei, 1948) words. It is important not to romanticise the past and not forget that even traditional reciprocal social relations preserving face can be strategic. Fei (1948), for example, argues that social relationships between Chinese people can be strategic, based on evaluation and calculation, just as much as they can be the realisation of egalitarianism (Zhai, 2005). Consequently, while reciprocal social relationships can function to create and sustain families, social groups and communities, they can equally be a way of creating *renqing* debt or reflecting social status or position.

Nevertheless, *renqing* acts as a constraint on strategic manipulation as individuals need to be aware that the relationships they have with others help them decide whether to give *renqing* or not; in this process, participants in social relationships need to protect face both for themselves and others. Chinese people call this process *li*, which is a kind of interaction ritual (Goffman, 1967; Zhai, 2011). People do not necessarily follow *renqing* out of kinship or respect for others, for it is not necessarily an emotional exchange, but can be a symbolic interaction in which people perform the acts of nice-ness and being polite, so as not to embarrass each other, and ensure the smooth unfolding of the interaction.

The role of these traditional Chinese conceptions of sociality involving *renqing* and *guanxi* explain the complex relationship between Chinese people, although this interpretation of sociality has been criticised in China in the recent past. For example, the state media frequently refer to corrupt bureaucrats as resulting from them being trapped

in *renqing,* and that the intricacies and nuances of this kind of respect and reciprocity can be interpreted as an extravagance and indulgence. I plan to explore Chinese young people's reflections on *guanxi* and *renqing* practices in their online social lives, and consider whether traditional conceptions of social relations are reflected in their online relationships or social ties.

3.2 Social Ties

Granovetter's (1973) study of the strength of social ties draws attention to the importance of social connections. The strength of a social tie is a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual confiding), and reciprocal service in a relationship (Granovetter, 1973). Family members or close friends are strong ties as they provide companionship, emotional support, and create reciprocal relationships between individuals. People with weak ties can be friends or even nodding acquaintances. Indeed, weak ties have their uses, with Granovetter (1973) finding that people are more likely to find job opportunities through weak rather than strong ties. Granovetter (1983) explains that this is partly because while we have much in common with those with whom we have strong social ties, our weaker social ties can provide new information, offer new resources, and introduce us to experiences and opportunities that these strong ties cannot.

Granovetter's (1973, 1983) suggestions about the potential value of weak social ties are supported by research in the 1980s in which weak ties were shown to be crucial in helping highly educated people achieve upward social mobility. For instance, Ericksen and Yancey (1980) conducted research among adults in Philadelphia to learn whether they consulted people they were connected to by strong or weak ties during their search for a job. They found that adults with a relatively lower educational attainment were more likely to seek help from those they shared strong social ties (mainly relatives) when searching for a job. In contrast, those with higher educational qualifications were more active in activating weak ties during their job search. Lin, Ensel, and Vaugh (1981) conducted similar research among adults in New York, finding that weak social ties can provide individuals with opportunities to contact people from higher social statuses.

Chinese people describe the strength of their social networks by distinguishing individuals who are *sheng ren* (a raw person) *shu ren* (a cooked person), *zi ji ren* (an insider) and *wai ren* (an outsider). These four terms indicate their closeness to the other person. *Sheng ren* is commonly used to refer to strangers, while *shu ren* refers to individuals whom they interact with and have got to know. *Zi ji ren* (an insider/one of us) and *wai ren* (an outsider) is based on the community that some individuals live in or belong to. Community is built on familiarity among members, who have shared experiences, and follow the same customs and norms. People have more trust in *shu ren* and *zi ji r*en compared with *sheng ren* and *wai ren.* One interesting example is when people are shopping in China, and the sales person might persuade customers to buy by saying '*wo dang ni shi zi ji ren, gei ni pian yi dian*' (I will treat you like one of us and give you a discount), even if the goods are expensive, customers enjoy being treated as *zi ji ren.*

Inspired by Fei's (1948) work, Chinese scholars have described Chinese society as *shu ren she hui* (an acquaintance society), in which people's social connections and relationships are based on familiarity. Familiarity has different meanings in cities compared to rural areas, as people in cities tend to manage their relationships through regulations or even laws, while in rural areas, people refer to *qing* (emotion) and *li* (sense) to manage their relationships and solve problems (Chen, 2011). Here, *qing* represents the relationships that exist between individuals. Fei uses the metaphor of ripples in water to explain the *cha xu ge ju* (differentiated patterns) that make up a person's social network based on these cultural characteristics. Fei (1998, p. 26) explains this concept as follows: "it is like a ripple that appears when you throw a stone in the water. Everyone is the centre of his social influence circle…the social relationship with others, is unlike the elements in the community that people are at the same level. It is like water ripples that push out, the further it pushes, the thinner the relationship is".

Blood ties and geographical ties influence an individuals' position in another's social network. The blood connections that exist with parents are closest to the centre, followed by close relatives, close neighbours, far-off relatives, close friends, friends, and then broader connections. Both blood ties and geographical ties therefore serve as part of individuals' identity, blood ties decide individuals' social position within the community, while geographical ties are like referees that individuals can draw on to reflect their

identity (Fei, 1948). For instance, when two Chinese people first meet, they would normally greet each other, then ask their place of origin. People who come from the same place quickly draw on their shared identities and develop a relationship. Chinese people name those who come from the same place as *lao xiang* (old villagers). For migrant workers and students in China, *lao xiang* is the initial *guanxi* base they can refer to when seeking job opportunities and social relations in the city (Zhang and Xie, 2013). Coming from the same place serves as a base on which people can develop their relationship, becoming their *guanxi* (Yang, 2011).

Reflecting on Fei's (1948) notion of differential patterns, Hwang (1987) categorises people's social relationships as 'expressive ties', 'instrumental ties' and 'mixed ties'. An 'expressive tie' is the primary tie that refers to emotional and normative binding between individuals, e.g. family and close friends. An 'instrumental tie' is temporary and strategic and people experiencing this tie are egalitarian, seeking equal exchange. e.g. a sales person and a customer. As the name suggests, 'mixed ties' include diverse and significant relationships which can have some of the aspects of strong ties (e.g. an emotional bond) but also of weak ties (infrequent contact). For example, ties with previous classmates can be dormant when both parties are not engaged, but they can activate the relationship readily through interaction and exchanging *renqing* (reciprocal favour).

3.3 *Guanxi*

Guanxi refers to connections between individuals with a need to exchange favours and reciprocity (Hwang, 1987). Following different *guanxi,* there are different kinds of responsibility, as well as different types of *renqing* reciprocity. Confucianism identified the five most important relationships for a human as *wu lun*, (the five cardinal relationships). Here, *lun* is a kind of social order, which can be understood hierarchically and horizontally (Chen and Chen, 2004).

The five cardinal relationships emphasise the dyadic basis of interpersonal communication, which is the initial *guanxi* (social relationship). The cardinal dyads are *jun chen* (ruler and subordinate), *fu zi* (father and son), *xiong di* (elder brother and younger brother), *fu qi* (husband and wife), and *peng you* (friends) (Chen and Chen, 2004). These

five cardinal relationships are the fundamental relationships that exist in Chinese society and form the basis of *guanxi*. Corresponding with these five cardinal relationships are five social norms that people are obliged to follow to sustain relationships: *zhong* (loyalty), *xiao* (filial piety), *di* (love and respect), *ren* (self-restraint), and *shan* (benevolence) (Fei, 1992). Therefore, there is no universal moral standard nor principle that applies to all kinds of relationships in Chinese culture as each relationship has its corresponding moral principle (Chen and Chen, 2004).

Guanxi starts from the *guanxi* base which can be shared attributes (Jacobs, 1979), shared identities and shared third party connections (Jiang, Lo and Garris, 2012). For instance, there is a *guanxi* base for people who come from the same village, the same class at school, or are groups of mutual friends. Anything that links people together can become their *guanxi* base and develop into a *guanxi* connection. Chen and Chen (2004, p. 310) suggest that "individuals who do not share common social identification can still initiate a *guanxi* by creating a future base through expressing an intention or even a promise to engage in future exchanges, collaborations, or joint ventures", which is the anticipatory base. Song, Cadsby, and Bi (2012) similarly argue that people who have no initial *guanxi* base need to cultivate their *guanxi* by gift giving, personal proximity, and affiliation in order to create a connection and develop it into *guanxi*. *Guanxi* is slightly different from the 'pure relationship' of Giddens (1991), because people evaluate the reciprocal ability of an individual, which normally depends on the *mianzi* one has in the minds of others. Also, *guanxi* is not all for an individual him/herself, as it can also be for the sake of others. For instance, Chinese parents prefer to develop *guanxi* with teachers in order to get their children admitted to key schools and hopefully receive more attention from the teaching staff (Xie and Postiglione, 2016). Chen and Chen (2004, p.310) explain the model of *guanxi* building as:

Table 5. A model showing the process of guanxi building

Guanxi stages	Guanxi objectives	Interactive activities	Operating principles
Initiating	Setting up bases	Familiarising	Mutual self-disclosure
Building	Enhancing quality	Expressive and instrumental transactions	Dynamic reciprocity
Using	Getting benefits, re-evaluating guanxi quality	Exchanging favours	Long-term equity

The creation of *guanxi* aims for long term connectivity and reciprocity. Contemporary *guanxi* studies predominantly fall into the area of business, especially in emphasising the importance of *quanxi* for companies (especially international companies in China) in managing organisational networks between employees, building *guanxi* in local government, and setting up and enhancing *guanxi* with customers. For instance, Chung (2011) conducted a questionnaire survey for 400 companies to learn about the influence of both business and political *guanxi* on market orientation. The findings indicated that *guanxi* has both positive and negative impacts on financial performance and that political *guanxi* has a negative impact on company performance. In fact, this notion relates to the discussion on the role of law and *renqing* in regulating or shaping Chinese people's social practices. This idea of the basis of social relations developed from a self-sufficient agrarian economy in which people were aware of the need to develop *guanxi* with others to prepare for unpredictable disasters (Fei, 1948), because the individual unity allows access to greater resources and allows for the pooling of risk. Compared with laws and regulations, the commitment made between individuals provides more direct mutual help. This origin is a long way from the online social relations of young people studying in contemporary Beijing. However, I believe that these traditional roots of identity are still an important aspect of identity and sociality, and I am intrigued to see how the construction of relations in the contemporary online social environment reflect these traditions.

3.4 *Renqing*

Renqing literally means human emotions or feelings people have towards each other. Hwang (1987) suggests three kinds of *renqing* exist in mixed-ties. First, the ability to express empathy and to provide flexible responses to others' emotional states. The notion of sharing others' feelings is one way to indicate that an individual has, knows, and understands *renqing*. Second, the gift to others in recognition of their emotional situation. Hwang (1987, p. 954) notes this "as a resource for social exchange, *renqing* may contain not only such substantive materials as money, goods, or services but may also include some abstract component of affection, this is why one is never able to pay off debts of *renqing* to others". Third, reliability by keeping in touch, sympathising and offering help when others are in a difficult situation (Hwang, 1987). Hwang (1987) also notes that an equal distribution of responsibility for the quality of relationships within the group or network is one way to sustain a harmonious group.

Based on these social exchange principles, Hwang (1987) suggests that there are three types of reciprocity principles for sustaining social ties. For instance, lack of emotional exchange leads to the dominance of concerns about equity. People in relationships based on expressive ties follow the rule of demand, while mixed ties are sustained by *renqing* (Hwang, 1987). Different exchange principles also mean different reciprocity terms, for instance, agreed dates for exchange between parties in instrumental relations, just as customers receive a product immediately after payment. In contrast, there is more flexibility for expressive ties. The Chinese proverb '*yang er fang lao* [27]' relates to children's responsibilities towards their parents. Parents meet children's needs and demands while raising them and children have the responsibility to reciprocate by meeting their parents' needs in the future. It is hard to measure the number of resources and affections that both parties invest in such a relationship or to predict the timing of this give and take relationship. For mixed ties, the *renqing* exchange or 'gift' exchange predominates, emphasising the indebtedness of both parties to sustain *guanxi*. As with parent/child relations, the involvement of affection and resource exchange make it difficult to calculate equity in such cases. As a Chinese proverb says *tou zhi yi tao, bao*

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[27] Chen, Yuan Liang, Song Dynasty. *Shi Lin Guan Ji*, yang er fang lao, ji gu fang ji. Raise children to provide against old age, accumulate wheat to prevent hunger.

zhi yi li (people give you a peach, and you need to return a plum), or *di shui zhi en, dang yong quan xiang bao* (the favour of a drop of water should be returned with the gratitude of a burst of spring) (Hwang, 1987). If the former proverb still involves a kind of equity exchange between individuals, the latter responds with gratitude, which is difficult to predict or specify.

Hwang (1987) notes that even Confucius suggests the sage does not expect others' gratitude, but he also notes *yi de bao yi* (reward favour with favour). *Renqing* is a kind of social glue for interpersonal relationships, giving *renqing* to others is like making an investment, and receiving *renqing* is like getting into debt. People who make such investments do not expect repayment immediately, so they can ask for *renqing* from others when in need in contrast to financial debt. Consequently, people do not like or want to calculate how much *renqing* they owe others or others owe them. This is because calculating debt between individuals indicates the intention of terminating the relationship. What is notable in Hwang's (1987) work, that inspire this study, is his notion of escaping the *renqing* network. Not everyone can handle complicated and long term *renqing* exchanges, therefore people start leaving for new places to avoid the *renqing* debt that they may inherit from previous generations. The more individualistic an individual is the more likely they might be to pursue egalitarian exchange rather than sustaining *renqing*. As repeatedly emphasised, rising individualisation in China, and individualism among young people, could make Chinese young people less interested in becoming involved in *renqing*, especially those who migrate to urban cities, and who are thus situated a distance from their family and community commitments.

3.5 Bourdieu and Social Capital

Corresponding to the Chinese notion of *guanxi* and *renqing* is the Western concept of social capital, which refers to the potential benefits of social interaction and social connections (Burt, 2001; Coleman, 1990; Lin, 1999). Bourdieu (1977, p. 503) defined social capital as the "capital of social relationships' that can provide useful 'support' to individuals". Bourdieu also notes that social capital can be understood as a currency, which not only provides support but can be cashed in for economic benefits such as jobs and access to education. Lin (1999) explains social capital in a straightforward way by

stating that people interact and connect with each other with the aim of generating mutual benefits which are understood as 'profits'. Burt (2001) is even more direct by highlighting that social capital is a metaphor for advantages gained through social connections in pursuing personal needs, and that one's position within a social network decides the social connections that one can develop and the resources that one can access.

Researchers like Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1990) place significant emphasis on the collective possession of capital and how economic capital inequality affects individual and groups' opportunities for achieving other kinds of capital, such as human capital, cultural capital and social capital. Bourdieu argues that "every type of capital is reducible in the last analysis to economic capital", but that different forms of capital including social capital can reproduce inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 252 cited from Field, 2008, p. 18). Later, Bourdieu (1990) argued that it is one-sided to calculate an individual's cultural capital and social capital only from an economic perspective. He suggested that although economic capital advantages enlarge individuals' chances in reaching and developing certain other types of capital, nevertheless the time and effort that individuals invest in learning and developing as well as sustaining relationships are paramount for an individual to achieve cultural capital and social capital and relatively independent of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Bourdieu's (1986) work on cultural capital and social capital are worth further exploration in the Chinese context, especially his discussion of the objictification of cultural capital and the benefits and potential risks of developing and sustaining beneficial social relationships and networks with others.

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital can exist in an embodied, objectified, and institutionalized state. The former two states indicate the disposition of cultural capital within the individual and objects, while the later suggests another kind of objectification of cultural capital that involves the certification of the institution, for example, in educational qualifications. Economist Loury (1976) explored the relationship between an individual's life successes and different forms of capital and noted that instead of attributing social inequalities to the lack of equivalent education and work experience workers possess, people must be aware that one's social origins (race and income of the family) affect the number of resources that one can invest in personal development, which influences the human capital that the social capital one can acquire in the labour market. Bourdieu (1986, p. 48) partly agreed with Loury's (1976) contention, but criticised

economists for focusing on the monetary perspective of education and ignored that "ability or talent is itself the product of an investment of time in cultural capital" and that the educational system affects social reproduction that moderates the "hereditary transmission of cultural capital".

Bourdieu (1986, p. 48) also argues that cultural capital "implies a labour of inculcation and assimilation", most importantly, requiring the investment of time and effort of the individual. Academic qualification is the objectification of cultural capital that confers its holder with "conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture", as well as socially recognized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 50-51). Although Bourdieu (1986, p. 51) criticised economists for being functionalists when considering educational investment, he also considers that "academic investment has no meaning unless a minimum degree of reversibility of the conversion it implies is objectively guaranteed". He further argues that material and symbolic profits that academic qualification generates depends on its scarcity and on individual endeavour. Moreover, the schooling explosion causes an inflation of academic qualification, which means the outcome of academic investment does not always meet an individual's expectation (Bourdieu, 1986). The reasons mentioning cultural capital in this work are based on the notion that possessing cultural capital affects social reproduction, which enables the individual to reach power and resources without the necessity of possessing economic and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

These ideas have direct parallels in the Chinese context as the belief that being in an advantageous position to reach resources and change social status through education is common in Chinese families (Daily, 2017; Zou, Anderson, and Tsey, 2013). From early childhood education to the investment in ensuring children receive higher education, Chinese parents consciously pay critical attention to their children's learning and academic achievement (Yang and Leong, 2016; Zou, Anderson, and Tsey, 2013). Chinese parents believe investment in children's education can enhance their chances of standing out within the competitive job market, enrich their knowledge, and elevate their social status in the future (Zou, Anderson, and Tsey, 2013). Daily (2017) notes that children's education has become the new luxury status for Chinese parents as the middle classes passionately invest in their children's academic career to indicate their social status and to improve their children's social status. However, while parents regard their children's

academic achievements as an extension of their personal achievement, there is limited research that explores Chinese children's attitude toward this and how it affects their attitudes toward social connections. Other than economic and cultural capital, social capital is also vitally important for people to achieve success in the job market.

Early in 1986, Bourdieu (1986, p. 51) described social capital as

> The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group — which provides each other its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various sense of the word.

Bourdieu's definition reflects his concern and understanding of the social order (Field, 2008). According to him, both the density and durability of social ties are vital, as the volume of the social capital that an individual possess, depends on the size of his or her connections (Bourdieu, 1986; Field, 2008) According to Bourdieu, economic, cultural and social capitals might not always be converted to or substituted for one another, while together they can generate new capital (Field, 2008).

Social relationships can reward individuals or collectives with material or symbolic benefits, but, to establish and sustain this usable relationship calls for continuously investment of time and effort from both agents (Bourdieu, 1986). Especially the institutionalised relationships (relationship with neighbourhood, colleagues, and families etc.) need people to follow mutually agreed symbolic constitutions, which are produced and sustained through exchange, encouraging and enhancing mutual recognition and knowledge (Bourdieu, 1986). Gauntlett (2011) notes that compared with other researchers who see social capital as heart-warming and profit generating, Bourdieu often discusses social capital in terms of social inequalities. Frequently, Bourdieu (1986) provides the example of how upper and middle class people conduct exchanges so as to develop pertinent relationship with homogenous individuals and exclude others.

Granovetter (1983) describes the relationships that upper and middle classes try to sustain as homophilous ties, which help to make their sphere exclusive.

Exclusionary, profitability, time and effort and social inequalities seem to be the key terms in Bourdieu's (1986) discussion of social capital. Researchers like Gauntlett (2011) and Jenkins (2006) criticise Bourdieu for narrowing social capital to hierarchical exclusiveness, which ignores the possibilities that individuals might achieve in their own and their collective's destinies. Bourdieu's (1986) work reflects the results and products of social inequality, but he also mentions the possible ways of reaching power and resources, through efforts to increase social and cultural. The origin of the individual does have an influence on his/her chances of accessing and mobilising resources, while it does not prevent an individual from achieving them through personal effort. Because as Bourdieu notes (1986), after all, symbolic and cultural capital is the assets that need individual's investment of time and effort. Additionally, social inequalities are the cold realities of the context that individuals live in, and there is value in recognizing this so that people can reflect on it and take actions to eliminate inequalities, rather than pretending social inequalities do not exist or do not affect people's chances in accessing and mobilising different resources.

Finally, Bourdieu's (1986) explanation of social capital shares similarities with people's perception of relational face in the Chinese context. For instance, people prefer connecting with individuals or collective with more capital or credentials so as to enhance personal chances of benefiting from these resources. Meanwhile, Bourdieu (1986) notes people consciously defend the collective honour and the spokesperson can even expel an individual who put the groups' honour under threatening, which is very like what would happen to an individual who losses moral face in a traditional Chinese community (Hu, 1944). Furthermore, the notion of 'personality cult' and of groups achieve their social existence through representation reminds me of the above discussion of consumption and face, in which people achieve and present the face they have through consumption (Jiang, 2006). What is worth further exploration is the critical importance that Bourdieu (1986) gives to cultural capital in the discussion of social capital, which is hardly discussed in contemporary Chinese face concept. Another potential avenue of research is considering the 'collapse context' on SNSs (Marwick and boyd, 2010) and whether exclusionary

social capital is still applicable in describing social relationships and networks in the online environment.

3.6 Mediated Relationships

Just as it is impossible to talk about *mianzi* without *guanxi*, then it becomes impossible to talk about *guanxi* in contemporary interpersonal communication without referring to the use of digital technology. With the development of portable digital technologies, social media has become an integral part of people's lives (Couldry and Hepp, 2013). Social media provides a platform for people to maintain or build social relationships, explore their identities and develop self (Surowiecki, 2004). Online platforms invite the convergence of separate activities, and more than ever, users have the chance to create and receive information, young people, especially, demonstrate the motivation for presenting themselves online (Livingstone, 2008).

Research at different stages reflects people's attitudes toward online connections in different periods. For instance, early CMC research valorised the Internet for enabling people to have anonymous communication and develop and explore the potential for sometimes fantastic identities (Turkle, 1995). The rise of online dating websites in the mid-1990s encouraged people to develop online relationships into offline contexts (Ellison et al. 2014). Online dating websites provided space for single people to interact online to arrange offline meetings and further interactions (Ellison, Hino, and Gibbs, 2006). In this context, people managed their online profiles strategically to present an ideal online self, e.g. men exaggerate their wealth and height, while females customise their profile pictures (Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs, 2006).

Walther (1996) develops the hyperpersonal model, to suggest how CMC users take advantage of technological affordances to conduct strategical self-presentation aiming to improve relationship outcomes. For instance, the asynchronous CMC communication gave people time to edit and compose their use of language before delivering their 'utterance', hide their physical appearance and control involuntary cues from leaking out (Goffman, 1959). Based on these edited and limited online cues, receivers tended to form an ideal impression of others, and even develop intimate emotional bonds with them

(Walther, 2007). Walther's (2007) work is based on people's control of nonverbal cues online, but this might still be helpful in email exchanges (Duthler, 2006), while the idea of creating an ideal impression through unilateral nonverbal cues may be losing its charm in the era of social media. This is especially the case on social networking sites where people are encouraged by the platform to provide a variety of information about themselves, for instance, a real name, a profile image, and a work place. Additionally, people are also developing new ways of managing their online impressions. For instance, people started by providing their pictures, but still in an edited form. Moreover, on the SNSs it has become difficult to avoid conversation, as people prefer to connect with existing offline connections rather than reach out to online strangers. As Livingstone (2008) suggests, despite the global networking potential of SNS, teenagers still maintain contacts with strong ties that build on a pre-existing study or work context. Social networking shifted the focus from the potential of fantasy to the extension of offline relationship online, and to the blurring of the distinction between these realms. So much so that boyd (2010, p. 39) claims that SNS is a genre of 'networked publics' that enables people to gather for "social, cultural, and civic purposes and…help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family". The use of WeChat by young people migrating to Beijing for study purposes creates a context in which young people are forced to navigate the two worlds that they inhabit – the established relations of the family, community and classmates and the university and city of Beijing. The one points towards the past, to traditional conceptions of social relationships the other points to the future, to a more individualistic society and to social relationships played out in a city of strangers. The WeChat environment is a manifold digital environment with multiple functionalities, and in my research, I am interested in how young people use the affordances of this platform to manage the profound issues where social changes meet identity.

Chapter 4—Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Corresponding to the theoretical discussion in Chapter 2 and 3, this chapter provides the rationale of research methodological process of this study. As this was a qualitative study the research questions were under review during the research process. Primary review on existing literature enabled researcher to develop the initial research question of this study, which is to explore the discrepancy between Chinese young and old generations' perception of the traditional interaction term-face. Then researcher conducted exploratory and pilot study to reframe the research question for this work, which is: What are Chinese young people's reflections on both their online and offline social practices in contemporary Chinese social context? Include two sub-questions to provide in-depth investigation on the key question, which are 1). What are Chinese university students' perception of traditional social interaction term *lian* and *mianzi*, and how it affects their social practices in both online and offline environment. 2). How do Chinese university students manage their mediated relationship with the use of WeChat? Begin with an outline of the development of the research questions during my thesis work, this chapter includes explanation of research questions development process and reasons of conducting qualitative interviewing and grounded thematic analysis for this study.

There are four phases in the empirical work. First, I conducted two exploratory focus group studies in China during April. 2014. One group was with people with an average age of 23 and the other group with people around the age of 50. There were two reasons for this exploratory study, one, to test the applicability of my research questions, and two, to test whether a focus group was an effective data collection method for exploring ideas about face and social ties. As a result, I decided that the focus group was not a good way of exploring such topics and that instead I would focus on the younger age group, as the older group were not very engaged with social media. Second, in September 2014, I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with 10 Chinese students studying at the University of Leicester, England. The interviews proved a more effective method for exploring ideas about face and social ties in the online environment and I could use the open-ended nature of face-to-face interviews to probe and follow up ideas during the

interview. The participants also appeared more comfortable discussing these ideas in the context of a face-to-face interview than in the quasi-public setting of the focus group. Third, between September and October 2015, I carried out 42 in-depth face-to-face interviews with students who were studying at universities in Beijing, China. Fourth, 20 of the 42 participants agreed to connect with me on WeChat, which enabled me to keep in touch with them and follow their posts up until January 2016. Fifth, I conducted follow up computer mediated interviews with 10 of the 20 participants with whom I had connected on WeChat. This phase of the research enabled me to discuss the themes emerging in my analysis and to gain a degree of validation for my interpretations. In total, and with their permission, I collected around 500 hours of recorded interview data and 120 images of participants' online activities during the third and fourth stages of the research. The following flow chart illustrates the research processes in more detail.

Table 6. Research Data Collection Process

Research	Date	Place	Research Methods	Components of Participants
Exploratory Study	Apr. 2014	China	Focus group	5 Chinese participants aged 50+ 5 Chinese participants aged 18-24
First-stage Study	Sept. 2014	England	Face-to-face in-depth interview	10 Chinese participants aged 18-24, studying in the U.K.
Main Study	Sept. 2015 -Jan. 2016	China	1.Face-to-face in-depth interview (Including post-elicitation interviewing); 2.Computer mediated interview 3. Participants' observation	42 Chinese university students aged 18-24, studying in Beijing

4.2 Research Methods Used in Similar Research

Before embarking on my own research, I reviewed the research methods used to study the Chinese concept of face. I found studies dating from 1944 (Hu, 1944) to more recent studies from 2013 (Zhai, 2013). I discovered that theoretical reflections on Chinese

concepts of face, linguistic analysis, qualitative interviewing, and quantitative questionnaires are the most frequently used research methods in existing face studies.

Hu (1944) distinguishes *lian*, moral face, as different from *mianzi*, social face, through the lexical analysis of the meaning of 25 Chinese phrases. For instance, phrases that relate to *lian* include: *diu lian* (to lose lian), *bu yao lian* (shamelessness), *lian pi bao hou* (to be impudent/thin-skinned). While phrases like *ti miani* (decent) indicate the social respect that individuals can receive from having *mianzi*. *gu mianzi* (caring about one's reputation) indicates that people are conscious of protecting their *mianzi* in social interaction. Phrases such as *gei mianzi* (give *mianzi*) indicate that *mianzi* is like a currency which can be exchanged in social interactions. Similarly, by analysing the meaning of ordinary language use in China, Cheng (1986) explains *lian* as the minimum face an individual need to experience a social life, with *mianzi* representing the best face an individual can gain. For instance, *zheng mianzi* (vying for *mianzi*) indicates that *mianzi* is like a reputation that individuals compete for, with *si po lian* (to rip the face) reflecting an individual who may take risks or act in an immoral way to achieve face.

Both Hu (1944) and Cheng (1986) describe a selection of phrases that are frequently used in *Han* culture. From the linguistic development perspective, Hu (1944) notes that *mianzi* has a longer history than *lian*, as is has been referred to since 4 BC, while *lian* does not appear in Chinese literature until the Yuan Dynasty (1206-1368). Hence, Hu asserts that people in the north of China prefer to use *lian* rather than *mianzi*. However, when I was studying in Beijing in 2010, I noticed that local Beijing people tended to describe a person who loves their face as *hao mianer* rather than *yao lian*. It is inherent for language to change across time and context and I was motivated by the idea that there might be some interesting transformations of meaning for face in relation to the online context and social media. The work of Hu and Cheng provided me with a rich resource of ideas about the varied meanings of face in China as a reference point for my explorations of people's understanding and accounts of their experience of face online.

Interviews, documents analysis and questionnaires are other methods that researchers frequently use in exploring people's understanding of face. A notable problem in using questionnaires on this topic with Chinese participants is recruitment. For example, Hinze (2012) discussed problems when recruiting interview participants for his PhD study on

face and politeness in 1999 and 2000. He eventually managed to recruit 130 students from the People's University in Beijing to take part in a questionnaire survey, but when he attempted to conduct a follow up interview among these participants, only 10 of the 130 participants agreed to participate. The participants refused by stating that as students they had nothing to say about face as only people who are self-conscious and unscrupulous, such as businessmen and politicians, are interested in such issues. Similarly, Gao's (2008) study of Chinese people's understanding of *lian* and *mianzi* reported initial difficulties in recruiting Chinese people to participate in face-to-face interviews so Gao conducted interviews through emails. These studies were helpful to me in indicating that the topic of face appears to be a sensitive one for young Chinese people and that I would need to take care in socialising my study with potential participants.

To overcome the issue of sensitivity and recruitment, Zhou and He (2005) conducted research with participants in a casual way. For example, during a meal, through conversations in term time, or even through causal chat in daily life. By greeting participants and explaining the aim of the research, they started their interview with open ended questions such as 'what do you think about *mianzi*?' or 'what do you think of when talk about *mianzi*'. Then they asked participants to give examples and clarify their ideas during the interview, as well as asking them 'what would happen if people do not have *mianzi*?'. They noted that serious questions developed during the talk and discussion and, in this way the researcher could gain a broad account of people's understanding of face and understand something of how they practice it in social interactions. Most importantly, they found that in-depth interviews enable the researcher to spot new terms and discover new themes that participants reflect on when talking about *mianzi*. This research influenced me to take an open-ended approach to interviews in everyday contexts such as the student cafeteria or the students' rooms, sitting down with them almost as a fellow student to discuss an idea.

Zhu (2005) also conducted face-to-face interview with 112 participants aged 20-35, and 89 participants aged 55 and above. Zhu designed six questions to explore participants' understandings of *mianzi* and their practices when facing potential loss of *lian/mianzi*. What I find inspiring about Zhu's data collection design was that Zhu made efforts to make participants feel comfortable and eliminate their defensiveness toward strangers (the researcher) and overcome the possible sensitivity of the topic and questions. For

example, the interviewees in Zhu's research were encouraged to refer to others' loss of face experiences, if they found it uncomfortable to talk about their own. Thus, Zhu's research gave me helpful examples of how to manage the sensitivity of specific aspects of face - such as loss of face - by getting people to discuss their observations of others and not just their own experiences.

This study was also inspired by Goffman's writings about face which I was interested in exploring in an online context for China. Goffman uses a variety of methods in his work, including ethnography, casual observations of everyday life and the analysis of a range of documents such as newspaper reports and novels. Following Goffman's example, Birnbaum (2008) conducted ethnography to explore university students' online self-presentation practices. He adopted participant observation as the hall director at a university, complemented by photo-elicitation interviewing of 30 participants, and content analysis of photographs. Birnbaum (2008) noted that the participant observation enabled him to immerse himself in student life and the photo-elicitation and image content analysis enriched the variety of data in his study. These multiple research methods provided an inspiration for this study, prompting me to adopt an ethnographic style in my interviewing, for example, by hanging out on campus, meeting participants in naturalised settings, following up by becoming a contact of some of the participants, and using photo-elicitation in interviews when the student's screen was visible, before analysing the images obtained.

Similarly, Serafinelli's (2014) study of social communication through photography on Instagram adopted netnography, mediated interviews, and visual analysis. Serafineeli (2014) states the use of netnography as an innovative way to study social practices in the interactive sphere, suggesting that mediated online studies should not be limited to online observations, but should extend to understanding the community context for social interactions. Serefinneli refers to participants' Instagram pictures as a method for enhancing the interpretation of interview material. This idea is inspiring for my study as it provides a way to elicit participants' reflections on their online practices. This is like Birnbaum's (2008) use of photo-elicitation, which invites participants to reflect on photographs and screen shots, which I also adopted in my study. I think that photo-elicitation is helpful as a prompt, encouraging participants to reflect on their own online practices, as well as helping the researcher towards a fuller understanding of the stories

behind examples of online pictures or posts complementing the things said during the interviews.

Taking these methodological considerations and the experience of previous researchers into account I decided that qualitative interviewing, using snowball sampling to contact 'friends of friends, and a combination of in-depth qualitative interviewing, pho-elicitation, netnography (becoming the contact for a sub set of my participants) and an informal and open ended interviewing style, would overcome the challenges of researching face amongst young Chinese, and provide a nuanced and rich understanding of face and social ties in social media use.

4.3 Exploratory Study: Focus Groups

The initial research aim of this study aimed to explore Chinese young people and older adults' understanding of face and their online face practices as a way into exploring the influence of modernisation in contemporary China. As young people grow up in a reformed China, older people (over 50) grew up in the period of Maoist collectivism. I thought that these contrasting contexts might shape their social practices differently, and be reflected in different understandings of face in relation to individualism and collectivism. Therefore, I conducted two pilot focus group interviews to explore these ideas and get a sense of whether examining the different groups in terms of understanding online face practices would provide a valid method for examining such ideas.

Focus group methods are often adopted in the social sciences "to discover participants' meanings and ways of understanding" (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996, p. 79). They frequently work as the precursor of quantitative research, exploring new ideas and generating hypotheses (Merton, 1987). However, the focus group can also be used as a stand-alone research method, reflecting the broad range of consensus and disagreement that people can have on a topic, which contributes to the social representation of an idea through public discussion (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). Compared with one to one interviews, focus groups help to generate discussion and different views on the same topic, to give a nuanced picture of meaning.

Furthermore, focus groups are a minimal social unit that provide a "more general group social interaction" than depth interviews (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000, p. 46). Additionally, the representations that emerge from focus groups are the result of social interaction within a group rather than personal perspectives. Bauer and Gaskell (2000, p. 46) believe that focus groups provide "a more naturalistic and holistic setting in which the participants take account of the views of others in formulating their responses and commenting on their own and others' experiences." They stress that participants in focus groups aim to establish the group identity and negotiate their own identity within the group by expressing personal ideas, as well as challenging others' views and opinions.

However, there is a chance that that the results of this panel for social interaction can either be polarised or one sided, especially when one or two participants take the initiative in expressing personal opinions in the process. For instance, if the focus group includes both a manager and his employees, the manager may have more to say in the group discussion than his employees. Therefore, in focus group studies, ensuring equality among participants is essential. To avoid a polarised discussion, I planned that the members in the focus group had relatively equal social status and were friends or familiar with each other. This is because I believe that familiarity among participants in focus groups enables the researcher to experience and observe the natural interaction between them, from the language they use, the gestures they make, and the negotiation process they may share (Morgan, 1993). Friendship groups also encourage participants to express themselves as participants more freely, with relatively fewer concerns on expressing disagreement or reflecting their disapproval (Kitzinger, 1995) in the group. These focus group qualities might also be useful in overcoming some of the recruitment and sensitivity issues discussed above.

4.3.1 Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

I used a convenience sample to recruit for the focus groups and to overcome the problems of recruitment reported in previous studies as discussed above. Five participants in the youth group were my friends, aged between 22-24 and all working in Beijing. Similarly, the five participants in the older group were my parents' friends who are working in different government institutions. The focus groups were conducted during dinner time

to take advantage of the social function of food in Chinese culture (Ma, 2015). Having meals together is an important way to maintain or strengthen interpersonal relationships with others (Ma, 2015), and the business meal is the occasion where business face practices frequently happen (Guppy, 2012). Moreover, sharing a meal creates an informal environment where participants can feel at ease, enabling a free flow of discussion (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996).

At the beginning of the meal, I briefly explained the aims of my research and gained permission to record the discussion, explaining that participants' identities would not be recorded when transcribed. Then I distributed the consent form for participants to sign. During the focus group discussions, partly due to the familiarity people had with each other, the participants were quite active in participating in the discussion and as the moderator I just needed to sit back to eavesdrop on their conversation, observing their responses. When there was a lull in the discussion I joined in, with the debate reflecting their disagreements or agreements and inviting them to elaborate or explain their views (Kitzinger, 1993).

4.3.2 Focus Group Findings

I conducted thematic analysis with the help of Nvivo in order to understand the meanings extrapolated in the groups (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Three main themes emerged: *mianzi* and *lian* are different; young people care more about face online; the pursuit of *mianzi* is tiring. All participants in the exploratory study appeared to be aware of the differences between *lian* and *mianzi*. They reached a consensus on the moral character of *lian* and that *mianzi* reflects social position and the respect of others. This is consistent with Hu's (1944) suggestion that *lian* and *mianzi* divide face in two, with the former representing moral character and the latter representing the social character of face.

The focus group with young participants reflected more on aspects of face practices in social interaction, especially the use of social media. Older participants' use of WeChat appeared to be limited to connecting with their children and friends and receiving information. Instead, young participants discussed using WeChat as an extension of their offline social life, thus, conducting face practices online so to sustain their relationship

with others seemed a necessity to them. The younger participants also noted that their online practices are not all about face but sometimes reflect personal interests or habits.

Young participants in the exploratory study also reflected on the negative impact of intensive face practices in their social life. They described it as "tiring," "empty," and "out of vanity." This finding sheds light on a new perspective on people's reflection of face practices in contemporary social life, and was not reflected in the discussion by the older group.

4.3.3 Reflections on the Exploratory Study

The aim of this exploratory study was to test the feasibility of my initial focus on age differences and the practices of face online, rather than to come to any substantive findings (Peat et al. 2002). However, it was encouraging that this exploratory study validated key themes in the previous literature. In the focus group, compared with the younger generation, the older participants had less thoughts on the relations between social media use and face practices. This may have changed, however, as when the focus group took place in 2014, most older participants were just starting to use social media, WeChat mainly serves as an instant messaging service and is used to contact their children. Hence, the lack of social media use among my older participants persuaded me to shift my research orientation from a comparison study between younger and older people, and instead focus on young people's reflections on face and social media use.

Furthermore, although the richness of the discussions in the focus groups were interesting, I felt that in that context, people were not able to develop their experience of social media and that I had limited opportunities as the researcher to follow up and probe people's reflections on face and social media. Consequently, I decided to explore the potential of in-depth qualitative interviews supplemented by a number of techniques (photo-elicitation, making friends online and follow up validation) to explore Chinese young adults' face practices in on WeChat.

The focus group findings enabled the researcher to refine the research aims for this study, which are 1). Understand Chinese young adults' social practices in both online and offline

world from the face perspective. 2). Explore Chinese young adults' perception of their mediated relationship and how they manage these relationships with the use of WeChat. To achieve these objectives, I conducted following pilot study.

4.4 Study of Chinese University Students Studying in the U.K

In September 2014, I conducted face-to-face in-depth interviews with 10 students studying at University of Leicester, in the UK. Compared with focus groups that gather evidence of public voice (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996), face-to-face in-depth interviews help to capture 'individual's voices and stories' (Hennink, Hutter, Bailey, 2011). Interviewers can explore interviewees' understandings, attitudes and feelings on the topic in focus during the face to face interview. As Fontana and Frey (2000, p. 663) note that interview is "a negotiated accomplishment of both interviewers and respondents that are shaped by the contexts and situations in which they take place." These qualities of the in-depth and qualitative enable the development of a more nuanced picture of Chinese young people's online practices, provide an understanding of their potential for achieving ethical social relations and reputation based on personal achievement. It also overcomes some of the problems of sensitivity and the limitations of public discussion of these topics.

4.4.1 Participant Recruitment and Data Collection

All face-to-face interviews were conducted among Chinese students who had been in England for one month by Sept. 2014. I used a snowballing convenience sampling method to overcome the reluctance of participants, as reported above. Four of the students were my housemates by then and the other six participants were their classmates who had agreed to participate in the study.

The interview was semi-structured with items based on Zhu's (1988) interview questions in a study exploring Taiwan people's reactions to loss of face. The interview guide used by Zhu (2005, p.163) was as follows:

1) Ask them to explain why they have experienced loss *lian* and loss *mianzi*, and explore whether they are aware of the differences between *lian* and *mianzi.*

2) Who do they think has *lian/mianzi*?

3) Explore what makes them feel loss of *lian/mianzi.*

4) Ask if they have developed any way of avoiding losing *lian/mianzi.*

5) Would they take any remedial actions after losing *lian/mianzi*?

6) how do they feel after losing *lian/mianzi*?

Inspired by above questions, I designed six interview questions: 1) How do you think about *lian/mianzi*? 2) Have you experienced any issue that make you feel of having *lian/mianzi*? 3) Have you experienced any issues that make you feel of losing *lian/mianzi*? 4) What kind of person do you consider as having *mianzi/lian*? 5) What kind of person do you consider as having no *mianzi/lian*? 6). What can make you feel loss of *mianzi/lian* on WeChat?

4.4.2 Research findings and Reflections

After transcribing the interviews and imported the transcripts into Nvivo. I began the analysis with open coding, developing a variety of nodes which reflected the key categories used by participants in the interviews (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). I then grouped these concepts into categories by grouping the nodes into family nodes. For instance, when participants suggested 'The more likes I receive, the more I feel I have face'. I developed the nodes as 'online likes' and 'online face'. The open coding and theme organising enabled me to examine concepts and categories in detail and to explore thematic patterns within these. Below are several patterns that I found helpful in developing the main study.

The online face practices also appeared to emphasise exchange. For example, for people who click 'like' on others' online posts, others should click the 'like' back, out of politeness. Otherwise, both parties lose face. Regarding the notion of a positive attitude, participants in the pilot study had already mentioned that they like to make friends who have a positive attitude also like to look at online posts that exert 'positive energy'.

This pilot study enabled me to capture participants' perception of face, through the way they make sense of social interactions with friends in both online and offline environment. This was done by taking the social context into consideration. It did make me realise that the semi-structured interview can limit people's expressive ability; the youth participants would have been more active if they could have encountered the interview as a conversation. Also, multiple kinds of interview date may provide new perspectives on understanding young people's online practices.

The pilot study interviews confirmed that this was an appropriate method for the following: developing rich responses to questions about face online; overcoming the problems identified in the literature about recruitment and sensitivity; and acknowledging my own experience of focus groups as not affording the opportunity to prompt and explore issues in depth.

4.5 Main study: Embedded Interviews with University Students in China

 After the experience of my exploratory focus group study and my pilot interview study, the main study took place in China from September 2015 to January 2016. I used a variety of methods in the main study: one-to-one face-to-face in-depth interviews, post-elicitation and photo-elicitation interviewing, computer-mediated interviews, participant observation through connecting on WeChat, and post interview validation. Detailed explanation on each method shown as below: participant recruitment, research protocol, data analysis, as well as the possibility of becoming involved in ethical issues.

4.5.1 Face-to-Face In-depth Interviewing

Following my initial round of interviews in Leicester I reflected on my experience and skills as an interviewer and decided to follow Fontana and Frey's (2000) argument in favour of the 'active listener' who aims to have a 'detailed and comprehensive talk' with interviewees to understand their language and culture. Further, in contrast to my pilot interviews, which drew on Zhu's (1988) design for a series of questions for her interview study on Chinese people's understanding of face, I decided to use a more open-ended

interview method. This is as I found that people's responses to prompts were richer and more interesting than their responses to 'set' questions.

I began to think of the in-depth interview as a 'a special kind of knowledge producing conversation' between interviewer and interviewee (Hess-Biber and Leavy, 2011). Interviewer and interviewee "co-create knowledge and meaning in the interview setting and thereby co-construct reality" (Hennink, Hutter, and Bailey, 2011, p. 109). Or as Salmons (2010, p. 40) notes, the interview "is a qualitative research technique involving a researcher who guides or questions a participation to elicit information, perspectives, insights, and feelings on behaviours, experiences, or phenomenon that cannot be observed." According to the experience of my previous research, I believe the conversation like interview is most suitable for interviewing with Chinese young people, as they like to have conversations or discussions, rather than being asked to answer questions one after the other.

Moreover, a well-constructed face-to-face interview can create an irreplaceable sense of intimacy and immediacy between interviewer and interviewee (Ean, 2010). In addition, in this study WeChat and the mobile phone enabled me to reach and connect with interviewees. I connected with some of them through social media and engaged in post-interview online follow up and validation. In this way, an interviewer can obtain depth and detail in interviewees' responses by inviting them to elaborate, justify or comment on their own posts on WeChat. The visual images help to complete the idea and enrich the data. Through this combination of methods, I aimed to explore young people's reflection on face practices in social interaction, especially through the use of social media.

4.5.1.1 Participants Selection

I selected a convenience sample of university students studying in Beijing. While there are debates on selecting university students as respondents in media studies, as Liu (2011) notes, much media research takes place using university students and consequently the voices of youth from rural areas and those who do not go to university are less heard. Carlson (1971, p. 212) even notes that students are 'unfinished' personalities at an early stage of their adult lives. Sear (1986) provides similar arguments, noting that college

students tend to have "stronger cognitive skills, less crystallized attitudes, more compliant behaviour, and less stable peer group relationships than older adults" (cited from Peterson and Merunka, 2014, p.1035). Therefore, out of the need for research replication and to enhance the generalisability of the research findings, Peterson and Merunka (2014) suggest involving non-students and people from a range of social backgrounds. They also suggest that the researcher makes it clear to address and justify in their paper if their research used a convenience sample.

Regarding studies on the Chinese concept of face, students' voices, especially university students' voices, have not been widely heard, as researchers tend to focus on the social interaction between professionals, whose social interactions are considered as varied and involving opportunities to exchange *mianzi* (Zhai, 2013). Other research has focused on rural arears where researchers believe that the traditional face concept has a strong influence on people (Jiang, 2006). For this study, I am interested in finding sample who are embracing social media and which reflected the changing conditions of contemporary China. In that sense, students who had been brought up in rural areas and who make up the prominent proportion of the urban migration, were my chief interest as I wanted to explore how the use of social media intersects with people's ideas about face and social ties. The participants in my Beijing sample turned out to be university students, but many of them came from different villages, towns, small cities across China, and study at different universities in Beijing. This population therefore fit my interest in terms of them being immersed in social media and balancing traditional and modernising Chinese culture. Thirty-nine of the participants were not local to Beijing.

4.5.1.2 Participants Recruitment

Participants recruitment took place in Beijing, China, from early September. 2015 to mid. October 2015. During this period, researcher managed to recruit 42 university students studying at universities located in Beijing, whose ages ranged from 18 to 24. Researcher applied three participant recruitment strategies one after the other in this study to build my sample: informal networks, snowballing and advertisement strategies.

Through informal network sampling, researcher managed to interview three participants studying in Beijing through my personal network. Informal network sampling takes

advantage of a researcher's personal network, and snowball sampling makes use of participants' social networks. With the help of these three people, I was able to conduct snowball sampling.

Snowball sampling enables the researcher to reach hidden populations in an economical, efficient, and effective way (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Like informal network sampling, participants take part in a study mainly to help their friends, as they are concerned that their refusal may make their friends feel embarrassed or lose face; their discussion process will be part of my research data later on. Through snowball sampling, I managed to reach a further 23 participants. These 23 participants came from three universities in Beijing, 18 from the Beijing Institute Graphic of Communication, two from the China University of Mining and Technology, and three from Ren Min University.

A disadvantage of snowball sampling is the likelihood of missing individuals who are not part of the social networks that the researcher has selected (Atkinson and Flint, 2001). Also, my plan was to reach out to 30 participants for my study, therefore, I believed it was worthwhile to reach out to more individuals, especially those from other social networks. To this end, I employed a sampling method to recruit participants from other universities through a recruitment advert using the campus bulletin board system (BBS), which is an online community where students at the same university can communicate and exchange information. Three university campuses were used: Peking University, Capital Normal University and Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications. The campus BBS at each university is only available to its students and staff and designed for accessing and exchanging information online. Therefore, I needed others' help to access their campus BBS. A friend who did his postgraduate studies at Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications contacted his friends at these three universities and managed to put out a call for research participants to respond to the online advert. (The advert is available in Appendix 1.) Sixteen participants responded to the adverts and participated in the interviews, six of them students from Peking University, five from Capital Normal University, and five from Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications.

By reflecting on the interview notes, I realised that I had reached the point of saturation for ideas as no new ideas were now emerging from the data. At this point I asked my friends to delete the advert from the campus BBSs.

In all cases I interviewed participants who are intensive WeChat users with at least 10 posts on their WeChat Moments. All participants claimed that WeChat is one of the social media platforms that they most frequently use, and took part in the post-elicitation interviewing. Among these 42 participants, 20 agreed to connect with the researcher on WeChat and to allow me to follow their WeChat updates.

I managed to obtain 42 participants for this study, even though it is acknowledged in the literature that recruiting Chinese university students for qualitative interviewing is challenging. Then there is no surprise when half of them refused to participate in the participant observation study, giving the following reasons:

(1) Compared with quantitative research, the participants saw qualitative research as time consuming. Participants noted they frequently took part in online survey, which they found easy, convenient and avoid the awkwardness of talking to a stranger (the interviewer).

(2) Chinese young people tend to stereotype qualitative studies as where one's private life is shared with acquaintances. Some people understand interviewing as psychological therapy, and expect the interviewer to help them solve their psychological problems, while others feel exposed to public view by participating in qualitative research.

(3) My identity also affected my participant recruiting in several ways. For instance, being Chinese and of a similar age to the participants eased the process of reaching out to participants, interviewing them in Chinese, understanding the terms they used and exploring the experiences they wanted to discuss. Being female also helped me gain trust from participants, as one female who responded to my participant recruitment advert explained that she felt safe responding to an online call for participants when she found out that the researcher was female. Similarly, when I was creating the online advert, my friends suggested including a personal image to enhance the credibility and attractiveness of the advert for the male participants. Additionally, since all participants in this study

were either undergraduate or postgraduate students, my role as a Ph.D. student studying in England influenced some participants to take the interview as a study abroad consultation. Some participants also saw it as a chance to meet a female Ph.D. student, a role that is frequently stereotyped as a third kind of human being, beyond male and female (Ou, 2017). Therefore, when interviewees express curiosity about the interviewer's identity and then the research topic, the interviewer needs to spend time communicating with them, answering any questions they may have, and enabling them to feel free to express themselves in the interview.

4.5.1.3 Protocol

All interviews in this study took place in the manner of a conversation. One day before the interview, I confirmed with participants to ensure they would attend, and once the appointment was settled. I sent them an invitation letter to read and sign (Appendix 2). I also let students to pick the place where they wanted the interview to take place, helping them to feel safe and relaxed. Therefore, all interviews were conducted in either coffee shops near participants' universities or in study rooms at these universities.

When we met at the café or their campus, I greeted the participants with a short conversation, asking about their studies and reasons for participation. Then I explained the procedure of the interview, how long it may take and what type of questions I may ask. Also, I notified them that the interview would be recorded and confirmed I would like to check their WeChat Moments. I also notified them that they could decide whether to connect with me on WeChat to participate in the three-month follow up participant observation study and mediated interview. Then I gave them the approved consent form to read and sign (Appendix 3).

During the interview, we started with introductions, talking about the use of social media. Then during the interview, I asked questions like 'what do you think about *mianz?'*, and 'what kind of posts do you like to create on WeChat?' Or prompts such as 'so what do you think of…?', 'what do you mean by that?'. These questions and prompts were not predesigned but reflected participants' answers and encouraged them to talk more about their use of WeChat and face related issues. Once the interview was completed I asked

the participants whether I could check their WeChat Moments, then the post-elicitation phase of the interview started.

4.5.2 Post-elicitation Interviewing

In this part of the study, the post-elicitation interviewing mimicked photo-elicitation interviewing. The latter inserts photographs into an interview and asks for responses, whereas I pointed to selected online posts during the interview. In anthropological research, photo-elicitation is based on the close connection between photograph and memory. For instance, Harper (2002) notes that the parts of the brain that process visual information are relatively older than the parts that process verbal information, therefore, an image can evoke a deeper consciousness than words, and take less brain capacity for process visual information than for processing verbal information. Therefore, photo-elicitation interviewing is more than the process of eliciting more information with the use of photographs, it also evokes a different kind of information (Harper, 2002). Anthropologist, Collier (1957) was one of the first researchers to use photo-elicitation interviewing to learn how families embedded in ethnically different communities, and how they got used to new forms of work in urban factories. Collier (1957, p. 585) states that "the pictures elicited longer and more comprehensive interviews but at the same time helped subjects overcome the fatigue and repetition of conventional interview." Similarly, ethnographer Pink (2007, p. 82) notes that individuals always produce meaning by "relating the image to his or her existing personal experience, knowledge and wider cultural discourse". In the communication process, words can help individuals express their feelings and motivations, while the individual can embed stories, interpretation, and emotions using the visual material (Flick, 2009).

This research aimed to elicit information from participants by stimulating their memories of creating or sharing posts, enabling them to reflect on their motivations, expectations, and feelings when creating these posts and interacting with their WeChat connections. Post-elicitation interviewing serves another purpose in this context, because WeChat users selectively decide which posts are available to their WeChat connection groups. For instance, some posts are only available to friends, some are for close friends, and some are made for parents. Therefore, during face-to-face interviewing the researcher could

observe participants' online posts, seeing what they were creating and who they were presenting it to. Such data would be very difficult to collect using netnography because of the selective availability of posts.

4.5.2.1 Collecting Data in the Field

At the beginning of the research, I had explained to participants that I needed to have a look at their WeChat Moments, and invited them to reflect on and explain why they create these posts, if they had any expectations while creating them, what their friends' responses were to these posts, and what would they do if they did not receive any response from others. All (42) participants agreed with this request, so I conducted this post-elicitation interview at the end of all the interviews.

There was no time limit for this interview, as it was a conversational interview based on participants' posts on WeChat. First, I invited participants to show their WeChat Moments to me and we looked at list of posts that had been created. Then I invited participants to explain what kind of posts they like to post, asking them to find an example to show me and explain the meanings behind it. Generally, I asked participants to select three posts they found meaningful, and explain the stories behind these posts. These posts needed not be limited to pictures but could also be verbal text, video, and online links. What I aimed to derive from this phase of the interview was participants' reflection on their online practices, their interaction with WeChat connections, and their online impression management practices.

As the post-elicitation interview took place right after the conversational interview I recorded the two interviews together with the use of Audio Memos, a mobile recoding App available at the Apple store. Also, I asked participants to make screen shots of the posts they mentioned and send these to me through WeChat. For the participants who did not want to connect with me on WeChat, I took pictures of their WeChat posts with my 'phone.

Once the interview was complete, I asked participants whether they had any questions, and whether they wanted to participate in the follow up research by connecting with me on WeChat. I also notified participants that their online images might appear in this thesis

and that if they had any problems or concerns with that they could draw back the pictures, or even drop out from the interview, however, no one did drop out of the research.

4.5.3 Computer Mediated Interview

Between October 2015 and December 2015, I conducted 10 computer (mobile) mediated interviews with 10 of the original 42 participants to validate some of my interpretations of the data and to check information. Computer-mediated interviewing enables the researcher to combine different media in collecting data for the research topic, it costs less, is efficient and productive (Miller, 2008). For instance, Serafinelli (2015) employed computer-mediated interviews in two ways in her study of mobile visualities and social communication via photographs on Instagram: one, the synchronous method using Skype, the other the asynchronous method via email exchange. Serafinelli (2015) believes computer-mediated interviewing responds to the full spread of familiarity that individuals have with media technologies, creates a comfortable distance between interviewer and interviewees, and makes the respondent interpret the interview as part of their everyday online communication rather than as an interrogation. Moreover, participants can overcome time and space barriers to participation through computer-mediated interviewing, especially as, in asynchronous online communication, they can take their time to check research questions and edit their answers (Heisler and Crabill, 2006).

The interviews took place in a casual way, with the researcher chatting with participants on WeChat. For the people who agreed to participate, I started the conversation by greeting them and explaining the aim of the validation research. Then I asked them to talk about how they had been doing since the face-to-face interview, their reflection on the interview, whether they had any new thoughts on the topic, and their use of WeChat. I managed to conduct eight interviews via the Video Chat service on WeChat, and two mediated interviews via Skype. The shortest video chat took 32 mins, and the longest video chat took 75 mins. The average mediated interview time was 42 mins. The most significant contribution of computer mediated interviewing is that they helped the researcher to develop reflections on the data from new perspectives. It also helped this researcher to check and validate data coding and interpretation.

4.5.4 Participant Observation

To increase the validity of the data analysis, a WeChat account with the user name: *socmedia* was used to connect with 20 of the 42 participants on WeChat. It observed their post creating practices for three months after the face-to-face interviews. The reason the observation was conducted for three months lies in my belief that participants' posts may reflect their life experiences in this period. By keeping in touch with them the researcher could develop a view of the combined practices of their online and social lives. The three months started when the participant decided to connect with the researcher on WeChat. When I connected with them I changed their WeChat name to appear on my account as their participant number, the date we connected on WeChat and the end date of the online observation.

During the participant observation, I checked participants' WeChat profile frequently to follow up participants' online posts and clicked like and commented on their posts from time to time. These practices were to make the participants aware that my WeChat account was active, otherwise they might have removed me as a contact on their WeChat contact list. Through prolonged online interaction, the researcher might become friends with participants, knowing the new changes in their lives and understanding their online practices better. Thereby I gain a sense of what they were experiencing in the social realm, and how they presented their experiences on the platform (WeChat). This interaction process mirror the online social interactions that the participants experience with their friends.

There are two advantages of conducting observation after a face-to-face interview. First, online observation can help the researcher to understand further the ideas that participants use in their interviews, and to observe the online practices described (Kawulich, 2005). Second, follow-up to online observation helps the researcher keep in touch with participants and might help to generate more data for the study when needed. There are also potential disadvantages, as I became an intensive WeChat user during this period and checked WeChat frequently. The researcher faces the dilemma of distinguishing his/her role in the online observation process, as a researcher or as a friend, and has to decide whether it is legitimate to use the data of casual conversation. In this research, I did not

develop online observation notes into transcripts and analysis in the data analysis. Instead, I took these notes as a resource to help me to understand and reflect on the interview data.

4.5.5 Date Analysis: Grounded Thematic Analysis

In the main study, I managed to interview 42 university students studying in China, with the interviews lasting from 32 mins to more than 2hrs; the average interview time was about 50mins. I collected 126 pictures of their WeChat posts. Among these students 20 participated in the participant observation, 10 of them participated in a follow-up computer mediated interview, and 20 in the participant observation. I made a table to name them according to the interview order and included some demographic information on each participant in a table, which can be found in Appendix 4.

There is a debate in the literature on qualitative methods, between those who advocate that themes emerge in the interpretative analysis of qualitative material (Singer and Hunter, 1999) and are discovered through the interpretation of qualitative data (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). In contrast, some express concern at the idea that themes reside 'in' the data (Ely et al, 1997). Emergent and discovered themes suggest themes exist in the data, but that researchers need to use their subjective perceptions to find topics in the data, then link these topics into patterns or themes. In contrast, Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis does not expect data to give out patterns in the data, in fact, it is the theoretical framework of the research accompanied by suitable research methods that arms the researcher with the capacity to 'interpret' themes that are emergent or discovered through analysis.

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10) state that "A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set". The theme does not need certain proportion of data to prove its existence, nor does it need to rely on quantifiable measures. Instead, the theme should capture essential as well as prevalent elements of the data that relate to the researchers' overall research questions. Namey et al. (2008, p. 138) also argue that thematic analysis moves beyond counting words and phrases and "focuses on identifying

and describing both implicit and explicit ideas". Thematic researchers can link concepts and opinions with data, and interpret them in many possible ways (Ibrahim, 2012)

Inductive "bottom up" (Frith and Gleeson, 2004) and deductive "top down" (Hayes, 1997) are other ways of discussing this distinction in approaches to thematic analysis. In the inductive approach, themes are closely linked to data, even when data are collected in an unstructured or open-ended way. Also, researchers' theoretical interests should not affect the identification of themes, thus "inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data without trying to fit into a pre-existing coding frame, or the teacher's analytic preconceptions" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.12). In contrast, deductive or theoretical analysis is more analyst-driven, by either the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.12). In this study, I combined these approaches, conducting the research and analysis with two major themes in mind, face and social ties, although for each of these I remained open about the sub themes emerging from the analysis. Also, I have been open to other major themes that may emerge from the analysis.

4.5.6 Transcription, Coding, and Analysis

There are three steps in the analysis process, one is interview transcription, then the raw date is coded under main themes, and finally, the development of sub-themes under the main themes is completed. The detailed procedures are explained as follows:

After all interviews were conducted, they were transcribed from the audio records. There are three steps to follow in transcribing all the interviewing recordings. First, I listened to the interview recording and wrote down my initial thoughts and ideas in a Word document. Second, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest immersing oneself in the data by repeatedly reading and checking the transcribed data. Therefore, I listened to the recording of each interview several times to both improve the accuracy of the transcription and to develop initial thoughts on the themes in the data. One of the most efficient ways to get more views on data is to listen to the recording as if it were background music while doing something else, such as jogging. This develops closeness and familiarity between the researcher and data. Third, initial thoughts and note

generation through transcription and data immersion helps the researcher to become familiar with the data and enables the initial coding process. For instance, I wrote down eight phrases that related to face, and eight phrases that related to social ties, along with one emergent theme on positive energy (Appendix 5). I also observed 10 interview questions that I asked frequently, helping me to look for patterns in the data (Appendix 6). I translated the transcripts into English and for the participants who were interested in checking the translation, I sent them the English version for validation, asking them to check whether the translated transcript represented their thoughts. I sent 10 participants their translated transcripts, and all of them were happy with the translation,

The second stage in the data analysis was to upload the transcribed data into Nvivo. Each participant's transcription data was treated as an external document in Nvivo. Since Braun and Clarke (2006) note that a theme should capture something important in the data related to the research of question, I developed face and social ties as the two main themes for this study. Then, through a process of open coding, I examined the data to identity the various subthemes of these two themes, while also allowing for the emergence of new themes in the data (beyond face and social ties). Therefore, I first created three nodes in Nvivo, face and social media, social ties and social media, and others. By using the inductive and opening coding method of observing patterns for the transcribed data, I first developed a variety of nodes, then I read more transcripts, and I organised these nodes into a node tree. For instance, I initially created an additional major theme node for 'positive attitude' when participants suggested people should be positive, then I created 'positive posts' when participants suggested online posts should contain positive energy. When the participants stated their liking for individuals with positive energy, then I put these two nodes as the sub-nodes of 'positive energy'.

I then put my initial thoughts and notes in Nvivo as memos for different nodes, to help discover the connections, foreground the coherence of the node structure and develop these into sub-themes of face and social ties, or the new themes. Themes and sub-themes need to "describe the bulk of data" (Joffe and Yardley, 2004, p. 67), be "predominant and important" (Blacker, 2009, p. 83), but do not need to reflect the full story (Ibrahim, 2012). Therefore, I conducted "data reduction" to discard nodes that did not have enough data to support them or were too divergent from the research topic (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.11; Fielden, Sillence, and Little, 2011). I then reflected on the links between

remaining sub-themes, by giving each sub-theme a title or name to reflect the essence of the data. With this analysis of sub-themes in place, I interpreted the overall story that data revealed about face, social ties and positive energy. Finally, I extracted examples from the transcripts to illustrate each theme and sub- theme.

Through photo-elicitation interviewing I collected photos of posts from participants and their reflections on these. What interested me most in this analysis were participants' reflections on their posts. In the discussion of the findings, when I extracted examples that included people's explanations of their online posts, I attached the image of the post along with it.

4.5.7 Ethical Issues

Before the data collection took place, ethical approval was obtained from the ethical committee of the Media and Communication department at the University of Leicester. All the participants were required to read and sign the consent form before they take part in this research and it was made clear to them that they could withdraw from the research at any point.

Researcher carried data collection procedures with participants' agreement, which includes record the interview process with researchers' mobile phone (iPhone 5s), invite participants to take screen shots of their posts on WeChat and send these to research through WeChat. To protect the privacy of the data, researcher also downloaded voice documents to her computer and secure them with password after every interview. Only the researcher could access this data, and the researcher's supervisors were able to check the transcript and the NVivo coding. In the consent form the researcher noted that participant has the right to request the transcript of his/her interview by contacting the researcher, while no one required this.

There were specific ethical issues concerning the participant observation phase of the research when the researcher was connected to participant WeChat, as the researcher could potentially access friend's comments and posts. However, on WeChat, friends' online profiles are only available with the permission of the participant and the researcher

did not record friends' online profiles. The researcher only asked participants to take friends' online profiles as examples in order to explain their impressions about this person and how these were formed. In these cases, only the participants' attitude toward their friends' online profiles were recorded. All information provided by the participant was considered as confidential. None of the participants' names appear in the thesis, and anonymous quotations have been used with participants' permissions.

The follow up online observation data collection was not straight-forward. I notified participants in the interview invitation and consent form that the researcher would conduct an online observation for three months. Students who participated in the interview but who did not want to participate in the online observation could click 'No' on the consent form, in which case the researcher would not connect with them on WeChat. As Birnbaum (2008) notes, it is impossible to delineate which role the online observer takes, as sometimes it could be causal checking, or sometimes the participants may contact the researcher for a chat like a friend. Therefore, I did not use the online observation data for analysis but used it as an experience to help me interpret and reflect on the interview data. Also, I notified each participant of their online observation date, then they could decide to keep the researcher as a WeChat contact or not.

Although the researcher kept a record of participants' posts and comments, this information does not appear completely in this thesis, only parts of the posts and comments appear with participants' consent. If the participants did not want their comments to be shown in my work, their comments were subsequently deleted. None of the information about the participants' friends was to be used unless I received consent from the friend. On the consent form, the researcher notified the participants that they had the full right to drop out of the research within three months of the interview taking place, however, no-one did drop out.

Chapter 5 — Emotional Face: Feeling of Having Face

5.1 Introduction

As the nation that is well-known for its *mianzi* culture, early researchers tend to make a distinction between the notion *lian* and *mianzi*, as well as from Western researchers' study on face. For instance, Hu (1944) suggests having *lian* (moral face) provides the basis for the individual to function well in a community, and *mianzi* (social face) reflects the social position of the individual in their community. Fei (1948) in a study of socioeconomic development in rural China suggests that in the small-scale peasant economy in China resulted *lian* was very important as not being able to function well within one's community means not being able to make a living. *Mianzi* shares some similarities with Goffman's (1967) study of face, as he explains face as a social gift that is given by society so long as individuals perform within appropriate lines of conduct. People face the risk of losing face or being out of face by acting out of line. This temporary or unstable feature *mianzi*, prompts researchers like Hwang (2006) and Gao (2008) to argue that losing *mianzi* can be temporary while losing *lian* can jeopardize individuals' social image, which is hard to restore. Nonetheless, participants in this research provide a rational way to evaluate the importance of *lian* and *mianzi* in different social interaction.

The recent changes in China, the new modernization, includes rapid urbanization meaning that people's social relations have often shifted from small agrarian communities to the city, a space in which there are many interactions with strangers. In this context, the moral face which worked as a social sanction in traditional communities appears to be losing its power. As Zhai (2011) notes, people without *lian* are more likely to refer to having social resources than being morally upright in a community in today's China. Participants reflect these concerns in their criticism of the increasing immorality that they have experienced or have explored on social media, and note that instead of following traditional moral standards, people need to develop and get used to new social rules.

Wu (2010. p121) suggests "family life and social status provide social face, morality provides moral face, and clever strategy provides political face. Even when all these are lacking, one who wants to be a full person has psychological face." Correspondingly,

participants attach notable importance to psychological face, which is a feeling of having face from personal perspective. I name this 'emotional face'. According to participants, having face needs is not limited to others' recognition, as their self-esteem can speak louder than others' recognition in the form of emotional face.

I have not mentioned the use of social media nor WeChat to this point, not because they are not important, but because participants believe that even though people are immersed in the Internet and social media, there is always a time that we talk about daily issues without mentioning them. In fact, one of the initial thoughts that motivated me to explore face on social media is the increasing scene people who are second generation rich flaunt their wealth online. Chinese people like to call an individual who displays high consumption as *hao mianzi* (like *mianzi*). The feeling is that flaunting wealth and beauty online is displacing the expression of other aspects of face in the online environment, particularly moral and psychological aspects of face.

5.2 Sociability and Personal Achievement is the Nature of *Mianzi*

This theme encapsulates two aspects of *mianzi* that participants regard as significant when evaluating whether an individual has *mianzi* or not. One is others' recognition of *mianzi* that an individual wants to claim; the other is an individual's psychological feeling of emotional face.

I derive the idea of emotional face from the personal aspects of face. For instance, Hu (1944) argues that the loss of *lian* is equivalent to the loss of personhood (*diu ren*) to emphasize being morally upright is necessary to be a person. Wu (2009, p. 120) develops this idea further by suggesting that the Chinese concept of face is based on the "idea of the cultivation of emotion and morality to make people more human" rather than the "sacred self" which is reflected in Goffman's (1967) work. Youth in this study place notable importance on social and emotion face rather than on moral face. The traditional Chinese concept of face highlights moral face by suggesting people are gregarious creatures that need to live collectively. In contrast, participants in this research consider sociability as more vital in occupying resources and social capital to win in power games.

Participants' awareness of the social character of face is reflected in their notion of having/losing *mianzi*. For instance, participants claim that a wide range of issues can stimulate feelings of having or losing *mianzi*. For instance, participants experience feeling having *mianzi* for 'passing a vital examination', 'receiving compliments from peers', or 'even being respected by waiters in the restaurant'. Correspondingly, they feel a loss of *mianzi* for 'forgetting to bring their purse while shopping', 'receiving [a] rebuff from others', or 'failing in an examination'. Participants claim they experience emotional face from trivial matters, although they need social face to enhance self-esteem and confidence to function well in the society.

For instance, participant 1 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) notes that individuals can experience the feeling of having/losing *mianzi* with or without the presence of others.

> If you are a student and you study well, then you have *mianzi*. If you are an employee and you work well, then you have *mianzi*. Even if people do not recognise every small achievement you have made, so long as you are proud of and happy with your achievement, then you have *mianzi*.

Participant 3 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) provides a similar statement as participant 1:

> I get a feeling of having *mianzi* when I manage to pass a difficult examination, especially when others cannot manage it. Of course, I cannot be better than others in all aspects, but if I have done my best that is enough… I also feel *diu ren* (loss of personhood/*mianzi*) when I trip and fall in front of the people I like…that is so embarrassing… [laugh]

By understanding this as a statement of the personal or emotional aspect of face, I believe participant 3) is reflecting on the constitution of self, in which 'I' represents the object and 'me' refers to the subject of self. Mead (1913, p. 375 cited in Dawson, 2016, p. 81) explains the relationship between 'me' and 'I' as "it is only as the individual finds himself

as he acts towards others, that he becomes a subject to himself rather than an object, and only as he is affected by his own social conduct in the way he is affected by that of others, that he becomes an object to his own social conduct." I understand Mead's statement as there is mutual influence between 'me' and 'I', they continuously shape and develop each other along with the influence of others in social interaction, which constructs the trajectory of the self.

Participant 3 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) talks of feeling an increase in *mianzi* when achieving high scores in examinations, and a loss of *mianzi* when tripping and falling in front of others. She does not develop these ideas by herself, but from her social interaction experiences and knowledge of the social context. I believe that participants' conception of feeling of having face is not to suggest the unimportance of others' recognition, but that they spend time in self-introspection. Self-introspection enables the individual to prepare for interaction with others, as well as managing psychological practices as an individual.

As an example of the inseparableness of 'me' and 'I' in the make up the self, participants find the psychological aspect of face are frequently associated with social face. For instance, Participant 32 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) from HeNan province says he wants to work and live in Beijing after graduation. He states that being able to have an apartment and Beijing *Hukou* (household registration) after graduating would make him feel a sense of *mianzi*, otherwise, he would feel a loss of *mianzi*. As he explains:

> If a middle-aged man, who lives in Beijing, does not even have an
> apartment, a car, nor Beijing *hukou*. Even if people say nothing about
> it, he, himself, would feel ashamed and have no *mianzi*.

Participant 32 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) believes people have *mianzi* rhrough appropriate levels of achievement for their age. The *mianzi* he desires stems from experiencing a sense of achievement and enhanced self-esteem, as well as from others' recognition. As Zhai (2005) notes individuals who conduct self-cultivation to gain admiration for their moral character focus on career achievements through personal effort are not practicing *mianzi*. *Mianzi* is not only about what individuals have but more about with whom individual interaction with, hence, individuals' *mianzi* depends on the

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importance others give to them (Zhai, 2005). Zhai's (2005) statement is like Goffman's (1967) argument that individuals can only have face by claiming it from others and gaining others' recognition.

Participant 31 (male, aged 24, first-tier university) notes:

> *mianzi* is how others think about you; you may think you are smart, while you turn out to be a fool in others' eyes. They may be polite to you without commenting on your practices, while they will avoid having further interaction with you, nor will they help you in need. To see whether people give you *mianzi* or not is to see if there is anyone will help you when you are in need.

An important issue is who makes up these 'others' or 'people'? Participant 30 (male, aged 20, first-tier university) states 'people who you care about' or 'acquaintances', or even 'strangers'. As I am going to explain in a following chapter on social ties, participants give greater importance to people they are familiar with as opposed to acquaintances. Traditionally, Chinese people prioritize protecting the face of a family member over a stranger. Similarly, having a family member's recognition may make an individual feel better than receiving compliments from a stranger (Hu, 1944; Fei, 1948). For participants, family members are significant others from whom they develop knowledge of self and who they invest emotion in (Andersen and Chen, 2002). Acquaintances help individual to gain the knowledge of values within their community and make individuals understand others' expectations. Apparently, what participants mean when they mention "others" is the role others play in their life. For instance, participants understand expectations from parents and are also aware of expectations from close friends, and acquintances.

By recalling Goffman's (1967) notion on the sacred self and Wu's (2009) understanding of the personal aspects of the self, both emphasise the importance of claiming face or *mianzi* in social interaction. Participants recognise the importance of having face by suggesting that a new trend in social interaction is '*hui jiao ji*' (sociability) and '*hui zuo ren*' (know how to be human). For instance, participant 32 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) describes people who are sociable as:

I have a friend who is good at socialising; he can manage a relationship with whomever he meets. Even waiters in restaurants like him; he has just got that skill to make everyone happy. People all like individuals who can socialise and make them feel comfortable. I wish I could be like him, while it turns out I cannot, because I do not know how, without feeling hypocritical, to say nice words to people that I am not familiar with. I really admire, or even envy, people who can do that.

Participant 35 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) takes it upon himself to emphasize the importance of being sociable and gaining *mianzi* through social interaction.

Everyone cares about their *mianzi*; who does not care about their *mianzi*? I think everyone wants to have *mianzi*, and especially want others to give them *mianzi*. I give *mianzi* to everyone I meet, no matter whether we are familiar with each other or not. Even if they have killed someone, so long as they do not endanger me, why should I not give them *mianzi*? I can at most prevent them from threating my interests, while I cannot not give them *mianzi* in public.

5.3 A Modified Way to Sustain Moral Face

The importance that participants in this research give to social face (*mianzi*) does not deny the importance of *lian* or moral standing, however, they do appear to be exploring a different perspective on moral face reflecting the importance to them of social interaction. The argument that *lian* represents the moral character of an individual the loss of which make it impossible for an individual to function well in the community (Hu, 1944), or the interpretation that *lian* is the "minimum moral level that defines a person's membership in Chinese society" (Jia, 2001, p. 39). Wu (2009) understands people's need for face as arising from the character of human nature to live a family life, to have dignity, to gain moral capital and to participate in power games. However, Wu (2009) also states that individuals can still gain moral capital and face even if they have broken some moral rules. Social rules are changeable and developed within society, participants' reflection on face practices in social life also indicate that the meanings of moral face and the

standards of being morally upright are open to change as part of the modernization of China, and reflected in the use of social media. Two themes are developed in this analysis. One is the role and importance of *lian* as moral face; the other is the changing meaning of moral face and being morally upright. The first theme reflects the traditional interpretations of *lian* while the second theme reflects the changing meaning of *lian* and moral face in the context of social mobility and economic development in China, accompany by the popularize of social media usage.

5.3.1 *Lian* Relates to Issues of Significant Consequence

Compared to the idea that *mianzi* is 'neutral' and 'not that important', participants consider *lian* as related to 'inner and important things', 'serious issues', and as 'deeper than *mianzi*'. Participant 1 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) states:

> *Mianzi* is neutral, while *lian* is much deeper and serious, only people
> who have done something immoral, they do not have *lian*…

Participant 6 (female, aged 20, second-tier university) reinforces the idea that *lian* relates to individuals' moral character by giving an example of the monitor in her class who tried to bribe lecturers to pass an examination and win a scholarship:

> It is ok for her not to have high score as a monitor, whereas it is a fault
> in moral character when she tries to play tricks to gain high scores. She
> may be considered as having *mianzi* by getting a high score and having
> a good relationship with lecturers, but I think it is *diu ren* (loss of
> humanity) because she loses opportunities to make friends with
> classmates who could have been her life-long friends.

Participant 33 (male, aged 23, first-tier university) provides a similar statement to participant 6 when describing people who he considers as 'bu yao *lian*' (do not have *lian*).

> To me, people who play tricks to win the scholarship, and start a quarrel
> and swear in public are all quite *bu yao lian*.

The young adult participants in this research are all university students, therefore, ranking in class and scholarships from school are important to them. Considering Gao's (2008, p. 180) notion that *lian* is "restricted to issues of significant consequences", it becomes easy to understand the disdain participants have toward classmates who play tricks to achieve high scores and scholarships. I am not surprised that participants raise concerns about classmates who dishonestly gain high scores and winning scholarships. What does surprise me, however, is that it appears that these cases happen so frequently that participants normalize these cheating practicing and describe such people as *hu lai shi* (sophisticated) and *gao guanxi* (know how to play with *guanxi*).

> We do not even talk about these cases with people outside our class not to say to turn them in to university. In fact, what they do is normal, everyone likes people who can speak nice words and be obedient to them. Even when we go to work, employers will like employees who are *hui lai shi* (sophisticated) and know how to manage relationship with others (Participant 4, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

Hu (1944, p. 45) once suggests that *lian* is "both a social sanction for enforcing moral standards and an internalized sanction", people follow social rules and internalize moral standards so as to be able to function in their community. Against the grain of this idea participants in this research appear to be aware of and openly discuss the flexibility of social rules. As Wu (2009) suggests social rules are made by humans and are therefore changeable. To me, young people in my study appear to be aware of the changeable nature of social rules and understand that social life in university and in the broader society are different from the interactions they have had before university.

Zhai (2011) claims that contemporary Chinese people are paying greater attention to *mianzi* (social face) than *lian* (moral face) without suggesting that this is an extreme shift, because moral and social aspects of face are both important. People are isolated living in cities compared to traditional communities. However, in the city they are embedded in wider social networks and have increased chances to enjoy prestige and an ostentatious lifestyle, with greater scope for personal achievement. Both Hu's (1944) moral face and Goffman's (1967) interaction rituals send the message that individuals construct self in

different ways to fit in with society. Therefore, the context in which individuals live significantly affects which aspect of face they find most important. It appears that participants in this research are developing the idea that the social aspect of facing is becoming increasing important, and that the moral aspect of face is changing.

5.3.2 Crisis and Change in Being Morally Upright

Participants are aware of the idea of shifting morality in China and how this is linked to face and the traditional concepts of *mianzi* and *lian*. Participant 30 (male, aged 20, first tier university) was doing an internship in a design company when his interview took place. According to him, the internship experience opened a door for him to have a look at the 'real world' and the people he works with in the company challenge his *san guan* (three essential views which includes values, philosophy, and world view).

> There are always a few people who like to take advantages of interns, steal interns' creative ideas, and make interns do most of the work, while putting their name on it…Even if we (interns) tell the management team, they would not get into trouble, as their work experience enables them to find a well-paid job in other small companies. Small companies value people who have worked in international companies, as their work experience can be a selling point for the company as it signifies quality and international connections (Participant 30, male, aged 20, first-tier university).

Participant 30's notion that the exponential emergence of new companies increases mobility is interesting. The question is, in such circumstances, whether mobility means that they escape the sanctions that according to Hu (1944) leads exclusion from the community. In traditional Chinese society people relied on community and family to gain 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991), but the Chinese state now encourages social mobility to achieve modernization. Institutions such as schools, markets, and work places all encourage people to be mobile so as to be rewarded with work opportunities and increased life chances. In this emerging self-determining society, democracy, civil society and welfare are not in place to protect people while traditional communities and families are not as influential as before. People in China seek 'ontological security' through their

own efforts as a project of the self (Giddens, 1991). When social mobility combines with individualism, the moral world among Chinese young people is concerning and worth further exploration.

Returning to participant 6 (female, aged 20, first-tier university) who commented on the class monitor who tried to bribe teachers to receive a scholarship, this participant believes that social mobility provided the class monitor with a reason to conduct immoral practices. As she explains:

> Maybe she (the monitor in the class) thinks we are just classmates, we will separate after graduation and may never meet each other afterwards. Whereas, we could have been life-long friends.

Similarly, participant 1 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) supports participant 6's (female, aged 20, first-tier university) notion by taking the use of social media into consideration.

> I registered as VIP in a gym store, hardly have I started go there, the store is closed. I cannot go to police for such small things…I tried to get in touch with their employees with whom I had connected on WeChat. However, they just told me the boss ran away and they could not do anything about it. While all I can do is to curse them as *bu yao lian* (shameless), which really does not mean anything.

By looking through participants' descriptions of immoral conduct, it appears that young people feel upset and angry not merely because others are immoral, but mostly due to their powerlessness in preventing immoral conduct and in bringing immoral people to account. In the traditional village, there are clearly defined rites and moral standards to regulate individuals' social practices. Failing to conform would leave an individual facing punishment, the worst case being dismissal from the community. In contrast, in the context of widespread social mobility in today's China, rites and moral rules that based on traditional collective communities have less deterrent for individuals who migrate to urban cities, consequently, *lian* as moral face is losing its traditional ans social regulative character.

Although participants discuss immorality according to traditional moral rules, I consider it as a phenomenon reflecting social transition in China rather than condemning China as being in a moral crisis. In fact, participants' statements also indicate new moral rules for modern community are emerging often based on traditional norms. For instance, Chinese people prefer to adopt *qing* (feelings) in sustaining their social relationships, which as participant 1 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) believes the *gan qing* between him and employees in the store could have helped him better than going to police. When employees refused to help, he experienced a feeling of betrayal and anger. Ironically, he might not have cursed employees as *bu yao lian* (shameless), if they had helped him. Instead, he might describe this story in a much more positive way by praising employees' virtues. What I want to note here is that high social mobility during the social transition of a society, complicates the process of setting standard social rules in regulating people's social practices.

Undefined moral rules also cause confusion among participants, who question whether to follow traditional moral rules to live a humble life regardless of the pursuit a prosperous life. Participant 10 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) described her friend's boyfriend who is a disabled writer and lives in poverty while still showing strong compassion for people in need. She described him as:

> [He is] a warm-hearted person. However, he is so naïve and idealistic which makes him not suitable for this society…there are numerous talented writers in China, people would not like him just because he is disabled or being nice to others. People feel sorry for him but will not really help him. We all like to interact with people who are outgoing, sociable…if people stubbornly stick to his own thoughts, then no one would like to communicate with him even if they know him to be a nice person.

Zhai (2011) describes the disabled writer as an individual with *lian* but without *mianzi*, because they are stubborn and inflexible. These people are like misfits who live in modern China, failing to socialise or occupy resources in power games. Conversely, individuals with no *lian* and no *mianzi* are more skilled at socializing and gaining resources (Zhai,

2011). Chinese people are simply in a dilemma about whether to remain morally upright to face the risk of living an impoverished life or to pursue personal achievement to live a profound life. As participant 10 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) suggests, the disabled poet must have the ability to feed his family first, then he can think about his personal dream and help others. All in all, make a living in a society lacking welfare support is more important than sticking to traditional moral rules.

Participant 25 (female, aged 23, first-tier university) supports Participant 10's statement by suggesting that people prefer to interact and connect with others who will potentially benefit them, rather than making friends with individuals who are morally upright but stubborn.

> We all say we look for friends with high moral character, while in practice we either look for like-minded people, or role models, or people who are more successful and better than us. Like-minded people comfort you when you are in need; successful role model guides you to move upward.

I understand the reason to connect with exemplary individuals in social life reflect the rational character of face, which means individual can have face by connecting with people who have face. For instance, individuals who have *mianzi* and *lian* tend to possess knowledge, character, talent, social status, or other achievements that are recognizable to others (Zhai, 2005). In contrast, others who lack of these characteristics want to connect with such individual so to benefit from their reputation, wealth, and social status (Zhai, 2005). Individuals give *mianzi* to others by agreeing to share their resources with them. Therefore, they express their appreciation and gratitude, and compliment the individual to enhance the individuals' feeling of having *lian* and *mianzi*. In contrast to the notion of taking advantage of others' success here the idea is to reward them with compliments to enhance their *mianzi*. Participants believe they are developing equal and reciprocal friendships with others, they believe that the aim of connecting with someone beneficial is to become a better self and move upwards together. For instance, they contribute supportive friendship, keep their passion to learn, and have ambition to move upward. In turn, others provide social resources, moral support, and inspirational ideals.

5.4 Gendered online self-presentation and face practices

This theme draws on the notion that participants first reflect when considering *lian/mianzi*. Participants' narratives on face fall into two categories: one is physical appearance, whilst the other related to material wealth. Goffman (1959) might categorize these as two dimensions of personal front. There can be an intimate connection as well as a gender distinction between them. For instance, participants note that compared to men, women are more interested in gaining face by presenting a 'pretty face' and flaunting the possession of material goods. In contrast, participants suggest that to be successful and wealthy is more important for men than for women when constructing social face both online and offline. Other than these gendered notions, participants develop the idea of having face based on their social role as a university student, which suggests that individual's achievements at university affect others' impressions of them. According to participants' statement, I develop an understanding of their claims to face through online representation in three themes, which are having *mianzi* by having a pretty face, the risk of flaunting material wealth, and appropriate online practices for young people at school.

5.4.1 Having *Mianzi* by Having a Pretty Face

Participant 23 (female, aged 22, first-tier university) is a *Weishang* (WeChat merchant), who sells cosmetics online. Against my prediction that women make up the large proportion of participants in such posts, she says that most of her customers are men who want to buy gifts for their girlfriends. According to her, these male customers are more generous than female customers; and she knows well how to attract their attention and persuade them to buy.

> I present edited selfies on WeChat from time to time, because I have a
> large number of male customers. Normally, men are nice to beautiful
> girls. I post selfies from time to time to indicate I do not simply use this
> account for selling products, but also for interacting with friends. Some
> male customers like to buy products from me, and sometimes they pay
> extra money and tell me to keep the change.

Participant 36 (female, aged 22, first-tier university) agrees that men are more likely to respond to edited compared to unedited online selfies. Therefore, she posts edited online selfies so to receive likes when she is in a low mood.

> Sometimes I do not consider the edited selfies are beautiful, but I do receive more compliments when I upload edited selfies. Boys like these edited selfies. They are so stupid that they cannot tell it is an edited selfie. I upload a selfie from time to time when I feel upset, and people like it, it is quite satisfying even though I do not want to develop a relationship with any of them.

Kapidzic and Herring's (2015, p. 969) study of teens' profile pictures on chat sites finds that girls are more likely to present seductive profile pictures than boys, as teens "have internalised the societal message that women should be submissive and sexually alluring and men should be powerful and emotionally remote". In this study, participants note that beautiful girls have *mianzi*, as they can achieve what they want by presenting their beauty to others. For instance, participant 23 can attract male customers and participant 36 can attract others' attention and enhance self-esteem. This finding is partially consistnt with previous research findings. For instance, Sung et al. (2016) suggest that attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment are key motivations for individuals positing selfies on SNSs. Chua and Chang's (2016) study of Singapore teenage girls' online selfies finds that girls' strategically self-present online and seek peer recognition out of feelings of low self-esteem and insecurity. They further note that peer comparison serves as one reason that arises from individuals' feelings of insecurity and low self-esteem. Similarly, Keleeman et al. (2018) also states that manipulated photos frequently relate to low body image, and that social comparisons negatively impact on adolescent girls' judgements of manipulated Instagram photos on body image, which make them rate manipulated photos more positively than original photos. Participants do note that manipulated selfies are quite common on WeChat, especially among female WeChat users.

Instead of focusing on individual personal characters, some participants consider there to be an overwhelming online beauty standard in media and social contexts. For instance, participant 5 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) states:

> *Wang Hong*[28] Beauty is just a straight male aesthetic, they like girls with beautiful face, slim body figure, and long legs, tight waist. Girls with these features are beautiful, while that is not the only beauty standard. The problem is everyone is following this aesthetic and changing their attitude toward others. For instance, if you fit this standard, boys will like you more. While if you do not fit this standard, then boys think you are not that beautiful. That is the problem we are having.

According to participant 5, WeChat selfies reproduce traditional gender stereotypes, in which women present themselves in certain ways to show their subordination to men. It would be worth further exploration of the notion of popularized online beauty standards, e.g. flawless white skin, big round eyes, and slim body figure. Existing research on advertising and media effects notes that gender representations in advertisings and media affect people's ideology of gender. For instance, in a content analysis of Instagram users' online selfies, Doring, Reif, and Peschl(2016) find that young women's online selfies include the subordination codes defined by Goffman (1979) and Kang (1997), such as feminine touch, lying posture, imbalance, withdrawing gaze, loss of control, and body display. They note that media content itself does not necessarily result in gender stereotyping in online selfies, instead, media audiences' evaluations and interpretations affect their online practices and attitude toward gender stereotypes. Similarly, some female participants in this study perceive edited selfies as presenting beauty, while most female participants emphasize that they feel more confident and have *mianzi* by presenting their personal character and working ability rather than through their beauty.

As Kramer et al. (2017) finds, men in general are less likely to create and post selfies on SNSs compared with women, and people have gendered perceptions of the same practices. Participants in this study do not give positive comments on males who post edited selfies on WeChat, as they consider the selfie creating practice itself is too feminine for men, which can make them lose *mianzi* rather than claiming it. For instance, participant 1 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) notes:

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[28] *Wang Hong*, Internet celebrity.

I do not consider a man who likes to post selfies online as normal, it is too *niang* (girly). Men should post images that relate to at work and other useful things…

5.4.2 The Risk of Flaunting Material Wealth

The close connection between personal achievement and *mianzi* makes it impossible to talk about *mianzi* without talking about wealth. Hu (1944), for example, makes the strong statement that poor people do not have *mianzi* and Jiang (2006) argues that Chinese people are passionate about conducting conspicuous consumption to gain *mianzi*. Although participants in this study talk about the relationship between having *mianzi* and wealth only one participant expressed an interest in making money and having a high-standard of living:

> I want to be a *wen yi qing nian* [arty youth]. I understand *wen yi qing nian* as the individual with good taste who lives a high standard of life, I think only when you have money do you have a chance to decide what kind of life you want to live, and have more chances to connect with upper class people (Participant 30, male, aged 20, first-tier university)

In contrast, the rest of the participants are reserved in expressing their attitude toward wealth, frequently stating that they do not consider being wealthy equal to having *mianzi*.

> I am not *fu er dai* (second-generation rich) and do not know their life. While I do not like people who flaunt their material wealth online, like what they have bought, what brand they use, and which restaurant they have been [to], which countries they have travelled to. I do not like that and do not think they have *mianzi*. (Participant 32, male, aged 22, first-tier university)

> People who were born into a wealthy family may consider that they have *mianzi*, while I do not think so. I admire people who impress

others with their abilities rather than their parents' money (Participant 4, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

Ironically, despite the distain for excessive displays of wealth online, participants do feel that having face frequently reflects wealth and high social status. For instance:

Mianzi is when you dress nicely and walk into a fancy restaurant, the waiters are willing to open the door for you, and treat you with politeness (Participant 34, female, aged 22, first-tier university).

I do not think girls need to have many expensive designer bags, while I do agree girls need to have several expensive bags. Because you just feel good when you have them and others will treat you differently when they look at you (Participant 36, female, aged 22, first-tier university).

These statements are similar to Winter's (cited in Fan, 2016) explanation that China is a country whose wealth stratification was eliminated in the Communist Revolution (1966-1976) then re-emerged during the social reformation (1979). However, the absence of the old aristocracy leaves the new rich without role models to emulate and without a template of how to spend and display wealth. Winter goes on to argue that the old aristocracy knew how to remain secluded and be less visible and to protect their wealth, but that new wealth needs to assert itself through conspicuous consumption (cited in Fan, 2016). Most participants describe wealthy people as passionate in flaunting family wealth through conspicuous consumption, which they find meaningless and have negative impressions of such wealthy individuals. However, the main reason that they feel offended by others showing off is that they believe others are sharing something that most people cannot have. To put it simply, they see people who show off as different from people in their peer group and their uniqueness as contrasting with their own lives. Respondents feel upset, annoyed, jealous, and have a sense of self-loathing when they think of the new rich. Lin and Utz (2015) explains young people's disdain and negativity toward wealthy peers as envy, a pain that is caused by others' good fortune, especially when the second-generation rich are almost same age as most youths but enjoy a much more lavish lifestyle.

Regardless of possible jealousy toward peer's wealth participants express concern toward what they regard as misguiding online presentation.

> You can see whether an individual is showing off or not. If they show something that most of us cannot have then they are showing off. I know someone who likes to post pictures with expensive bags, good restaurants, and foreign travel. She posts this because she knows that others cannot have these things and will admire her for it. However, for me, she is just being shallow and is showing off… (Participant 5, female, aged 23, second-tier university)

Participants note their disdain toward others' flamboyant online practices, mostly out of their suspicion of such online self-presented. Individuals who present a pretentious life online while living a plain and simple life offline discredits the individual in their eyes. These views have a gendered dimension, as participants appear to agree that women have a higher tendency to claim *mianzi* through making a show of material goods and are more likely to present false impressions in online environments.

> I have a friend – she always borrows money from others. However, she presents herself like a second-generation rich person on WeChat by sharing pictures in good restaurants, buying expensive products, and travelling abroad. I do not know where she gets the money and I feel she is cheating others (Participant 14, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

> Girls like the superficial things that make others think they care more about *mianzi*. For instance, they care more about their appearance [and] they like to go shopping, and like to compare with others (Participant 30, male, aged 20, first-tier university).

> I do not like girls who take a selfie and must show the brand of their bags, restaurant environments, and even a Starbucks cup. I do not have friends like that but I know women who like to do this (Participant 15, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

However, there is a double standard in judging women and men's online flaunting of wealth. Participants express higher acceptance toward men as they consider it necessary for men to present personal achievements by presenting the material goods they have:

> It is normal for a man to present what they have online, as they need to attract girls' attention, and people would think either he is from a wealthy family or he has done some work to make the fortune. While if women flaunt expensive things, they have on WeChat, people would say they are materialistic and start gossiping about where she got the money from to afford all these things (Participant 1, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

> Girls care more about their appearance and they like to buy cosmetics and expensive things and show them online. When other girls see these pictures, they ask their boyfriends to buy these expensive things for them. Whereas, we are just students right now; they have been too vain (Participant 14, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

Hong Fincher (2014), in her study of leftover women in China finds that women are in an inferior position in receiving help from their families to make down payments on an apartment. Instead, they are taught and believe that they have the responsibility to provide financial support to their brothers, male relatives, and even future husbands in buying an apartment. Professional women sacrifice the chance for promotion and the right to put their name on deeds so as not to leave the impression of being strong and shrewd and scare potential suiters away. This phenomenon also reflects the problematic socialist gender ideology in post-reform China in which the socialist state emphasis gender equality to encourages women to participate in socialist construction, but instead of granting women equal rights and benefits with men, they end up requiring women to sacrifice their private family for the country (Ji et al., 2017). Furthermore, Confucian patriarchy still plays an important role in Chinese society, based on the sentiment that "men are in charge of the outside world and women in charge of internal affairs", it is a custom for women to present their subordination to men and serve within the family (Ji et al. 2017, p. 767). As mentioned in Chapter 5, male participants state they experience

mianzi by owning an apartment, having a car, or registering as a Beijing householder, as they consider personal achievements enhance their roles in society and in the family. The contradiction between socialist and traditional gender ideology leave women in a dilemma, as they need to compete equally with men regardless of biological differences in the work places, while playing gendered roles as traditional women in the family, personal relationships and in their public self-presentation.

People tend to hold a suspicious attitude toward women who express eagerness for material products and are ambitious for their careers and upward social mobility. Such ambitions are taken to indicate that they would increase pressure on a man to achieve financially as it indicates that she might not be able to budget well for her future family. Similarly, women who strive for upward social and career mobility need to compete with men, which might be seen as a challenge by men who presume that women should sustain their traditional roles and go back to the family and their subordination toward men. Both female and male participants note that it is important for woman to give *mianzi* to man by listening to his orders while he is with his friends. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why men accept females who flaunt their body and undertake submissive practices, while feeling threatened when females flaunt their wealth, especially presenting purchasing power.

Participants in this study do not think wealth equates to having *mianzi*, instead, they suggest that wealth is not the only way to gain *mianzi*. and that flaunting wealth on WeChat may make an individual lose *mianzi*. However, determining what kinds of practices on WeChat belong to flaunting wealth online is ambiguous and difficult to define. Participants' characteristics and strength of social ties with others can all affect their evaluation of whether an individual is sharing information with them or flaunting wealth online. As Participant 37 (female, aged 22, second-tier university) states:

> One's attitude toward flaunting wealth really depends on people – real friends will be happy with what you achieve, while narrow-minded people will see whatever you post on WeChat as flaunting. The key thing is to be neutral – neither to be too negative nor too positive – like share something about your life, your study, and simple travel with friends, instead of the luxury of high-end things.

I do not like to show off; it does not bring me anything except for upsetting others (Participant 27, male, aged 22, first-tier university).

Given the potential risk of losing *mianzi* when presenting edited beauty and material goods, participants agree that creating or sharing study and work-related posts is appropriate on WeChat, especially when the individual is connecting with his/her parents and teachers.

5.4.3 Appropriate Online Practices for Young People at School

This theme reflects elements that most participants consider to be important in constructing their identity and self-esteem and the appropriate ways to enhance face online. Fraser (1990, p.228) considers face as 'individual's self-esteem'. Participants appear to agree and note that work related achivements (e.g., internship or working experiences) and academic achievements (e.g., formal schooling and extracurricular activities) make them feel proud and experience m*ianzi*. What is notable is the extra importance participants place on the ranking of the university at which one studies and one's performance at the university. Generally, they believe the higher tier university one enrols in, the better the student is acting out his/her social role, and better chances for him/her to select their friend circles.

Half the participants in this research study at *yiben* (first-tier university) and half of them study at *er ben* (second-tier university)[29]. The students from first-tier universities and postgraduate students express higher satisfaction toward their university and feel proud of themselves for being able to be part of it. Conversely, undergraduate students from second–tier universities have a greater tendency to express their dissatisfaction with the university they are studying at.

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[29] Yiben universities tend to belong to 211 project and 985 project, which receive financial support from the state directly and aim to meet international standards. Er ben universities are 'bureau' rank and *San ben* (third tier universities) are vice-bureau rank and receive financial support from local government.
Zhao, L, T. (2017). Chapter 5 Higher Education. In: *China's Development: Social Investment and Challenge*. World Scientific Publishing. pp.74-94.

Participant 13 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) was a second-year undergraduate student at the Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication (BIGC) when the interview took place in 2015. BIGC is a second-tier university located in the south of Beijing. Participant 13 hails from Guangdong Province, and explains his reasons for coming to study in Beijing:

> Students from our province rarely choose universities in other provinces, except when they fail…the college entrance examination. I came to Beijing because I failed…the examination, and I am embarrassed to tell my friends I am studying at this university as they have never heard of it before and think it is a third-tier university.

In contrast to participant 13's shame at studying at a second-tier university far away from home, participant 23 (female, aged 22, first-tier university) who was studying at the Peking University was confident and proud when describing her social life at university. As a student who received a bachelor's degree and was now studying for a master's degree at Peking University, participant 23 described herself as *tuvzhu* (aboriginal), so to distinguish herself from *fei tu zhu* (non-aboriginal), which refers to postgraduates who are studying at Peking University but hold a bachelor degree from other universities. Participant 23 (female, aged 23, first-tier university) stated:

> These two groups of people are not the same… *tu zhu* understand the core Peking University culture, while *fei tu zhu* may take years to understand it… when you enrol as an undergraduate at Peking University in Beijing it is different from being accepted as a postgraduate student, because the College Entrance Test (CET) is apparently more competitive than the Postgraduate Entrance Test (PET).

She further states that the ranking of the first-degree that one holds affects a person's friend circle, and that there is clear discrepancy between students from high ranking universities and students from relatively low-ranking universities.

I keep contact with some of high school classmates, one of them is studying at Zhejiang University, one is studying at Tsinghua University, and another is studying at RenMin University[30]. We keep in touch with each other on WeChat and we go out together from time to time. I keep in touch less with friends in other universities, especially those who are not studying in Beijing, because we are going to have different friend circles in the future; what we see and what we know will be different. To be honest with you, I do not think our lines are connected (Participant 23, female, aged 22, first-tier university).

For participant 23, academic achievements (from CET to PET) and elite social networks construct the elements that enhance her self-esteem and make her sense of face. On the one hand, it reflects the value of individual intellect in Chinese society, as Hu (1994) notes, scholars are exceptional for having *mianzi* without the necessity to be wealthy as their moral cultivation makes them a highly-regarded person, and they are conscious of their personal reputation which makes them cautious in their daily practices so as to protect their face. Additionally, the evaluation of face for a Chinese individual is from both a personal and rational perspective. Chambers (2014) regards the 'friend circle' as a beneficial 'personal community' that the individual creates on by deciding who they want to be 'friends' with on and offline. Apparently, participant 23 prefers connecting with students from comparable world-famous universities, and accumulates them as her social capital. The notion of creating friend circles is quite common among participants, which I will explore further in Chapter 7.

Postgraduates from second-tier universities also appear to be happy with their PET results and being able to work for a master's degree. For instance, participant 15 (female, aged 23, second-tier university), a postgraduate student at a second-tier university in Beijing, did not regard joining a second-tier university as a loss of face; rather, she considered it as gaining face, as she is completing a master's degree, rather than a bachelor's degree. She attributes her achievement to hard work, as well as the motivation to gain respect for

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[30] Zhe Jiang University, Tsinghua University, and Ren Min University are considered as the top key universities in China.

her family, as she caused a loss of face for her parents when she entered a lower, second-tier university in a second-tier city in China. She explains this as follows:

> The PET is quite competitive in Beijing… I did not expect to be successful at it. When I received the offer, I felt so happy and proud of myself. I am quite satisfied with my situation now, as are my parents… Prior to passing the examination they worried that I may not get a good job if I held a second-tier university graduate certificate, but now they are proud that I am a master's student.

Participant 15's proud feeling stems from her academic achievement as well as her ability in gaining face for her parents. To make parents proud of them and gaining face for parents serves as an essential reason for participants to achieve academically. For instance, participant 4 notes:

> You know in small places (in China), parents and teachers care about children's (students') school performance. Parents gather together to compare their children's examination scores, parents would feel loss of *lian* if their children achieve lower examination scores than their friends' children… these are parents who are not well-off, but feel they have *mianzi* if their children perform well at school, they would think 'Even though I am poor, if my children perform better at school than yours I have more *mianzi* than you do.'

Participants in this research frequently mention their responsibility to their parents and family. To gain reputation for their family serves as an important reason to work hard at school. As I have mentioned above, the significance Chinese people place on education is more than to learn knowledge at school and to make a living. Education frequently works as an opportunity for the children and their family to move upwards in society. Because from the collectivist perspective, individuals do not exist on their own so that who they connect with and the community they belong to decides much of their social identity. For instance, Chinese people prefer calling someone by their social roles, *wang jing li* (manager wang), *li jiao shou* (professor li), or *lili ma* (Lily's mom). Relationships that reflect personal achievement can change with time, whereas social roles based on

blood relations are more persistent. The role for being someone's child or parent is for life. For Chinese participants, acting out their social roles includes acting as good students at school as part of being a good child for his/her parents. Hwang (2006) finds that university students from Taiwan feel that their face is enhanced by personal academic performance, being morally upright, their parents' morals, and their parents' success in their careers. In contrast, parents experience having face in respect of their children being morally upright and academic achievements followed by their personal morals and career achievements. Participants in this study understand good performance at school helps them to act out both the role of student and, most importantly, as a good child at home, which requires them to work hard, to be positive, and to be ambitious for the future. Other than academic achievement, activities that can enhance personal experiences of face are also valuable for participants, such as being a member of student organisations and internships in professional companies. Undergraduates who express their awkwardness at studying at a less-known university are more active in talking about their social experiences. For example:

> My internship experiences have been excellent… I have learned things that I cannot learn at university and have experienced a professional environment. Before the internships, I felt like simply another student, now I feel like a professional who can make…a living by myself (Participant 3, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

Additionally:

> I was quite shy in high school and spent most of my time learning and knew little about other activities. When I started university, I joined a student organisation and learned many new things. For example, I learned how to organise activities, how to set up a performance stage and how to control the lights for a performance. Sometimes, I am quite happy with myself and proud of what I have learned in these years at university (Participant 16, female, aged 21, second-tier university).

For undergraduates who describe themselves as having 'failed' to make it to a first-tier university, social activities are another way for them to prove their capability and feelings

of having face. The other notable point is participant 16's description of an individual who could not get over their failure as having mental issues, and the suggestion that such individuals should think positively and move on. For her, the ability to be positive and inhibit negative energy is a positive characteritic that individuals can claim for themselves in social interaction. The obsession that participants have with being positive in life reflects the social context of contemporary China, which I will explain further in Chapter 8.

Participants' consciousness of sustaining the image of being a good student is also reflected in their online practices. For instance, they frequently note that they prefer to create posts that are 'useful' and relate to study in WeChat connect. The image below is an example that participant 8 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) provided created on her WeChat Moments. The text translates as 'receive several certificate (s) of honour these days with my name nicely written (thumbs up) want to practice good handwriting of my name (smiley face). PS: this… certificate is from first year university, now the second year at university is (finished) (smiley face) how time flies'. During the post-elicitation interview, participant 8 recalled the reason for creating this post as:

> I worked extremely hard last semester to be able to receive this certificate of excellence, I feel happy and have *mianzi*, and want to share this with my friends. The handwriting of my name is also quite nice, so also I want to share that with my friends. Some people that I am not familiar with may consider me as showing off, but most of my friends will feel happy for me, so they comment and click like on this post…it is one of the few posts for which I received many likes and comments…

最近收到的几张荣誉证书的名字写的都好好看啊👍👍想学习一下自己的名字😄😄😄ps:介个证书是大一的，现在大二都结束了😄😄又要感慨时间啦

证 书

6月30日 17:33 删除

Image1: Image of Participant 8's post on WeChat

Participants consciously act out their role as students in both the online and offline world. Ting-Tommy (2015, p.87) considers "'*liens' (lian)* as an internalized moral compass and mien-*tzeu (mianzi)* as an externalized social image." Being able to attend a high-ranking university, achieve high scores at school, perform well at work appear to satisfy both this internalized moral compass, as well as producing an externalized social image. In this research, participants think about face as a personal accomplishment, but they also feel the need for others' recognition of their achievements to enhance this feeling and to gain face from others, because only face that is recognised by others allows them to exchange compliments with others in future social interactions. Therefore, both entry to high-ranking university and being a hard-working student expressed through online performance becomes participants' way of gaining others' recognition. This all reflects the idea that others' recognition determines the amount of favour that others might give to the individual in future social interactions (Hwang, 1987). It might be difficult to predict others' recognition of the individual in offline life, but with the use of social media, the feedback he/she receives from others represent the recognitions others give him/her, which enables individuals to experience having face.

5.5 The value of 'likes' and 'comments'

This theme encapsulates different values participants attach to the feedback they receive from others on WeChat. Participants in this research take online 'likes', 'comments', 'sharing', 'online helping practices' as informative feedback from others, and give

different value to each kind of feedback. For instance, they regard online 'likes' as offline greetings as a minimal way of expressing care or politeness to others. 'Comments' are regarded as gestures indicating care and interest, as well as a way of starting a dialogue. Participants give the same importance to sharing and online helping as they represent supportive gestures from others.

The importance participants give to others' online feedback is consistent with Goffman's (1967) interpretation of individuals feeling 'in face' when others respond to their social practices as they expect, otherwise they feel 'out of face'. Goffman (1967) suggests that people who are 'in face' feel happy, confident, and even walk with their chest held high. Online feedback from others has similar effects. For instance, Leary and Kowalski (1990) state that positive feedback online compliments and can enhance an individual's self-esteem and motivate them to conduct further strategic self-presentation. Similarly, Chua and Chang (2016) outline how girls in Singapore attach high importance to the quantity of 'likes' they receive for their online selfies, as online recognition enhances their self-esteem and reduces their feelings of insecurity. Although participants prefer addressing themselves as not always caring about others' online feedback while they also note that they feel happy when others respond to their online practices.

In contrast to likes and comments, 'sharing' and 'online helping' are not as visible to participants online. 'Online helping' practices include online 'voting', 'questionnaire filling' and 'donating'. For instance, people share hyperlinks on WeChat to invite others to vote for someone, to fill in questionnaires, or to donate money for certain campaigns. These kinds of snowball sharing and helping practices are so dispersed that it is difficult for individuals to have an overview of others' feedback or the impact of their posts. Therefore, 20 participants focus on 'likes' and 'comments' as transparent recognition which makes them feel positive. As participant 2 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) states:

> The more 'likes' or 'comments' you receive means the more people like your posts, and find them interesting or useful. I am happy to find they like my posts.

The 'happy feeling' of receiving 'likes' and 'comments' from others also motivates individuals to alternate their online practices. 15 participants explicitly note the desire to receive positive feedback from others online so to feel good about themselves and to motivate them to create more posts online.

> When I feel bored I just create a post that I think most people may like, like selfies. Most people tend to like others' online selfies. I felt happy when I see the number of 'likes' and 'comments' increase with time. It can kind of like boost my self-esteem, feeling there are still people who care about me and like me (Participant 37, female, aged 22, second-tier university).

Participants express different preference about the online 'likes' and 'comments' they receive. A number of participants (N=27) claim that online 'comments' are more valuable than online 'likes'. They believe online 'comments' take more effort to create and require more effort from them to reply. Most participants in this research give the highest value to online comments, as they believe others not only need to understand their posts but also need to consider how to reply.

> People who give comment are close to you. If people who are not close to you why would they spend effort on creating comments for you. 'Likes' would be easy and neutral (Participant 34, female, aged 22, first-tier university).

Whereas, female participants assert that they are aware of their edited selfies are to enhance self-confidence, therefore, they value the quantity of online 'likes' rather than the quality of online comments. For instance:

> Sometimes, I prefer people to just click 'like' on my posts. Then I do not need to think of how to reply them appropriately and can interpret these 'likes' the way I want, and as positive as I would like them to be (Participant 4, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

Participant 4 further explains reasons for preferring online 'likes' as:

'Comments' are mainly between close friends. Individuals comment on each other's posts only when they are familiar and close to each other. Otherwise, both parties would feel awkward. For instance, when I create a selfie online, if people I am not familiar with to comment on my post like *Meinv* (Pretty Girl) I feel awkward about their posts, because I know I am not that beautiful. If I reply thank you, it suggests I think I am beautiful, which people would view as narcissistic. But, if I do not reply, this suggests that I am not polite to that person.

This statement mentions two factors that participants take into consideration when perceiving 'comments' as face given by others. One is the commentator, which refers to people who comment on individuals' online posts. The other one is the content of the comments. For instance, participant 4 expects to receive comments from close friends rather than individuals who she is not familiar with. Meanwhile, she expresses disdain toward others' exaggerated comments, which she considers as having a lack of sincerity and does not meet with what she expects.

As a member of a music band who makes their own music, participant 2 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) expresses similar concerns about receiving online comments out of friends' politeness:

I like to upload our songs or new demos on WeChat to share with my WeChat friends and seek comments, to see whether they like them or not... most people would just comment 'good', 'nice song', 'like it, thumbs up', or click 'like'. I tried several times and realised that no one would be stupid enough to confront me online and point out the drawbacks of our songs…

Participants 2 and 4's statements reflect the idea that face practices are common or even over stated online compared to the offline world. For instance, for their WeChat connections they prefer providing positive feedback rather than negative comments. Contacts' positive feedback represents a gesture of giving face to others or preventing others from losing face, meanwhile, they also present an impression of themselves as polite and supportive to friends. While according to participants 2 and 4, over conducting

face practices online makes them feel disappointed rather than good, as they are not receiving what they expect.

Participants in this research provide quite confusing statements on their attitude toward others' online positive responses. On the one hand, they experience joy when others provide positive responds to their online posts; on the other hand, they note others' online positive responses do not always enhance their self-esteem or make them have *mianzi,* because it does not meet their expectations.

According to participants, the primary expectation is to get a swift reaction and in-depth inquiries from close friends. For them, close friends are their 'imagined audiences' (Marwick and boyd, 2010) whose online recognition is more important than others' online feedbacks.

> Sometimes I just share the posts with my friends, I do not care whether others like it or not. If my friend receives it and likes it, that is enough for me. Because sometimes you just need certain people's recognition, which is enough to make you happy. (Participant 1, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

Lim and Basnyat (2016) note that an online 'like' is like a pat on the shoulder to congratulate others when they are happy and comfort others when they are in sorrow. Therefore, participants feel disappointment when the quantity or quality of others' feedback does not meet their expectation. Some participants (N=12) even state they will delete a post that receives little feedback from others, to make their profiles on WeChat look better, and that they adjust their online posting practices so to make others like their posts.

> I delete some of my posts on WeChat that receive few 'likes' or 'comments' from others, because it means others do not like it. Later, I will create or share something that most people may find interesting (Participant 9, female, aged 21, second-tier university).

Participant 9's statement reflects Goffman's (1959) discussion of self-presentation, as part of the back and forth process of social interaction. , Individuals not only provide what they consider as good for others, but are also constantly exploring and providing what others are expecting. In the meanwhile, individuals also adjust their practices so to make others' respond according to their expectation.

5.6 Summary and Conclusions

This chapter captures participants' reflections on the practices of *lian* and *mianzi* in their everyday life. The research finds that young university students in this study do understand *lian* as moral face and *mianzi* as social standing, as researchers (e.g. Hu, 1944) have suggested. What makes the preent research findings different is the significant importance that participants place on social face, which is *mianzi*. They suggest that the sociability of an individual can increase his/her chances in receiving *mianzi* from others most of the time, that they receive favour from others and achieve what they want. Although participants are vexed at some people regardless of being morally upright in the pursuit of personal benefits, they still note that there are also touching moments in life that makes them believe moral face is vital in social interaction.

Gender was also shown to be significant when participants express their attitudes toward others' online practices. Participants express higher acceptance of women creating and posting edited selfies online and of men flaunting personal wealth online. Some female participants note that online selfies can initiate interaction, attract others' attention, and that the compliments they receive enhances self-esteem. In discussing China's selfie obsession, Fang (2017) argues that the most widely used selfie editing app-Meitu, promotes "an ecosystem of beauty" among its users, with the effect of mainstreaming conventional beusty as a personal standard. Fang (2017) further notes that being able to create selfies does not necessary signifiy a liberated sense of self as Chinese youths clamor for independence and individualism, while at the same time enacting a stereotyped self-representation. The lack of liberated sense of self is also reflected in participants' gendered attitudes toward people who flaunt conspicuous consumption online, as participants tend to have higher acceptance or even consider it as essential for male for to

present personal capabilities by flaunting their personal wealth rather than female. Therefore, we need to take gender issues into consideration when we talk about individuals' feeling of having *mianzi.*

Generally, participants feel proud and gain *mianzi* through those aspects of their characters and achievements that receive recognition from others. Participants perceive the online likes and comments they receive as recognition of their online practices. Participants give different value to online likes and comments. For instance, participants value the quality of the online likes they receive when they seek for others' attention and recognition, but they value online comments more when they want to start a conversation. What participants value most is recognition from their 'imagined audience' (Marwick and boyd, 2010), who usually consist of their close friends. Therefore, even though not all participants agree that they need others' recognition to feel of having *mianzi*, thay gain a feeling of enhanced *miani* when others' online feedback meets their expectation. Otherwise they will feel disappointment or a loss of *mianzi*.

The other notable reflection that participants make concerns a variety of tensions or an ambivalence towards face and to face online. As the joyful feeling of having *mianzi* always accompanies struggles to gain *mianzi,* to enhance self-esteem either through personal effort or by gaining recognition from others. Participants ascribe their unpleasant feelings toward gaining face to the necessity to 'please others' and to 'compete with others'. As Participant 37 (female, aged 22, second-tier university) notes:

> I do not like having *mianzi*; it is purely imaginary… People talk about *mianzi* and want to be better than others, whereas, except for presenting superiority, what is the point of this competition process? I hope people do not care about *mianzi* to live the way they want and find inner peace to be nice to others.

Participant 36 (female, aged 22, first-tier university) supports this statement:

> Pursuit of *mianzi* makes me miss a lot of things in my life. (Interviewer: Like what?) Like there are more things than competing with others and to be the best one in class; there are other things in life that can make

me happy. But when I think about comparing ourselves with others and thinking of others' impression of us, then I forget what I really want and forget to enjoy the process of learning and working because I focus too much on the results.

All participants in this research note that family expectations and school education motivates them to participate in social comparison and strive to achieve upward social mobility. As mentioned regarding gaining *mianzi* and the awareness to be morally upright, participants follow moral rules that they receive at home and school to obey their parents' instructions and to perform well at school. All participants note that their parents take their performance at school seriously and feel proud, having *mianzi*, if participants perform better than their peer group, while they feel disappointment and lose *mianzi* if participants fall behind. Participants are aware of their responsibility to gain *mianzi* for parents and schoolteachers, while the intensive peer comparison makes participants feel exhausted. Parents' intervention increases participants' likelihood to leave home and study in other cities, they may create virtual co-presence with parents with the use of smartphone and social media, while they consciously conduct different strategies to manage their relationship with parents, which I will explain more in Chapter 6.

Chapter 6 —The Mediated Relationship between Independent Child and Smothering Parents

6.1 Introduction

In a study on face and favour, Hwang (1987) defines the relationship between children and parents as a form of expressive social tie. The strength of affection activated in this bond enables them to provide emotional support to each other when needed. In addition, the potentially reciprocal relationship between children and parents motivates the parents to provide emotional and financial support for their children. To compensate, children are accountable for their parents, being duty-bound to take care of them when they become old, following the traditional Chinese saying, *yang er fang lao* [31] (bring up children to provide against old age). Ironically, the financial cost of taking care of each other in this situation might be easier to calculate than the emotional cost.

The Chinese social context has shifted enormously since the development and growth of the market economy in the early 1980s. Accompanying such rapid economic development, high levels of social mobility, enlarged cities and empty rural areas, have emerged. Additionally, an enormous number of migrants have moved to metropolitan centres such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, becoming the main work force for these cities. University students also make a substantial contribution to this migration (Zhou and Xiao, 2015). This population movement took place in the era of the 'one child' policy, and rising individualism among Chinese youth, which contributed to the shrinking Chinese household, with many parents living alone in rural villages (Sun, 2013). These dramatic social changes have come to challenge the Chinese practice of filial piety, where children stay at home and look after their parents in their old age.

In addition to the social conditions that affect family relations there are variations in parenting styles that significantly shape the relationship between parents and children. Darling and Steinberg (1993, p. 493) define parenting styles as "a constellation of

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[31] Chen, Yuan Liang, Song Dynasty. *Shi Lin Guan Ji*, yang er fang lao, ji gu fang ji. Raise children to provide against old age, accumulate wheat to prevent hunger.

attitudes toward the child that are communicated to the child and create an emotional climate in which the parent's behaviours are expressed". Based on levels of parental warmth and control, researchers suggest four parenting styles: authoritative, permissive, laissez-faire, and authoritarian (Bauirnd, 1991; Valcke et al., 2010). An authoritative parenting style provides children with a democratic environment, with high support and strict control (Huver et al., 2010); with a permissive parenting style, children are allowed to self-regulate, and parents do not force children to follow rules (Baumrind, 1991); a lasissez-faire style suggests parents who are indifferent towards their children, neither providing parental warmth nor parental control (Ozgur, 2016); an authoritarian parenting style places an emphasis on parental authority and children's obedience, with low parental warmth but high parental control (Ozgur, 2016).

In addition, media reports frequently discuss the influence of parenting style on the family relationship. 'Helicopter parenting' and 'attachment parenting' are two popular terms that are used to describe parents who anxiously supervise their children and intervene in their children's lives. For instance, the term 'helicopter parents' suggest parents who cautiously pay attention to their children, hovering over them like a helicopter (Bayless, 2013). Bayless (2013) cites other researchers' words and notes that helicopter parents are over-focused parents who take responsibility for their children, including their successes and failures. As they want to make sure that they have done their best to make their children stand out in the competitive job market (Bayless, 2013). Similarly, parents who are suspicious of modern life's impact on the development of children might choose attachment parenting (Freeman, 2016). Those who propose attachment parenting believe it is a mother's instinct to take care of her children, wanting to be close to them (Liss and Erchull, 2012; Freeman, 2016). Attachment parenting encourages parents, especially mothers, to create strong bonds with their children through providing extended breastfeeding, nurturing touch, co-sleeping arrangements, and consistent loving care (Liss and Erchull, 2012). In fact, both helicopter parenting and attachment parenting reflect parents concern about their children, with the intention of protecting them from experiencing negative feelings, such as depression and anxiety. Whereas, as Freeman (2016) notes in her article, no matter which kind of parenting style parents adopt, it is essential that children are able to experience life and explore it on their own. Parents close monitoring and control may backfire by increasing anxiety levels for both parents and children and reduce children's sense of independence (Bayless, 2013).

Existing research examines the impact of parenting style on children' personality and behaviour (Baumrind, 1991; Huver et al., 2012). For instance, authoritative parenting is believed to have a positive impact on children's development, as the high level of support involved can result in a child's emotional stability (Huver et al., 2012). Padilla-Walker and Coyne (2012) also found that authoritative parents tend to be less willing to conduct sanctions on children's media use but will adjust their monitoring strategies according to a child's needs. Chen's (2014) research suggests Hong Kong parents' parenting style affects their children's motivation to carry out reciprocal filial piety, as well as life satisfaction. Chen (2014) claims that although Hong Kong children will carry out reciprocal filial piety towards either authoritative or authoritarian parents, children are less likely to develop positive emotion towards authoritarian parents and carry out filial piety obligation merely to fulfil cultural norms. In contrast, children are more likely to develop positive emotions toward authoritative parents and carry out filial piety due to affection and love for those parents.

Most of the participants in the present study moved to Beijing to enhance their education and work opportunities, and also to get away from smothering parents and develop some independence. However, they note that the Internet and social mobility, overcomes geographical distance and thus connects them to their parents and their accompanying filial responsibilities. Correspondingly, participants state that their parents' desire to feel the presence of their children is strong, and that they try to conduct parenting via WeChat and other social media. According to the participants, parents are inclined towards helicopter parenting, using WeChat to inspect their children's online activities. Parents are also said to be obsessed by sending information that they think their children might find useful and encouraging. In contrast to their parents' passion for creating online intimacy with their children, the participants are seen to develop online tactics to maintain a polite distance from their parents, also using WeChat. In addition to their intention of avoiding smothering parents, young college students in this study also suggest that the discrepancy in information communication technology (ICT) literacy between parents and children results in disputes about WeChat use.

6.2 Virtual Co-presence between Parents and Children

All participants in this study were born in the 1990s, and their parents are between their late 30s and early 50s, with most of them in their mid-40s. McDonald's (2016) study of social media use in urban China indicates Chinese parents who are in their 40s and 50s use smartphones as it is seen as trendy, and because the screen is big enough to watch the news, but hardly any of them have installed or use social media applications on their smartphones. In contrast, most participants in this study reported that at least one of their parents uses a smartphone and has installed WeChat on it. Thirty-nine out of forty-two participants confirmed that social media, especially WeChat and QQ, have become the main channels for communicating with their parents.

Previous research indicates that an increasing number of parents connect with their children on social media to overcome geographical distance, and to experience feelings of co-presence, intimacy and togetherness (Zhou and Xiao, 2015). As Madianou and Miller (2012) explain, in polymedia, contemporary mediated communication involves the use of a wide range of communication media. Participants in this study noted that social media like WeChat enables them to send instant messages, make videos and voice calls, and share trivia with their parents, all of which eases their parents' concerns about them.

Participant 37 (male aged 22, second-tier university) comes from Henan province, China, and was a second-year undergraduate student studying at the Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication when the interview took place in 2015. As the only child at home, he admitted that his departure to college left his mother anxious and worried. Therefore, as soon as he received an enrolment offer from a university in Beijing, his mother bought two smartphones, one for him and one for herself, asking him to install both QQ and WeChat, and for him to teach her how to use these social media applications:

> I installed WeChat and QQ for my mum, created an account for her on both sites, and taught her how to use them. She was amazed by the video chat and that is what we frequently use for daily talks. She can see what I am doing, and I can know how she is doing (Participant 37, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

Participant 37 expressed his understanding of this intensive scrutiny from his mother. As the only child at home, his mother quit her job to look after him when he was small, and their close relationship has made him concerned that his mother might become depressed when he left home for university. Participant 37 is not alone in feeling worried about his left-behind parents in this study, as almost all of them expressed a high degree of concern about their parents being left behind at home, especially those students who are only children. Therefore, like participant 37, some other participants were also willing to help their parents use smartphones and social media, to create an experience of co-presence, hoping that their parents would explore and develop their own social media connections.

> I hope my mum can make some friends on WeChat, but not completely online strangers. Like her previous colleagues, classmates, and friends. I hope she can have more time for herself instead of paying too much attention to me. Because I will have less time for her when I start working, she needs to generally get used to it (Participant 37, female, aged 22, second-tier university).

Participant 4 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) made similar statements when she explained one of her posts on WeChat, where she wrote "the rain's heavy today".

Image2: Image of WeChat post from participant 4

she explained it as follows:

> I created this post because that day it was raining heavily after I came back to the accommodation, I felt so lucky. While when I think of my parents who go to work if it is the heavy rain like this at home, would anyone bring her an umbrella, would she get caught in the rain? Therefore, I created this post to express my feelings.

In Hall's (1976) study on high context and low context culture, he notes that people from a low context culture prefer expressing themselves implicitly rather than explicitly, compared with individuals from a high context culture. Participant 4's statement is consistent in suggesting that young participants prefer to express their feelings and sense of care toward their parents more ambiguously.

The close attachment between parent and child also made some participants admit that they experienced regret for leaving their parents to study in Beijing. They often changed their tone swiftly and emphasized reasons for staying in Beijing, e.g. for the work opportunities, convenient living circumstances, and for their dream of living in a large urban city. Indeed, living in Beijing is not solely for themselves, as it is often a family dream which makes their parents proud of them, with neighbours and relatives often showing admiration or jealousy. Therefore, according to the participants, while both they and their parents are aware of the pain and worry that can arise due to their geographic separation, both parties remain optimistic and believe working hard and staying in Beijing can lead to a brighter and more positive future. As participant 9 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) stated:

> I wanted to stay in Beijing after graduation, because my parents like Beijing. It is one reason for me to apply for universities in Beijing even though I could have been at a better university in my province. Beijing is different, it is large and with more work opportunities, and the city infrastructures are much better than our city. When I see old people doing exercises in the park in the early morning I think my parents would love to do so in the future.

Students and their families share a reciprocal aspiration in seeking upward social mobility (Lam, 2013). For participants who are not local to Beijing, studying in Beijing, getting a foothold in the city and finding a job there after graduation, signifies upward mobility for the whole family. Therefore, it is not surprising that 30 out of the 39 participants from 15 provinces across China expressed their intention to work and live in Beijing after graduation, with most of them noting the permission and strong support they have received from their parents. In the Chinese context, these sentiments are post-traditional,

going against the grain of Confucius' saying that '*fu mu zai, bu yuan you*'[32] which suggests to children that they must stay close to their parents in order to fulfil their duties of filial piety. Hwang (1987) emphasises the reciprocal relationship between children and parents in Chinese culture, where parents make an effort to raise their children, and children have a moral duty and lawful obligation to repay those parents through ongoing support. Ironically, the complete Confucius saying is '*fu mu zai, bu yuan you, you bi you fang*'[33] which means children should not travel far while their parents are alive, except when children have clear goals and aspirations, in which case they can travel. For most participants, leaving home and studying in Beijing is a necessary part of achieving their dream, while creating a sense of co-presence with their parents using social media is a modern and convenient way to carry out filial piety.

6.3 Keeping a Polite Distance from Smothering Parents

In addition to young people's ambition for upward social mobility they are also eager to escape what they perceive as their parents' smothering care. Participant 11 (female, aged 19, from a second-tier university) is from Haerbin in the north of China. As a first-year undergraduate studying at the Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, she was upset when the interview took place. As the interview progressed, the matter that troubled her become clear.

> I came to Beijing because I wanted to run away from my family. My family knows me as a shy little girl, and they try to arrange everything for me. However, I do not have the courage to tell them what I think. So, when there was a chance for me to leave, I took it and ran away (Participant 11, female, aged 19, second-tier university).

For participant 11, smothering parents at home prevented her from developing and realising her identity. According to participant 11, presenting an image of shyness and

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[32] AUTHORS CITED HERE CONFUSED, TWO DIFFERENT CONFUCIUS? Confucius, Lu Yun Li Ren Confucius say: Fu mu zai, bu yuan you, you bi you fang." Confucius emphasises that children have a responsibility to act out filial piety and take care of their parents, without NEXT PHRASE DOENST MAKE SENSE against individual to go realize their aspiration when they have the right and clear direction.

[33] Same as footnote 1.

obedience made her parents happy. Nonetheless, she did not enjoy presenting this image and instead wanted to interact with people who are not from the same community as her so to present the identity as she liked. Mead (1934) explains socialisation and role taking in three stages: the imitation stage; the play stage; and the game stage. According to this view, children imitate the social practices of individuals with whom they have a close affiliation, known as their significant others. This is followed by playing with significant others, an experience through which children develop their sense of self and a consciousness of meeting others' expectations. In the game stage, children not only construct a sense of self through interacting with significant others, but, importantly, they learn to manage multiple social roles, developing relationships with who Mead terms 'generalized others'; people who one relates to in social roles in contrast to the intimacy of significant others. Participant 11 sees parents and other family members as significant others from whom she developed her initial identity and awareness of self. Through increasing interaction with 'generalised others', participant 11 reconstructs her sense of self. What participants in this research suggest is that, ironically, while Chinese parents expect their children to grow up and achieve, they also reject the identities that their children develop, appearing to have difficulty in 'letting go' of parental control.

The term 'helicopter parents' may help to explain the intense scrutiny of children by Chinese parents. Helicopter parents spend enormous effort having their children's social and personal development under their control, so as to prevent their children from facing risks and difficulties in life. For participants in this study, parents' unsolicited counsel and attention in their lives has constructed a barrier that prevents them from presenting their real selves. For instance, participant 11 (female, aged 19, from a second-tier university) found her parents' expectation of her as shy and obedient toward her elders, constraining her self-development. As she stated:

> I am an outgoing person with an active mind. I like to talk to different people and want others to consider me as having a great sense of humour. People at home think that girls should be quiet and reserved. When I go out with my parents, they introduce me as 'she is very shy and does not like to talk' in front of relatives and their friends. I feel I must cooperate with them, to pretend to be quiet and shy. I am tired of

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that, because that is not who I am. I have grown up and am different from before and it is just difficult for my parents to accept that.

Participant 11's notion of being an obedient child reflects the traditional notion of *xiao shun* (filial piety), which demands that children are subordinate and obligated to act in prescribed ways to fulfil their duty to their parents (Qi, 2015). There are 18 chapters in the classic Confucius treatise *xiaojing* that provides guidelines for people in carrying out their filial piety toward elders, superiors, and rulers.[34] Following parental instructions serves as the kernel of filial piety in traditional Chinese families. In contrast, participant 11 suggests that even though children are aware of their obligations of filial piety towards their parents this conflicts with their need for self-development. If I understand participant 11's comment from Mead's (1934) perspective, the reason she feels uncomfortable in performing according to her parents' expectation, is because it creates an imbalance between her awareness of 'I' and 'me'. 'I' refers to participants' personality, the self-defining part of the self; while 'me' reflects others' perceptions and expectations of that person. Yan (2010) adopts the term 'uncivil individual' to suggest that Chinese youths are increasingly demanding autonomy and decreasing their personal obligations toward family and community. In this research, the participants appear to be searching for a balance between personal autonomy and family obligations. For instance, participant 11 would rather maintain a polite distance from her parents than confront them and make them worried. In addition, participants seem to believe that they are acting out filial piety by presenting an ideal image for their parents on social media platforms. They are thus not challenging the obligations of filial piety but developing online self-presentation strategies to appear to meet these responsibilities.

The participants also noted that the increasing use of WeChat among their parents can lead to online smother parenting as parents seek to sustain their relationship at a distance. For example, most participants noted that their parents pay extra attention to their posts on WeChat, with participant 37 (female, aged 22, at a second-tier university) stating:

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[34] *Xiaojing* (in Chinese). Available at :
http://www.guoxue.com/jinbu/13jing/xiaojing/xiaojing001.htm). Accessed on the 5th Mar. 2018.

I rarely create posts on WeChat, but whenever I do, my mum will click 'like' or comment on it. Sometimes I am simply moaning about unhappy things to attract my friends' attention and my mum will contact me immediately and ask about it. Or if I create something she finds inappropriate she will contact me and suggest that I delete it. I do not want to block her from accessing my WeChat Moments, so I just post something neutral and positive from time to time on WeChat.

Most participants are ambivalent towards connecting with their parents on WeChat. Five participants stated that they rejected their parents' friend requests on WeChat so as to avoid unnecessary concerns and over solicitous care. For instance, participant 6 (female, aged 20, second-tier university) noted:

I do not connect with my parents on WeChat because I think WeChat is for my friends. If they want to find me, they can call me. In fact, even if I connected with them, they might not understand what I am doing and misunderstand my posts. We young people like to use some *wang luo yu yan* (Internet language) which parents may not understand or consider appropriate. For instance, I like to play jokes on my friends, and I sometimes give them some funny names or post funny customized pictures of them. Parents would not understand these jokes…

Maintaining a distance from smothering parents and keeping some level of personal privacy appear to be the key reasons for participants rejecting parents' online friend requests. Those who connect with parents on WeChat prefer also sharing personal feelings with people outside their family. This finding is consistent with Tse et al.'s (2012) study of privacy between young people and family in which young people are interested in both sustaining familial relationships while also sharing their concerns and feelings with people outside their family, such as friends, classmates, and even colleagues. Tse et al. (2012) interpret this as evidence of a generation gap between result-oriented parents, and the desire of young people for more personal autonomy. Traditionally in Chinese families, there is a hierarchical relationship between father and son, older and younger brother, husband and wife. Individuals who are in the superior

position have the right to know about individuals in the inferior position. Therefore, in the traditional Chinese family, it is common for parents to invade their children's privacy. For instance, parents will check their children's diary and their room to make sure they are developing in the way expected. Chambers (2012) notes the rise of the privatization of childhood and 'self-regulation' in urban Chinese families, while in the present study, participants note that both privatization and 'self-regulation' are based on children's assurance that they are on the track expected by their parents. For these reasons, participants prefer to present ideal images of themselves to meet their parents' expectations and to protect their privacy and personal autonomy. Participant 5 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) explained:

> …My parents are supportive and respect all my choices because they think I am an obedient child; they believe in all my decisions. For instance, even though they did not want me to leave home, when I told them I wanted to do my bachelor's in Dalian, and then a postgraduate degree in Beijing, they supported me as they believe girls should receive a higher education. I understand their [parents'] support is based on the premise that my decisions are right and beneficial…Therefore, when I want to do something that they may not be happy with, I do not let them know…I am old enough to make my own decisions, I just need to report what I have achieved rather than what I have tried or experienced.

Participant 5's notion of her relationship with her parents is consistent with Chambers' (2012) account of the increasing privatization of childhood in urban China. Chambers argues that the Chinese urban family, like that in the west, embraces a self-regulation strategy, and has moved away from state scrutiny. Families conduct self-surveillance with the ambition of being a 'good family' through the regulation of customs and practices that respect, as well as control, children. For instance, participant 5 describes her parents as open-minded and supportive, while she is also aware that their support is based on the assumption that her decisions and conduct meet their expectations. Participants also emphasise they keep things that their parents forbid or strongly disapprove of to themselves. Participant 6 (female, aged 20, second-tier university) explained it as "they [parents] do not understand". Participants' statements that parents

do not understand them suggests a generation gap and disapproval of parenting styles, especially Internet parenting styles. Participant 12 (male, aged 20, from a second-tier university) explained:

> Parents always try to understand their children, but we are growing up in a different era, we learn different things, we meet different people, of course, we see things differently. It is not the problem of the parents nor the problem of children, it is the problem of communication and understanding… We do not know how to communicate with each other, parents work hard to raise up family and children work hard to meet parents' expectations. While in this long sacrificing and contributing process, no party knows what the other party wants or likes.

According to participant 12, the generation gap results from mis-communications between parents and children, thus causing misunderstandings. He moved to Beijing to avoid possible conflict and misunderstandings between him and his parents; to reduce parental concerns and possible interventions, he has decided to tell his parents what he has achieved rather what he is doing. He explained this as:

> They would not understand my life at university nor would they be able imagine life in the city. I better tell them good things rather than my negative feelings. As their worries are unhelpful…

The participants are selective about what they reveal to their parents, but they do recognise the need to keep in touch. Consequently, they share content that their parents will find appropriate via their WeChat usage. The key reason they commit to connecting with their parents online is to keep in touch with them and to enable their parents to feel that they are still able to parent. Participants also recognise the need to set their parents' minds at ease, acknowledging that their parents lurk online, and continually observe their online practices.

> My parents rarely click 'like' or comment on my WeChat posts. However, if I create or share posts that they do not like, they contact

me, and ask if I am doing well (Participant 13, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

Livingstone et al.'s (2017) work on parental mediation suggests that parents may carry out enabling mediation and restrictive mediation to mediate their child's Internet use. In this study, participants clearly see their parents as operating a restrictive parenting style and thus use strategies to avoid their restrictions, while participant 13's statement also reflects the discrepancy between parents and children's understanding of parental mediation. Parents might consider themselves as protecting and enabling their children, whereas, their children see their parents as being restrictive and controlling their online practices.

6.4 Children: Parents Spreading Pseudoscience

This theme reflects the discrepancy in terms of media literacy and the generation gap between Chinese youth and their parents. Prensky (2001) distinguishes digital users according to their age differences. Young people who were born and grown up in the digital age are 'digital natives', whereas the older generation are 'digital immigrants'. Prensky (2001) notes that although digital migrants try to mimic digital natives' practices, their 'accent' reveals their lack of digital literacy. To participants in this study a prime example of their parents revealing that they are digital immigrants is the way that they spread pseudoscience online. Previous research tends to stereotype young people as incompetent in distinguishing fake news on social media (Shellenbarger, 2016), however, participants in this study claim high levels of confidence in their ability to identify fake online information and identify online information that is true and useful. Instead, participants consider their parents as less capable at discriminating fake news in an online environment. They give examples of the information that their parents frequently share on WeChat: *yang sheng* (ways of maintaining good health), *suan ming* (fatalism/luck), *xin ling ji tang* (mental chicken soup/inspiring information). Even though participants note that their parents are trying to express love and care by sending and sharing these information links, they report being disturbed and worried about their parents' inability to identify online fake news and be over-protective. They find it difficult to deal with

their ambivalent feelings toward parents' online practices and feel it would be difficult to stop their parents from spamming them with pseudoscience without hurting their feelings.

For example, participant 7 (male, aged 20, first-tier university) is a second-year undergraduate student studying at an art school at BIGC in Beijing. He states that learning about art is what he is interested in and the main motivation for him coming to Beijing. In contrast, his parents view his major differently, equating art to 'staying up all night', 'eating irregularly', and experiencing 'creative difficulties'. His parents frequently remind him to take care of himself and give him emotional support by sending him article links on *yang sheng* (caring for health) and *xin ling ji tang* (inspirational information). He finds it disturbing and worrying that his parents flood his WeChat with misleading fake news.

> My parents like to send me some posts like 'be careful, eating these two foods together can cause health problems', 'staying up overnight causes huge damage to your body', 'which two kinds of food should not be eaten together', 'the importance of having breakfast'… All these kinds of things, they consider that these online articles reflect the wisdom of traditional Chinese medicine. They do not even believe news like this is fake, as they consider there is some truth in online news.

Participants in my sample expressed their concerns regarding parents' low level digital competence and worry about the potentially negative effects of parents' online sharing practices. For instance, participant 1 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) played the role of door keeper in supervising his parents' online practices to reduce inappropriate posts and prevent possible negative associations.

> I can accept my parents sending me articles that include inaccurate medical information, what concerns me most is that they share it on their WeChat Moments, and then relatives and friends also share it. If anything bad happened, the impact would be too much. I told my mother to try not to share any information she thought useful. If she really wants to share, to send it to me first, then I can check the link and tell her whether the information is accurate or not.

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Participants also worry that spreading pseudoscience online might affect both their parents' and their own images in front of others. For example, participant 4 (female, aged 23, second-tier university), is concerned about the impressions others might develop of her by viewing her parents' online practices.

> I tell my parents to try not to share any posts related to medicine or health issues. I ask them if the articles they share turn out to be fake news what would others think about me as a postgraduate student who is learning media? Others might think that I am not good at my studies because my parents share false information.

Participant 4 proudly noted that after this intervention her parents reduced their online posting and now rarely share posts with medical links. As mentioned in Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, the communal feature of Chinese face suggests that an individual's face is shared by other members of their family or community. Therefore, when participant 4 complained to her parents that their online practices might affect others' impression of her, her parents were able to adjust their online practices to meet her expectations. In fact, Goffman's (1959) work on concealment and teamwork also helps to explain this phenomenon, with parents and children considering themselves a team, with each member taking responsibility for supporting each other's performance as well as concealing possible mistakes that the other makes during the performance. For participant 4, her parents and herself make up the family unit, working together in both online and offline worlds to present an ideal image to others. Participants indicate that their parents are aware of this and will change their online practices out of concern for their children.

In one case, however, participants admitted to finding parents' online smothering relatively acceptable and less hazardous. *Xin ling ji tang* (inspirational information) posts are encouraging and motivate participants to realise their ambitions. Half of the participants agreed that *xing ling ji tang* posts from parents can be helpful and useful, especially when they need encouragement. During his interview, participant 32 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) from Shang dong province talked about some troubles he had recently been through when he failed one of his examinations. After talking to his

mother about his failure, instead of blaming him, she comforted him by sending him a message on WeChat, as well as a link that included a 'chicken soup' article:

> My mum paid extra attention to me at that time, she sent me an encouraging message every morning and night. Also, she sent me some links that included 'chicken soup' articles. I found this helpful, as when people are in need, the family is always the one who cares about them most.

No matter how frequently the participants emphasised their independence and their frustrations with their smothering parents, their belief still appeared to be that their parents are the strongest support they have. In his description of the expressive ties between children and their parents, Hwang (1987) emphasises the importance of providing emotional support when needed. In this study, the use of WeChat helps both parent and child to overcome geographical distance and provide emotional support to each other, often in a more intensive way than would be possible offline.

Gong (2016) argues that modernization, urbanization, and especially the One-Child Policy, has led to the rise of the nuclear family and resulted in changing family lifestyles in China, as the focus of family has shifted from elders to the only child in family decision making, family expenditure, and filial piety. The only child, who is often referred to as a 'little emperor' or a 'little empress' is often indulged by grandparents or parents with commercial goods, in combination with strong parental control. Bao (2017) explores the emotional dilemma that the Chinese child faces when dealing with their parents' mixed parenting style. Bao (2017) notes that Chinese parents spoil their children with material goods, so long the child's performance (e.g. academic achievement) meets their expectation, otherwise, parents conduct authoritarian parenting by adopting strict rules and disciplines to regulate the child's social practices. Participant 32's mother did not take any offline actions, while her continuous online messaging become a pressure that made participant 32 to carry on and work harder at his studies. As Bao (2017) suggests, such conditions can result in psychological problems for children, and a love-hate relationship between children and parents.

In this study, alongside their appreciation of their parents' caring, participants also said that they were unhappy with parents who smothered them and got upset when they were flooded with information by their parents. For instance, when mentioning interaction with parents on WeChat, participant 1 (male, aged 22, from a second-tier university) noted:

> I like my parents to send me information from time to time because I know they are learning something new. However, I feel pressure when they share links with me too frequently. I do not really have time to look at them, and, you know that *xin ling ji tang* (inspiring information) is only helpful when you need it. When your life is good, and you look at 'chicken soup' things, you just feel ok…ok…

Participants were not always happy with their parents smothering them via WeChat. However, instead of disconnecting from their parents on WeChat, most participants preferred to adopt different strategies to manage their online impressions. These included reducing the chances of their parents interfering in their online practices and thus avoiding disagreements with them.

Young participants' distress at sharing a social media platform with their parents might also be due to their different levels of media literacy. Research finds that the more parents judge themselves and their children as skilled the more likely they are to prefer enabling rather than restrictive mediation (Livingstone et al. 2017). A key difference between the participants and their parents lies in understanding the relation between online conduct and offline reputation and life chances. Parents see online conduct as symptomatic of broader conduct and commitment to study, whereas participants see online interaction as playful, informal and irreverent. Parents considerto themselves as more able to identify online risks, while the participants see the online world as one of opportunity. Participants also appeared to be particularly concerned with their parents' understanding of both the online world and the life of a young person in the city. For instance, the participants expressed high levels of concern about their parents' tendency to spread spam and pseudoscience on WeChat, indicating their lack of online literacy.

6.5 Online Strategies in Managing the Parental Relationship

This theme explores online strategies adopted by participants to manage their parents' anxieties and intrusions. As mentioned previously, due to the generation gap and difference in media literacy, the participants prefer to maintain a polite distance from their parents, sustaining a relationship with them, while also preserving their personal privacy. A unique WeChat feature enables youth to create co-presence with their parents while having private spaces for self-expression that are not visible to parents. For instance, WeChat users can use online groups and blocking functions to share their information selectively. Participants admitted to adopting three strategies to achieve this: online blocking; self-monitoring; and social media platform switching.

6.5.1 Unilateral Online Moments Blocking

According to the participants, there are two ways to carry out online blocking. One is to make their WeChat posts inaccessible to their parents, the second is to block parents' posts from appearing on their WeChat Moments. However, this strategy would not be possible without the WeChat block setting function. Individuals can find three blocking options by clicking on WeChat connects' account on his/her WeChat contact list. "Don't Share My Moments" disables the person from checking one's posts on WeChat; "Hide his/her Moments" blocks other contacts' posts from appearing in one's WeChat Moments; and "Block" prohibits others from interacting with an individual on WeChat, either via instant messaging or by replying to moments. The participants not only acknowledged they adopt these WeChat features to manage the intimate relationship with parents, but also with people outside the family, such as friends and classmates.

6.5.1.1 Hiding Parents' Moments

Rather than challenging parents' enthusiasm for using social media as a contact device, some preferred not to see their parents' online posts. As noted by participant 30 (male, aged 20, at a first-tier university):

I blocked my mum's WeChat moments, because she always shares useless links. For instance, articles with titles like 'which kinds of food become poisonous when eaten together', 'this food can cure cancer', and parents are very interested in links that contain information regarding health...they do not justify whether the information is accurate or not, they just share it on WeChat. (Participant 30).

Participants also realised that although parents' low media literacy limits their ability to distinguish true and false online information, they do admit that this is a common problem and that they can also face difficulties in making this distinction. Therefore, participant 26 (female, aged 20, from second-tier university) stated that rather than persuade her parents to change their approach and potentially upset them, she prefers not to see her parents' online posts:

…They [parents] will not listen to you, because they are doing what they consider appropriate and right online. Sometimes, it is even difficult for me to tell which kinds of traditional medical advice is helpful or harmful, how could they tell? It is popular for people of their age to share this kind of information with their friends. Since I cannot prevent them from doing so, I decide to not see their posts and block them from appearing on my WeChat Moments, they will not know and will not get upset…

For participants, not interfering or judging their parents' online activities is the preferred way to carry out filial piety with the use of social media. Chinese youth regard taking care of their aging relatives as an indelible part of carrying out filial piety, although the aging population and competitive social environment make it increasingly challenging to accomplish this responsibility. When young people are not geographically close enough to their parents to take care of them, they instead express support and care through social media as the main way of carrying out filial piety. Therefore, participants state they only block their parents and relatives' WeChat posts temporarily, as they sometimes feel the need to react to these family members' online posts and indicate their support. For instance:

I block my parents and relatives on WeChat from time to time. Sometimes they share fake news or links, like 'you will have good luck if you share this picture' or 'share this link, otherwise, bad things will happen to your family'. The former is ok, but the latter is horrible. As a media student, I feel ashamed and annoyed when I see them share these links …I choose not to see their moments… but I unblock them from time to time in case they post something and I need to click 'like' or comment to show my support (Participant 4, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

…Since I am not at home, I can only express my care toward them [parents] through phone calls or video chats via WeChat. I am happy if they [parents] can find something interesting to do online. Sometimes they share the links so often that I hide their posts, but I still check what they post online from time to time, and click like or comment to express my support (Participant 34, female, aged 22, first-tier university).

6.5.1.2 Not Sharing Moments with Parents

In contrast to some children encouraging parents to create posts on WeChat, some participants found their parents are more supportive when they think that their children are not creating or sharing posts online. Participant 27 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) was a first-year postgraduate student at Peking University when the interview took place. He got his first smartphone in 2013, which he explained as being late compared to his peers, but normal to him, as he could not see the necessity of having a smartphone when social media is accessible on a laptop. However, his parents found it inconvenient to contact him this way, especially as his old phone had a weak signal, meaning they were unable to cannot contact him via WeChat or to observe his daily activities through WeChat Moments. Participant 27 said that he did finally invest in a smartphone and created a WeChat set-up to meet his parents' wishes, although he blocked them from accessing his WeChat Moments.

I make my WeChat moments inaccessible to my parents because they do not understand me and why I create certain posts online. I told them

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I have not opened my friends circle on WeChat as I do not want to expose my private life to others. They understand me and are quite happy. In fact, I post on WeChat quite often, which they do not know [smile]…

Similarly, participant 25 (female, aged 23, first-tier university) a second-year postgraduate student studying at Peking University had been a fan of the Korean pop band Shinhwa since she was in high school. Her parents became worried about her obsession with the band and prevented her from participating in activities organised by other fans. She stated that she did appreciate her parents' painstaking effort to prevent her from becoming obsessed with this band in high school, otherwise, she may not have been able to enter a top university in China. However, once she did enter university, she revived her interest in the group, even creating a Weibo (micro-blogging) account to upload the latest information about them. Her Weibo account had more than ten thousand followers by the time I interviewed her which enabled her to send information to a large number of people, while WeChat was providing her with an enclosed space where should could interact with friends (some of whom also like Shinhwa), to discuss details about the band and organise activities. Her WeChat Moments is not accessible to all her connections on WeChat, and does not include her parents. She explained:

…My parents do not know I am using my WeChat friend circle to create or share posts, because I told them I was closing it. My parents once asked me why I closed my WeChat friend circle, so I told them I was concentrating on my examinations and WeChat friends circle posts might distract me from my work. They were happy to know I am concentrating on my work and have not encouraged me to reopen it.

For Participant 25, WeChat thus meets her need for a private space where she can communicate with people who share the same interests as her, while also working as a tool for keeping in touch with parents and other friends. However, she does not want her parents to know about the activities she organises and participates in because she believes they would prefer her to be work hard at university.

By telling their parents they are not creating or sharing posts on WeChat, both Participant 27 and 25 provided a reason that had value to their parents; 'preparing for examinations' 'concentrating on their studies', both assertions that parents would believe and would encourage their children to carry on with. As noted by McDonald (2016), Chinese parents used to consider the Internet a hazard, with a negative impact on their children's education, especially when children become addicted to online activities, such as gaming and chatting with strangers. Therefore, by telling parents they are not creating or sharing posts on WeChat, participant 17 and participant 25 are aiming to reassure their parents that they are still a child who is bent on concentrating on their studies rather than one who is wasting time on social media. Livingstone et al.'s (2017) study of parental mediation shows that when children are young and less skilled online, parents tend to adopt 'restrictive mediation' to limit their children's use of the Internet, thereby preventing them from facing danger. In this research, which examines relations between young adults and their parents, the mutual trust between participants and their parents makes parents believe that their children are self-restricting to control the time they spend online and the activities they take part in. For most participants, making only selective posts available to their parents and creating a positive impression on their parents is more realistic than lying to their parents by telling them that they do not create or share any posts on WeChat. As Participant 28 (male, aged 23, first-tier university) stated:

> …My parents would not believe I do not share or create posts online. Although I do not share my online posts with them, they find other ways to know about my life. For instance, they can call me on the phone or send me messages more frequently, and I need to spend more time to tell them what I have done recently, which is time and energy consuming for all of us. They would feel more at ease if they see me create or share posts on WeChat from time to time, so they know I am doing well.

6.5.2 Selectively Deciding Which Posts to Make Available to Parents

The young Chinese participants in this study note that being geographically distant from their parents has led to them finding multiple ways to access as much information as

possible about their children's lives at university. They are aware that their parents observe their online activities and evaluate whether posts are 'appropriate'. Most participants are financially dependent on their parents and far away from home, so not having their parents worry about them is part of the filial piety they can practice through social media. Twenty-five participants mentioned that they selectively decide which posts on WeChat their parents can access.

The affordances of WeChat make it possible for participants to decide which posts should be available to their parents. WeChat users can selectively decide with whom they want to share posts when creating or sharing posts on the site. For instance, WeChat users can decide if a post is to be available to all his/her contacts on WeChat, if it is to be kept private, or they can select from their WeChat contact list and decide whom they want to share posts with. To ease this process, WeChat users can sort their connections into different groups, then decide with which group they want to share posts with or not. Being able to create groups and selectively decide which posts are available to parents eliminates the disadvantage of collapsed context, as discussed by Marwick and boyd (2010); this is because WeChat users can strategically manage their online impressions for targeted audiences rather than generalised WeChat contacts.

Zhou and Xiao (2015) suggest that Chinese parents observe their children's online practices, so as to develop questions and have topics ready for starting conversations with their children; on the other hand, Chinese young people consider any clues that trigger parents' further inquiries as causing unnecessary trouble and concern for parents as well as for themselves. Participants in this research also suggest that parents are like online agents or lurkers who observe their online practices and give instructions on what they should or should not do online.

As the only child at home, participant 21 (female, aged 24, first-tier university) described her parents as "different from others' parents, they are quite open-minded, and if I tell them something I would like to do they will help me to evaluate it, and make a decision." However, she also mentioned a case of her open-minded parents becoming quite sensitive to several pictures she posted online.

I used to create posts that related to my studies and what I did with my classmates at school, or when we travelled together to places of interest. My parents were quite happy and would 'like', 'comment', or chat through Instant message on WeChat. However, the other day I posted several pictures of me and my classmates staying overnight in KTV. They got so furious and called me immediately and asked me to delete all these pictures.

The story ended with Participant 21 (female, aged 24, first-tier university) deleting pictures from her WeChat friends circle. Participant 21 reflected on her online posts, stating that "Maybe I posted those [pictures] at the wrong time [she uploaded pictures after midnight], or maybe I should make the pictures unavailable to my parents."

More than half of the participants claimed that their awareness of their parents' online observations affects their online self-presentation, especially when they feel like expressing negative emotions online. Also, participant 34 (female, aged 22, first-tier university), an only child, left her hometown to study in Beijing, which makes her parents always concerned about her safety. She explained:

If I do not reply to my parents' message or phone call within one or two hours, my mum will contact all my friends and even my lecturers to find me. She does not contact me frequently, but I know she keeps on eye on my posts. Whenever I post something negative, my mum will call me on the phone quickly to ask if I am okay.

Participants' self-censorship is not limited to deciding what to post or not, but also correcting what they create on WeChat. For instance, Participant 34 noted that once she had a stomach pain and created a post on WeChat with the expectation of receiving some comfort from her friends. Afterwards, she deleted it out of concern that her parents might see it and worry about her.

I created the post quite late and received some enquires from my friends to ask if I was okay. I deleted it afterwards, because my parents might

get worried when they saw it the next morning, and the stomach issue was nothing serious.

Participants in the sample noted that one of the main reasons for practicing different tactics in managing their online impression is to set parents' mind at ease and reduce their intrusions. They therefore, are careful not to create or share posts that their parents might find 'problematic', they also notice that presenting an image including positive motivation and determination to succeed, so to ease their parents' minds, which is more effective than merely eliminating the posts that express negative emotions.

For example, participant 7 (male, aged 20, second-tier university) presented one of his online posts, which was accompanied by the text "After tomorrow, I am still a true man". This is shown below:
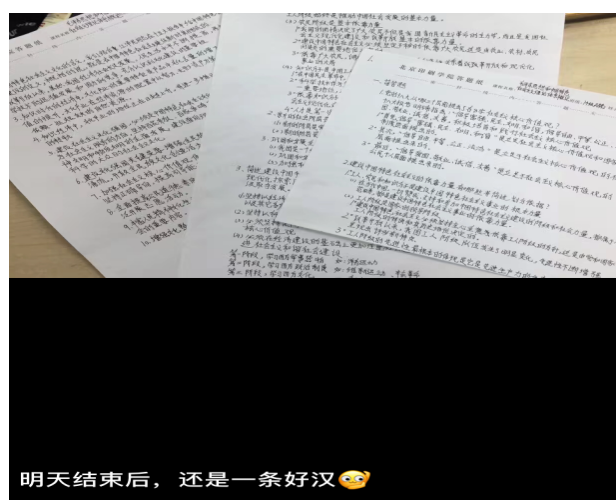
Image3: Image of posts from Participant 7

He explained that two reasons motivated him to do this:

> It was the end of the semester, we are all busy writing essays and preparing for the examination. This is the last examination in this semester. I wanted to present to my friends who are still working for the final to make them jealous… on the other hand, I know my parents check my WeChat friend circle every day, so when they saw my

examination paper, they would think 'oh, my kid is so hard working'
[laugh]…

Reflecting on Marwick and boyd's (2010) notion of 'imagined audience', I would state that the young participants seem to regard their parents as a significant 'imagined audience' when conducting their online self-presentation. According to the participants, if they decide to only make certain posts accessible to parents, they need to aware of the impression these leave on their parents. For instance, while describing over edited online selfies, participant 19 (male, aged 24, first-tier university) noted:

Some people edit their selfies so much, making them different from what they really look like. I look at these pictures and think 'do your parents know you are that beautiful', 'how would your parents feel when looking at your over edited pictures? Would they think you are so ugly because you are not confident with your looks and edit your selfies so much?

Participants in this research can be seen to complain about their parents smothering them and interfering in their online practices. Nevertheless, they still have a sense of motivation in terms of managing their online practices in ways that set their parents' minds at ease and makes their parents happy with them. As mentioned previously, participants prefer to share positive and happy emotions with their parents and share unhappiness and concerns with their best friends. When WeChat become the main platform for connecting participants with their parents, some participants found that they felt more comfortable conducting their online lives on other social media that their parents cannot access rather than strategically manage their online impression for their parents.

6.5.3 Switching Between Different Social Media Platforms

When participants found it difficult to manage their impression for mixed online audiences using one social media platform, they tended to switch to other social media platforms, especially platforms they have already once used. The young participants noted that they also revisit previous social media platforms out of nostalgia for having a

private online space in which to express their personal feelings. As Participant 37 (female, aged 22, second-tier university) noted:

> I have two Weibo accounts, one for work and one to express my negative feelings. I cannot express these negative feelings on WeChat as friends and parents will worry. Sometimes, I just want to mark the day so I post something on Weibo.

Most participants mention that they have experienced times when they feel upset and have negative thoughts, while having no one to talk to. The use of multiple social media platforms provides them with a private space where they can express their feelings, especially negative ones, and they even use these spaces for personal diary entries where they record memorable things. Hallikainen (2014) states that people switch among different social media platforms to accumulate social capital and seek social rewards. Participants in my research mentioned the importance of using social media to release negative emotions, which they identified as difficult to share with family members and close friends. Although they noted that they share their unhappiness and concerns with friends rather than parents, they also prefer conducting these practices using face-to-face interaction. It appears that in the online environment they feel more obligation and duty to present positive energy, which I will discuss further in Chapter 8.

6.6 Conclusion

Chinese traditional social norms emphasise parents' role in raising their child and also place significant importance on the child's moral obligation, in terms of gratitude for parents' loving kindness. This means showing respect to parents, following their instructions, and taking care of parents when they get old. However, China's rapid urbanization and modernization are challenging and modifying the nature of intergenerational filial piety. In 2013, the Chinese government added a new section to The Law of the People's Republic of China on Protection of the Rights and Interests of the Elderly, suggesting that children who neglect or ignore their parents might fall foul of the Law. These new rules highlight Chinese family members' obligation to provide financial support, livelihood and spiritual comfort to older people and to encourage family

members to live close to the elders in their family. This new law specially stipulates that family members who do not live with their older relatives should visit or greet them frequently, also, that employers need to provide holidays so that their employees can visit their elder family members. This new Law aroused intense discussion on Chinese social media, as people described their struggle to juggle their career aspirations with acts of filial piety towards their parents, according to the Law's regulations. The urbanization in China has encouraged people to migrate from rural areas to work in cities. Consequently, it has become difficult for those Chinese people who are financially dependent on a job located in a large urban area to visit parents who live in rural areas or other cities.

Recent media reports on the Chinese family, tend to exaggerate Chinese young people's desire for independence. For instance, one article in the Economist magazine comments on family, identity, and morality in China society; when describing the social relations between Chinese parents and child, the author writes "Chinese people increasingly do what they want, not what they are told" (The Economist, 2016). In contrast, findings in this research suggest this statement only partially reflects Chinese young people's relationship with the older generation. Notwithstanding the participants' observation that they are vexed by their smothering parents and want to keep a respectful distance from them, my research does not suggest that participants are rebelling against traditional filial piety. In fact, they are carrying out filial piety in what they regard as a more modern and realistic way.

Participants suggest social media and digital mobile devices enable them to create co-presence with their parents despite geographical distance. Most of the participants who migrated to Beijing with the intention of escaping from smothering parents, now have some personal space, and they aim to stay in the city to pursue a better future for themselves as well as for the next generation. According to the participants, their parents tend to support these decisions, hoping that their children might achieve a higher social and financial position. Parents also feel a strong attachment towards their children, and concern about the possible risks and dangers that child might experience. The young participants note that before they can provide financial support to their parents, the best way to carry out filial piety is to provide engagement and spiritual comfort. Hence, both participants and their parents have come to carry out their social responsibilities through WeChat. For instance, parents can consider that they are acting out their role by reassuring

themselves that their child is safe and sound. Meanwhile, participants strategically manage their online practices so as to present favourable online images that meet their parents' expectations and set their minds at ease.

The participants also note that due to the generation gap and difference in media literacy with their parents, they conduct different strategies to manage their own and their parents' online practices. For instance, in relation to their concern about parents' sharing of pseudoscience, they explain this to their parents and make them aware of the negative impact of posting such information and the impression others might form about them because of it. Participants also report strategies to manage what information about them is available to their parents. They aim to present an image of being obedient and hard-working students to reduce parents' anxieties and interventions. Chinese parents appear to adopt a mix of parenting styles. For instance, Chinese parents who smother participants by supervising their social practices both online and offline fulfil like the description of helicopter parents, suggesting parents who aim for continuous involvement in their children's lives, with the intention of protecting their children from risk and danger. Meanwhile, participants' descriptions of their parents' parenting style support previous research findings that suggest the Chinese parenting style is a mix of the authoritative and the authoritarian (Xu et al, 2005). Participants therefore present themselves as obedient in order to satisfy the authoritarian parenting style, while parents who communicate with the child and provide emotional support are characteristic of a more authoritative parenting style. Additionally, participants note that their parents are satisfied when they see their children present themselves as hard-working, which is consistent with tiger parenting and the sort of parental strictness that ensures excellent performances in academic circles and social achievements (Kim, 2016). However, instead of complaining to parents for placing such strict rules and parental controls, participants also mention parents' enormous support in encouraging them to face difficulties and challenges. All in all, participants' reflection on their mediated relationship with their parents indicate the complexities involved in categorising Chinese parenting styles. Mixed parenting styles among Chinese parents could be the result of the combination of traditional Chinese and modern western parenting styles, which also closely relate to parents' personal characters and experiences. For instance, Chambers (2012) notes that experts in media publicity and individuals' psychological self-reflection have replaced traditional institutions in monitoring families, while participants believe that parents' personal experiences and

internalized traditional rites have a stronger influence on their understanding of media and the way they communicate with their children. As participant 1 (male, aged 22, from a second-tier university) noted:

>…The way parents communicate with children is not fully dependent on their education level, but on what kind of childhood they have had and their reflexive abilities. There are parents who are highly educated who force children to obey their instructions. There are also parents who have not received higher education but have strong empathy so they can understand their children and are willing to communicate with them. Personally, I do not believe in the education instructions online or on other media, the so-called scholars tell you how to educate your children and how to make your children successful. Sometimes, it is absurd to take all their suggestions, they like to refer to western ways of family education, such as the Harvard way, the Oxford way, or American ways. I would say children are all good, while parents and social context varies. Chinese parents fancy western education as it can indicate their social distinction, while in their deepest mind they are traditionally cultivated Chinese parents, who expect children to be successful as well as obedient.

Participants appear to struggle to manage a mediated relationship with their parents, reflecting the idea that Chinese youth are in a dilemma regarding the balancing of traditional and modern social values. Indeed, traditional Chinese values expect a child to be obedient and serve their parents, and modern social values suggest young people should have a greater degree of autonomy and be able to grab opportunities, for example, for travelling and exploring the outside world. In addition, cultural norms and government emphasise the obligation to carry out traditional filial piety also influences young people's reflections and actions. This contradiction has been reinforced by the widespread adoption of the one-child policy and insufficient welfare services for older people in China, placing a major emphasis on the role of family members in taking care of older people.

Participants' practices for managing their online impression suggest that their respect for traditional social norms does not prevent them from exploring and developing themselves. They partly manage this by preventing their parents from knowing things, although their ambitions for educational and social achievement have not changed that much from their parents' generation. Therefore, the rise of individualism among Chinese youth is different to that displayed by the more individualistic culture found in western countries.

A notable point that needs further study is young participants' attitude towards traditional kinship. Participant 4 (female, aged 23, from a second-tier university) stated that she is trying to change her way of talking and not present her character as too direct. She believes that a steady and calm character represents maturity and that to be indirect in social interactions can prevent misunderstandings. However, her well thought out attitude towards outsiders is not matched by equal calm towards her family.

> I do not like relatives or neighbours who have extra interest in other family's lives. They keep everyone informed about the tiny things that happen in your family. Like, which university you kids go to, how much salary your kids make and how much salary their kids make. You know, the whole process is to make their family and their kids stand out among their peers. However, when you meet these people you must not get upset or even show you are upset. Otherwise, the parents will blame you for not *dongshi* (understanding rituals). Therefore, even if relatives criticise you, you still need to smile at them and nod your head and say 'yes, you are right'. I just get very upset with this. I like to see my grandparents when I go back home for holidays and I really enjoy the warm atmosphere when my big family gathers together for the spring festival. However, I need to leave the dining table very quickly after I finish eating when my aunts start talking. Otherwise, I feel my whole year is spoiled by them.

Participant 4 thinks her parents are over concerned with maintaining kinship, which she finds difficult to manage and does not understand the motivation for. According to the traditional notion, kinship ties are supposed to be about a relationship that provides care

and shows hospitality to others. In contrast, participants in this research seem to find very close kinship ties oppressive, forcing them into complex games of social comparison and family loyalty. In my studies, the young participants feel this compromises the individuality that they enjoy when they interact with people who are outside the family realm, and other relatives. Interestingly, this can be expressed in terms of traditional Chinese conceptions of identity as face. For example, individuals feel that they lose *mianzi* when they are placed in the disadvantaged position in relatives' social comparisons and the feeling of losing *mianzi* is stronger when they feel their parents are disadvantaged because of them. Chinese young people expect their parents to be individualistic, to give less attention to children and kin and to spend more effort in taking care of themselves. However, they are also aware of the difficulties involved in acting out this notion when parents are still living in a traditional community. Therefore, some participants prefer to manage their kinship ties online instead of interacting with them offline as their parents do, while some participants note they prefer to ignore kinship ties altogether, and instead turn to develop their friendships. In the next chapter, I examine the ways in which my participants manage other social ties online.

Chapter 7— Mediated *Guanxi* and *Renqing*

7.1 Introduction

Guanxi refers to a person's network of social relations. It can refer to the social capital that an individual has through the social connections between two parties, whether individuals, groups and companies. As mentioned in Chapter 6, Fei (1948) adopts the term *cha xu ge ju* (pattern of different sequence) to describe Chinese people's social networks. It suggests that individuals see themselves as the centre of a concentric circle with others scattered in these circles depending on their closeness to the individual at the center. For instance, family members and close relatives are in the inner circle, while distant relatives and general friends are in the further circle. When Fei's (1948) work took place in the 1930s in China, social mobility was not as prevalent as it is today; the traditional belief was that kinship served as the key bond among individuals, which is rarely changed nor replaced.

With increasing social mobility in Chinese Zsociety, Liu (2009) modifies the notion of *cha xu ge ju* by introducing the idea of the fluid character of social relationships, which suggests that social connections are scattered across three zones: the core zone, which includes family members and close kin; the reliable zone, which includes close friends and distant relatives; and the effective zone, which includes all other kinds of social connections (e.g. general friends, acquaintances, further distant relatives). The fluidity of social relationships suggests that people in different zones can shift from one zone to the other. For instance, people from an outer concentric circle can replace individuals who used to be in the inner circle, e.g. acquaintances can become best friends by offering emotional and social support to the individual when he or she is in need. Conversely, close friends and relatives can lose their importance to the individual through geographical distance and by failing to sustain communication and mutual attachment.

Granovetter (1973) suggests that members in a social network can be categorized according to the strength of the ties between them. Strength of ties is defined as a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy (mutual confiding) and reciprocal 'service' between people. For instance, family and close friends tend to provide

companionship and support continuously to the individual, while general friends and acquaintances tend to have a more temporary and instrumental relationship with the person. Closeness and time spent together also result in mutual information sharing. Granovetter (1983) therefore argues that due to the high similarity between the individual and those with whom they share strong ties, those with weak ties can provide new information, offer new resources and introduce the individual to activities and social realms that strong ties do not. One consequence is that individuals have a higher chance to exploit job opportunities through weak or thin social tie than a strong tie. Granovetter (1983) also argues that people develop strong homophilous ties to exclude outsiders in hierarchical societies.

Bourdieu's (1977, 1986) work on social capital echoes Granovetter's work on the connections between social capital and other kinds of capital, e.g. economic, cultural and symbolic. He suggests that social capital consists of the connections that an individual can effectively mobilise (Bourdieu, 1986). Therefore, individuals who are in an advantageous social position have relatively more social capital than individuals in relatively inferior social positions. Putman (1995, p. 67) explains social capital as the features of social organizations that "facilitates coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" with the emphasis on the social networks, norms and social trust. Similarly, participants in my research frequently adopt the term *quan zi* (circle) while describing the beneficial social community they aim to create in their social life. People in the same *quan zi* tend to come from same place, share similar education backgrounds and, most importantly, are willingly to create a beneficial social unit to distinguish themselves from others.

Compared with Granovetter (1973) who focusses on the factors that influence the strength of social ties, Chinese people use *qing* (feeling) to reflect the emotional commitment and closeness between two parties (Zhao et al., 2015). Zhai (2005) describes Chinese society as a *ren qing* society, in which people exchange resources in the name of *ren qing* rather than follow the principle of equality in social exchange. Western social exchange theory emphasizes symmetry and equality through reciprocity, whereas Chinese *ren qing* works through a metaphor of indebtedness in which one party is in debt to the other so that to sustain *guan xi* they need to repay any kindness or service in the future (Zhao et al. 2015). In China, creating a *ren qing* debt with one party is an investment from which an

individual can expect a repayment in the future. Considering the roles of *ren qing* and *guan xi* in Chinese people's social interaction, this chapter includes explanation on how participants in this study develop *guan xi* and exchange *ren qing* on the WeChat platform.

Chambers (2013) argues that social media platforms provide individuals with technological tools to manage extensive weak ties, helping to maintain relationships with a small number of contacts in conjunction with other personal media channels. Ellison et al. (2007) find that undergraduate students prefer to connect with individuals with whom they have offline connections, such as friends, classmates and neighbours, rather than strangers. Middle school students in McDonald's (2016) research state that they randomly connect with strangers online as *luan jia* (messy adding), in contrast to the rational connections with people from work, school, family, and village. A few participants in my research admitted to having linked to online strangers when they were in middle school and that they stopped messy adding in high school preferring to connect with individuals who they have offline connections with. Furthermore, participants who are not local to Beijing especially tend to develop a 'localism network' with individuals who come from the same place as them and study in Beijing.

In discussing mediated intimacy, Chambers (2013, p. 163) suggests that friendship today has become "both a potent exemplar of individuality and personal choice and a global marketing tool to influence our personal tastes and patterns of consumption". Similarly, youth in this research note that they would like to connect and interact with individuals who can be exemplary for them and have a positive impact on them. Participants in this study prefer to develop *guan xi* (relations) with people who are equally good or better than they, as they believe the effort they spend on maintaining and enforcing *guan xi* is like a *ren qing* (reciprocal favour) investment, for which they expect to receive repayment in the future. Compared with reciprocal favours, participants also hope to have a 'hyper friendship' that can help them to construct the identity that they want to have (Chambers, 2013).

7.2 Reciprocal Favouritism in Relationships Among Chinese Young People

Hwang (1987) suggests that reciprocal relationships that are temporary follow the rules of equal exchange or investment of resources to meet each party's material goals. He gives the example of a salesperson and notes that people are rigorous in protecting their resources in such social exchanges. Zhai's (2011) work on face and favour suggests the changing relations among Chinese, as he notes Chinese people are passionate in connecting with authority, creating beneficial relationship with others, so as to occupy the advantageous position and useful resources via social interaction. Zhai (2011) criticises the rising number of people who shamelessly expand their social networks and develop relationships to receive as many favours as possible.

This research captures the transformation of different social ties among youths in this study, especially when they anxiously develop social networks as wide as possible so to prepare themselves for the unpredictable future. Therefore, the instrumental component exists in different kinds of social ties and does not necessarily terminate after personal goal achievement. Instead, individuals seek continuous connection and look for the exchange of *ren qing* in the long run by anticipating the potential reciprocity they might receive when deciding whether to develop their relationship into a *guan xi*. As a result, the involvement of *ren qing* in *guan xi* helps to sustain reciprocal relationships; meanwhile, it creates obligations on individuals to be capable of repaying the *ren qing* debt to sustain their beneficial connection with others.

7.2.1 Connecting with Classmates on WeChat

Participants' contacts on WeChat are predominantly made up of peers and very often their classmates. Classmates are a special social unit in Chinese society, as Chinese students normally study in the same class during middle school, high school and university (McDonald, 2016). Very often students who live in boarding school share the same accommodation with classmates during their school career and form collective identities by participating in similar actives and completing the same curriculum (Yang, 2002). The collective identities among classmates serve as the base of their *guan xi*, and they prefer

to describe their relationship with classmates as 'lifelong' friends (Fan, 2002). Correspondingly, this *guan xi* base extends to the online environment and affect youths' use of WeChat. For instance, participants frequently create discussion groups on WeChat that are based on their school class, which become a platform for individuals to sustain relationships and to reconnect with previous classmates (Ellison et al., 2011).

Participant 14 (male, aged 22, second-tier university), a first-year undergraduate student from Guangdong, started using WeChat when he entered university and joined his high school discussion group on WeChat.

> My high school classmates created a WeChat discussion group and added me to the group. After talking several times in the discussion group, I found that some of my classmates were also studying in Beijing. We created our own discussion group and organized an activity to meet up. I found some of them quite nice and funny and although we never talked in high school we are now becoming good friends and meet quite often.

Participant 17 (male, aged 24, second-tier university) made similar points:

> I know some of my previous classmates better in the group discussion. They were talking about something that I am interested in the [discussion] group, [so] I joined in the talk and found we have similar opinions on some things. Generally, we have become good friends.

Shared identities between participants and their classmates serves as their *guan xi* base, and the use of WeChat inserts an 'affective component' (Jiang, Lo, and Garris, 2012) into their relationship. Participants describe this affective component as *gan qing* (emotional feeling) in Chinese, which is the functional element of *guan xi*, because people only have emotional commitment to each other when they have *gan qing*. Chinese people prefer to describe the strength of *gan qing* as either deep or shallow. The more intense and warm their social interactions are, the deeper (stronger) their *guan xi* is. In contrast, a lack of interaction or cool reactions toward each other's invitations results in a shallow (weak) *guan xi*.

The use of WeChat among the young enhances the intensity of online interaction, and the 'niceness' and 'humour' they present online enhances their *gan qing* and *guan xi* with each other. Furthermore, the other notable element of *gan qing* is its instrumental functional: people who have *gan qing* with others are committed to helping others realize their interests (Jiang, Lo and Garris, 2012). Therefore, participants develop their *gan qing* with previous classmates who also study in Beijing, not only because their geographical closeness and the ease of meeting online but also because of the potential favours they might receive in time of need. As participant 18 (male, aged 24, second-tier university) notes:

> … we come from the same place and have studied in the same school, I just feel that we can trust each other more than people we are not familiar with. We can help each other when we are in need, and *jia li ren* (people at home, mainly refer to their parents) are less worried as well.

Chinese people refer to those who come from the same place as them as *lao xiang* (fellow villager). Zhang and Xie (2013) name the *lao xiang* network as the 'localistic network', a social network based on an individual's place of origin. The reason that makes localistic networks play an essential role among internal migrants is a belief in regional identity and ethnicity, and the view that people from the same region have shared customs and moral values. Zhang and Xie (2013) argue that migrant workers in urban cities provide help to those who come from the same places as them, thereby creating reciprocal favouritism. Youths in my research believe that WeChat enables them to reconnect with previous schoolmates, with whom they have more trust and belief in and with whom they can communicate and share feelings and develop a reciprocal favouritism relationship.

7.2.2 Updating WeChat Connections According to Personal Needs

As discussed previously, profile pages on WeChat constitute a *peng you quan* (friend circle) consistent with Fei's (1948) ideas that Chinese social culture is formed in concentric circles. Chinese people's friends or social circles are individual centred; the

scope of the circle reflects the social resources and power that individuals occupy in different contexts (Hwang, 1987). For instance, Fei (1948) notes that in the villages wealthy people's social networks may extend to distant relatives or even acquaintances, while the peasant farm may only have a household of two. A feature of concentric circles is that people in such circles can be reclassified into a circle closer or further away from the individual. Even after a few decades, Fei's (1948) concentric circle metaphor still works well in explaining the structure of Chinese people's relationship, while findings in my study are more in support of Liu's (2009) suggestion of considering the fluidity perspective of these circles, as participants note they constantly check or even update their WeChat contacts for personal needs.

Participants do not consider all their connections on WeChat as *gun xi*. One third of participants claim that they 'update' their WeChat contacts occasionally, so as to have enough space to connect with 'new friends'. WeChat enables users to connect with up to 5,000 friends. However, the well-known Dunbar (2016) number suggests that on average people can only manage 150 relationships and that relationship decreases as the number increases. Dunbar (2016) notes that young people (18–24 years old) tend to have about two friends in the inner layer of their social network and 282 broader connections. Youths in my study describe their close friends as 'two or three' and 'those few people', which is far less than the 5,000 quotas that WeChat provides. Participants also note that when they do not see further possibilities in developing or sustaining a reciprocal relationship with an individual, they might remove that person from their WeChat contact list to save space.

As the chair of the student union at his university, participant 7 (male, aged 20, second-tier university) claims there is not 'enough space' on WeChat, although he had 1,258 contacts on it. This number is more than most participants in this research but much lower than the limit provided by WeChat.

> I check my WeChat contact lists when I feel bored. I will delete some
> of my friends that I have not contacted for two years and I do not think
> we will contact each other in the future. Such as, middle school classes
> or even primary classmates, some high school classmates, and some
> people who I added to WeChat occasionally who are less interesting.

Participant 23 (female, aged 22, first-tier university) is a WeChat merchant who sells products to WeChat connections. For her, each WeChat contact represents a potential customer, and the 5,000 contacts limitation hold up her from expanding his online business.

> I need to add different people online to sell products to, while there is a limit of the WeChat number. I have to update my contact lists very frequently; normally I will delete people who have not bought my products for few months.

Despite her grand plan, it turned out that she only had 1,195 contacts on her WeChat. Then I realize, participants who consciously updating their WeChat contacts are not because of a shortage of space but out of their desire and anxiety to develop beneficial social networks. They selectively delete people who they consider as having less instrumental value for them and leave space for people who might contribute more to them. The claims by heavy users of not having enough space may reflect the difficulty in sustaining relationships with large numbers of contacts; therefore, they must ensure all online connections they have are active and efficient.

There are also participants who see their WeChat contacts list as their 'phone directory' and hardly delete contacts from it. For them, contacts on WeChat remind them of whom they have once connected or could possibility renew relationship with in the future, or people who could provide information that they are interested in. This finding is consistent with Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe's (2007) notion of creating bridging social capital through social media, and extending the friendship group to include people who are different, interesting or innovative. These weak ties between individuals are different from Hwang's (1987) notion of mixed ties in which people sustain their relationships through frequent contact and exchanging favours. It appears that the norm is to have concentric circles reflecting offline personal networks and that more extensive networks of contacts reflect either a specific purpose, such as online trading, or to have an extended set of people with whom favours can be exchanged or who might be of value at some point in the future:

> I do not delete WeChat connects because I think everybody I connect with represents one experience. When I check my contact list on WeChat I remember why we connected with each other and what the person looks like, even if we do not interact online. Maybe one day we will post something and attract the interest of each other and become good friends. (Participant 6, female, aged 20, second-tier university)

Participant 37 (female, aged 22, second-tier university) also checks her Moments:

> I do not have so many friends (165 contacts) on WeChat, I hardly delete any one from my contact lists. There are some contacts I have never talked to or have not talked to for years; I keep connect[ed] with them on WeChat as they like to share useful information.

Participant 3 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) showed one of her WeChat friends' online posts to me that included a Chinese poem: 'Night is here, the waning crescent moon appears outside the window'. She explains the reason for connecting with this contact is through the recommendation of a friend; in fact, she has never met this contact in person, as she states:

> Some of my WeChat connections are just online and are not familiar with me offline. I still connect with them because I like their posts. Like this person who posts nice pictures or meaningful sentences on WeChat, we have never interacted with each other online, but I would like to meet him in person if there is a chance.

For participants, sustaining social connections and receiving useful information are becoming equally important for them to use WeChat. On the one hand, it appears they are creating personal virtual communities to strengthen existing social ties with family, friends and neighbours; on the other hand, youths in the study actively develop losses ties with others that can be meaningful in various ways (Benkler, 2006). Considering this finding from the social capital perspective, participants are consciously maintaining bonding social capital for emotional support as well as anxiously extending bridging social capital by creating weak social ties with others for external information resources.

Previous research tends to suggest bonding social capital comprises strong ties within homogenous groups, while bridging social capital comprises weak ties with heterogeneous group (Beaudoin, 2011). Research findings not only shed light on participants' desire to creating bonding and bridging social capital, as well as reveal the shared upward moving intentions among young participants.

7.2.3 Desire to Create an 'Elite' Group

Participants consider their online contacts as their social capital that they could develop *guan xi* with and benefit from. Granovetter (1973) mentions that people attempt to create strong ties with those from a higher social class and that even weak ties with people from social class can bring chances for an individual to step into the upper class or gain better work opportunities. Granovetter's (1973) statement on high social class might largely involve the economic capital that one possesses, while participants in this study present higher preference on connecting with individuals who have similar or more 'cultural capital' than them (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, participants note they prefer to connect with individuals who they consider 'belong to the same circle', 'are helpful' or 'know things better', from within their social circle. Participant 3 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) states:

> I added some of my previous primary school classmates as my WeChat
> friends on a trip back home. Then I delete or block them on my
> WeChat, because they like to create posts about their kids, share fake
> news, and posts like 'you would get bad luck if you do not share this'.
> I just feel we do not belong to the same circle, our interests, field or
> vision are different. I do not think we have things in common to talk to
> each other, nor do I think we have further positive interaction.

Similarly, Participant 13 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) does not like previous classmates who are less educated than he:

> Some of my previous friends quit school after middle school or high
> school. Even though they are doing business and becoming wealthy, I

can imagine what they post on WeChat, maybe pictures of their kids, information of their business. For students like me their online information is useless. I would not add them to WeChat if I have a choice.

He further explains:

I can understand them [previous classmates creating certain posts], because that is what their life is about. Maybe when they look at our WeChat moments, they consider us as immature or even stupid. I think we should understand each other, we are living in a different circle now, our future life will be different as well. What we can do is they live their life, we live our life keeping a polite distance. We may tell jokes when we meet online or offline, but we know we are different from the bottom of our heart.

To distinguish people based on their education level is not new, as Bourdieu (1986) discusses in his work on cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) notes that social capital can exist in an embodied state, an objectified state and an institutionalized state, which suggests the existence of cultural capital within the subjective disposition of the person, through cultural (e.g. books) and educational goods. The education level discrepancy between participants and their friends who have not been to universities results in a cultural capital divide from embodied and institutional perspectives. This is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986, pp. 50–51) notion that academic qualifications reflect the cultural competence of the holder and confers him/her with a "conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture", which also produces a form of cultural capital that its bearers possess.

In this research, participants note that a discrepancy in cultural capital between them and friends who have not been to university places them on a different life path. I interpret participants' notion of different life paths as not limited to being geographically far from previous classmates but more about the potential value that participants attribute to their academic capital. For participants, cultural capital related to place of education also effectively improves their social capital, which might eventually increase their economic

capital and their social position in the future. Hence, connecting with others who have a similar level or more cultural capital has the potential to improve their life chances.

Bourdieu (1986) argues that the recognition of cultural capital is based on one's academic qualifications making it possible to compare people in terms of their academic credentials. According to participants, the comparison of academic qualification takes place both between those who have and have not received higher education and between those who attended high-ranking universities and those who have been to less prestigious universities. For instance, participant 25 (female, aged 23, first-tier university) a second-year undergraduate student described her friend circle as:

> I keep contact with some high school classmates, one of them is studying at ZheJiang University, one is studying at Tsinghua University, and the other one is studying at RenMin University.[35] We keep in touch with each other on WeChat and go out together from time to time. I am less in touch with friends at other universities, especially those who are not studying in Beijing, because we are going to have different friend circles in the future and what we will see and know will be different. To be honest with you, I do not think our lines are connected.

The young people in my sample understand their social circles in ways that depart from the tradition of locally based social circles reflecting social status (Fei, 1948). Instead of spending effort on sustaining strong ties with kin and neighbours as Fei (1948) once suggested, participants are eager to create beneficial connections with people out of their family or even their living community. The other notable change of social connection preference among Chinese youths is they express less interest in interacting with people who are attracted by their personal influence as Fei (1948) once described, in contrast, they express prefer to be in an advantageous position in choosing the social circle they want to assimilate into and decide who they can assimilate in their friend circle.

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[35] ZheJiang University, Tsinghua University and RenMin University all belong to the well-known universities in China.

Meanwhile, traditional upward social connection also exists in the online environment, as participants express an interest in connecting with people who they perceive as from higher social position than themselves. For instance, participants consider connecting with teachers, employers, experienced colleagues and fellow students as beneficial for their personal and professional development. Participants note that because there is less chance to interact with these people in person, online interaction becomes essential in improving others' awareness of them, which possibly increase their chances to benefit from such relationship.

Participant 15 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) received her bachelor degree from a university in Henan province and was doing a master's degree at a university in Beijing when the interview took place. She explains that her master's enrolment examination was lucky and benefited from WeChat contacts:

> When I was preparing for my postgraduate entrance examination I tried to get some connections with students in this university. Luckily, my friend's brother had a friend who was a postgraduate here. I got that person's WeChat account and she helped me find a professor's WeChat account, so I connect with that professor on WeChat and told him I want to be his student. I clicked like and commented on almost every post that professor created or shared on his WeChat moments. When I took the interview process, the professor recognized me and said, 'You are the student who often clicks "like" on my WeChat, right?' I said yes and he was quite happy, my interview went very well. Even now, I think it is my online 'likes' and 'comments' that secured me a place to be a postgraduate at this university.

Similarly, Participant 24 (female, aged 21, first-tier university) describes using WeChat to enhance her relationship with her employers:

> I am in an internship in this company for almost a year now. My postgraduate supervisor introduced me to work there so people in the company are quite nice to me. We all connected on WeChat to organize activities and I pay attention to employers and senior colleagues' online

posts as I need to react to their online posts to show my respect as well as to la guan xi (pull guan xi, strengthen social tie) between us.

Burt (2001, p. 31) notes that society is like a market in which people exchange goods and ideas in pursuit of their interests, and 'social capital is a metaphor about advantage'. In Bourdieu's (1980 cited from Field, 2008, p. 19) discussion of social capital, he notes that "different individuals obtain a very unequal return on a more or less equivalent capital (economic or cultural) according to the extent to which they are able to mobilise by proxy of group". Social capital, in other words, moderates the effect of economic and cultural capital on life chances.

As Burt (2001) notes, social capital enables people are well connected to realize their potential. In this research, participants consciously manage their social connections with individuals from the same or higher status social groups, while keeping a distance from individuals who they think are from inferior social groups. As Bourdieu (1986) notes, social capital does not come by nature; on the contrary, it takes time and effort for individuals to manage. Therefore, the following sections explain how participants manage their social capital through the use of WeChat.

7.3 The Obligations to be Someone's WeChat 'Bestie'

To sustain social capital, participants discuss the need to fulfil their obligations in the relationship. In this study, participants praise WeChat and the smartphone for enabling them to connect with friends. They also note their obligation to develop rituals to make their 'besties' feel special both online and offline, such as by providing expressive support to close friends like family members do, reacting and responding to best friends' online posts and messages in a timely way, and creating 'lore' with close friends that make certain posts meaningful only to them.

7.3.1 Close Friends and Family Ties

Most of my respondents ($n = 34$) migrated to Beijing for higher education; their residency period in Beijing ranges from two months to five years. Irrespective of their length of stay

in Beijing, their willingness to keep in touch with friends is the same, especially for those who reside in Beijing for less than two years. Connecting with friends, especially close friends, is an important reason for participants to use social media. The mobile phone based multimedia platform WeChat becomes the main tool that participants use to connect, share feelings and receive caring attention.

Participant 10 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) is a second-year undergraduate student who comes from HeNan province. Our interview took place in a café zone at her university. The weather was muggy and the air conditioner in the café zone was not functioning well. Although the interview lasted for two hours, she spent most of the time talking about two of her best friends. Both best friends were her classmates from high school, where they were *tong zhuo* (sitting next to each other in classroom), she describes her relationship with these two best friends as:

> We are like sisters, even closer than our siblings. We lived in the same accommodation when we were in high school and applied to universities in the same city [Beijing]. Two of us came to this university [BIGC] and the other one is at Beihang University. We try to meet every week when we were free and text each other every day on WeChat. Whenever one of us feels upset the other two will comfort them by texting, voice message, or video chat. If something serious happens we will go to see each other immediately. The one in the same university as mine lives in the other campus, but it is still easy for us to see each other. The other one is on the 5th north ring of Beijing, one time she called me and said she missed home and felt upset. I spent four, five hours changed buses and subways to see her, she was surprised when she saw me, started laughing and said, 'I felt happy just by seeing you'. I had dinner with her then travelled another four hours back…

Image 4: Map of Beijing

Image 4 is a screenshot I took from Google Maps on 11 May 2016 to indicate the travel that participant 10 has done to visit her friend [participant is based in Da Xing and her friend is based in Chang Ping]. While participant 10 is not the only respondent who has travelled far simply to comfort a close friend, participants who have done so tend to note that 'a friend in need is a friend indeed'. What is worth noting is that WeChat not only plays a role for keeping in touch with close friends, but most importantly the actions that friends take after online conversation matters to participants more.

Most young participants ($n = 37$) in this study are the only child at home; they express their desires to have siblings and note that they consider their best friends as their siblings. For them, their best friends fill in the role of being their sibling, especially for participants who are away from home. Close friends who stay at home help them to carry out filial piety as siblings would do.

Participant 19 (male, aged 24, first-tier university) comes from Neimeng, the northern part of China. He quit his job as *gong wu yuan* (governmental officer) and was doing a master degree when the interview took place. Close friends in his hometown have become his pillar in helping him carrying out filial piety toward his parents:

> I have several good *ge men* (brothers) at home. We have made an
> agreement that we should support each other in the future to take care
> of our parents, because all of us are the only child at home. It would be

too much pressure for each [of] us if our parents or grandparents get
sick in the future. Therefore, when I left for studying in Beijing, my
close friends told me not to worry about my parents as they would be
there for them. I talked to my close friends almost every day on
WeChat, they also help to celebrate my parents' birthday when I am
not at home.

It is kind of a Chinese custom that people prefer to refer to others as brothers or sisters to
indicate their closeness. In this research, most participants are the only child at home and
are geographically far from home. Close friends generally present their importance by
providing both emotional and instrumental support to participants. Liu (2009) once noted
the 'flattening' social relationships among Chinese, as people from the same generation
are slowly replacing kinship with close relatives or even parents and becoming the core
zone of social network of rural young Chinese.

Participants' further description of their relationship with close friends indicates this
relationship is more like mixed ties in Hwang's (1987) work. People in the mixed tie are
sustained by *guanxi*, which is elastic, dynamic, easy to change and *renqing* serves as the
basis of reciprocity. In fact, as Bourdieu (1986, p. 52) notes, "the network of relationships
is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or
unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationship that are directly
usable in the short or long term". By constructing relationships and developing rites
within them, people develop mutual knowledge and recognition of each other through
social exchange, such as gifts and words. For participants in this study, participants are
constructing relationships with close friends by referring to each other as siblings, which
makes them develop a sense of commitment and acting out the sibling role including
responding to the expressive needs of others. Therefore, creating a sense of co-presence
with each other seems to be essential to qualify as a 'sibling'.

7.3.2 Creating a Virtual Co-Presence

All participants express their need to feel the presence of close friends through WeChat.
Compared with their ambivalent feelings about co-presence with parents on WeChat,

participants frequently request intimate interactions with close friends. Topics that they hesitate to share with their parents they gladly share with close friends. To maintain *guanxi* with close friends, there are three main ways that participants frequently create co-presence with close friends: sending instant messages on WeChat, providing instant responses to close friends' online posts and creating specific posts for close friends. For example:

> Some of my good friends are not in Beijing; we cannot always make phone calls due to time and fee issues. Therefore, when a friend wants to share some information with me, she will send me an instant message, then we will video or voice chat on WeChat. Sometimes, she will express her feelings by creating posts on WeChat. Normally we only pay attention to close friends' online posts, so when she posts and I see it I will click 'like' or comment on her post to signify that I have seen it. If I realize that she is expressing negative feelings, then I might message her or call her as soon as possible, so we can talk which makes her feel better. (Participant 15, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

Participant 15 considers paying attention to close friends' online practices and providing immediate replies as acting out her role as a good friend. As Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) note, social media users may have many connections online that they call friends, while who are real friend requires further investigation. Therefore, participants express their sincere toward the friendship by providing immediate online response to the online practices of the significant others.

Participant 15 also notes the importance for close friends to interpret the information that embed in online posts, as I shall explain further. The shared experienced enables friends to develop shared abilities to interpret each other's practices without further explanation. For young participants, geographically distance from close friends is like losing the opportunities to communicate with the one who understand them directly. Affordances on social media, especially on WeChat, enable them to develop the sense of continued co-presence, so to feel being surrounded by close friends. As participant 1 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) notes:

A long time with no contact would make close friends become strangers. The advantage of WeChat is we can connect with each other even when we are not together. I know what they are doing; they know what I am doing. By sending messages or creating posts online, we feel close to each other when we meet and have something common to talk about.

Participants feel it is important to distinguish between their close friends and general contacts on WeChat, making their close friends feel special and aware of the importance that the individual assigns to them. The following themes include four kinds of practice that participants frequently mention to make some friends feel special and important and to enhance their relationships.

7.3.2.1 Making My 'Friends' Feel Special

Participants note one reason for expecting an immediate response from close friends is because they would create certain posts especially for these friends to see and respond to. For instance, participants would create posts that based the mutual knowledge and recognition they shared with close friends and significant others (e.g. family member, loved ones), so that only these people can interpret the full meaning of the posts. There are two kinds of relations that participants especially value: close friends and romantic partners. By creating the mutual knowledge embedded posts and publicising the relationship to general others, participants create posts especially for significant others, which could enhance the intimacy between them and strengthen the institution they have constructed. It creates an image that the relationship between them is a 'pure relationship' based on understanding, which is unique and they appreciate more (Giddens, 1991).

7.3.2.1.1 Appreciating Besties Online

Participant 17 (male, aged 24, second-tier university) explains that he rarely creates posts on WeChat, except when he wants to 'express thanks' or has something 'special' to share with friends:

Sometimes, I post something to some special friends, either to say thanks or to share something interesting with them. Sometimes I mention their name in the posts to express thanks. My friends will understand what I want to say in my posts, and even though posts are available to all my WeChat connections, it is not for them, and I do not expect their feedback.

In fact, participant 17's online practices are like individuals who aim to express their feeling toward others, while the awareness of creating favourable impression for both parties, which calls for the presences of others to complete their online performance. Goffman (1971) notes shared momentary mood and mutual engagement in the situation creates rituals in interpersonal interaction. Similarly, Bourdieu (1986) also notes that the social connections is conducted through the rites in institution, in which people could exchange things and develop mutual knowledge and recognition. Ling (2008) notes the involvement of ritual in interpersonal interaction helps to develop an individual's sense of pride and honour. I would understand the specially designed rite within the group create speciality for each member in the group, which makes individual perceive their role in the situation as well as develop expectation on how they should be treated by others. Therefore, when participant 17 is performing specifically for a certain friend, with other WeChat connects acting as the audience of the performance, then that special friend may feel special for being involved in the online ritual and the poster creates an impression of sincerity.

Participant 17's posts are also his way of repaying friends' favour and *renqing*; it is a sign of gratification and promise of remembering others' favour and *renqing* so as to repay the favour later. This give and repay process is consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) notion of people consciously or unconsciously sustaining the social connections to benefit from them in the short or long term, as well as Hwang's (1987) notion of *renqing* in which people provide favour to others as an investment for future reward. As Livingstone and Lunt (2012, p. 77) note, 'relations among speakers and hears were never simple and "co-presence can be symbolic in online environment'. Therefore, when participants conduct special thanks in online practices to certain friends, they are presenting the impression of gratitude. Correspondingly, friends who have given favour to them leave an impression of generosity and helpfulness. In fact, the 'collapsed context' on social media enables

participant 17 to have all his WeChat connections as his 'imaged audiences', who could observe his online performance for special friends. That these general others recognize him and his friend is the key point of conducting his online performance.

7.3.2.1.2. Special for Online Romances

The other notable finding of these 'specific for you' online practices is that participants adopt social media to manage their romantic relationships. Online romance is not limited to online dating websites and attracting potential partners with strategic online self-presentation (Ellison et al., 2006). Participants talk online about the maintenance of existing romantic relationship with boyfriends or girlfriends. This theme is quite confusing in some ways because romantic relationship are close relationships that participants value and carefully maintain in both online and offline environments, while the nuances of 'romance' make this relationship different from close relationships with classmates and friends. For example, the phrase *shai xing fu* (presenting happiness) specifically refers to individuals who present relationships with their partners on social media. According to participants, online practices directly or indirectly related to one's partner could be considered *shai xing fu*; examples include selfies with partners and texts that express personal feelings toward partners.

Similar to participants who create posts especially for certain friends, participants also regard people who continuously *shai xing fu* as aiming to attract others' attention or even showing off. One third of participants in this study indicate they have *shai xing fu*, suggesting that one reason to create such posts is to share their happiness with friends, although they admit that the main reason is to express affiliation to their partner and to make a 'public' demonstration of their relationship. Participant 23 (female, aged 22, first-tier university) describes herself as not interested in presenting her 'private life' in 'public', while her boyfriend considers presenting their romantic relationship online as an expression of love and care for each other. As she notes:

> My boyfriend always asks me to post our selfies online because he
> thinks if we are together then we should let others know it as well.
> Considering his feeling, even though I do not feel like doing so, I post

some of our travel pictures on WeChat so then our common friends can 'like' or 'comment', and he will feel happy.

Participant 3 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) shares feelings similar to participant 23's boyfriend, as she believes her online relationship publicise helps to enhance her relationship with her boyfriend:

People like to say people break up quickly by presenting romantic relationship online. While I think if you do not even dare to present your partner to your friends it means that you are not sure about that person and your relationship will come to an end quicker. I like to present what I do with my boyfriend online but in a secret way. For instance, I will post a picture with scenery and add text like 'Thank you for your company, it is a nice trip' or 'It is good to have you with me'. For me this is *shai xing fu*, my boyfriend is happy when he sees this and my friends who are single would not upset by looking at these posts [laugh]…

Romantic relationships need nurturing from both sides, including gift exchanges, letter writing and even online posts, which are ways to express one person's feeling toward the other. The online romantic presentation is like announcing the sovereignty of being someone's girlfriend or boyfriend because social media is the top venue for flirting and girls tend to be the target (Lenhart, Anderson and Smith, 2015). Moreover, romantic posts include cues for partners to explore and interpret; like the above discussion on the 'specific to you' online practice creates an interpersonal ritual to make a partner feel special, praised, or even honoured (Goffman, 1967; Ling, 2008). As Ling (2008) notes, co-presenting interaction is important in establishing romantic relationships and mediating information from other channels helps to strengthen the relationship. It appears that participants are using the 'collapsed context' (boyd, 2007) in enhancing their co-present interaction with their 'significant others' (Lenhart, Anderson and Smith, 2015).

7.3.2.1.3. Shared 'Lore' Through Mediated Communication

Ito and Okabe's (2005) study on the use of mobile phones for dating inspired the notion of 'lore'. In their research, people who have met in person start exchanging thoughts and feelings or they even plan the next meeting over the phone. Ito and Okabe (2005) claim that mediated interaction between the dating couple becomes part of their lore or relationship story. Relationships with close friends may not have same love chemistry like dating couples, while the mechanism for good relationship sustaining could be the same. For instance, friends have shared lore through mediated and face-to-face interaction, and their awareness of shared lore enables them to spot and interpret cues to their friends' commitments to their relationship.

Participant 34 (female, aged 22, first-tier university) comes from Taiyuan, an urban city in north-west China. She did her undergraduate degree at a university in Taiyuan and came to Beijing a year before her interview to do a master's degree. She describes her first few months in Beijing as lonely and says that friends giving care over the phone helped her to overcome her difficulties and to kill boring time.

> It is awkward to contact them directly to express my negative feelings;
> I will create some posts that were only available to some of my best
> friends on WeChat when I feel upside. Some of them might contact me
> when they saw my post, then we could have a long conversation, which
> makes me feel better afterwards.

The feeling of embarrassment in seeking comfort directly from close friends motivates participant 34 to create posts that are based on the lore shared by her and her close friends. Participants avoid the risk of receiving rebuffs from others by making certain posts specifically for close friends. She also hints that what she embeds in the posts is like a test to check the closeness between her and her friends. Individuals who create posts and expect special others to respond apparently experience disappointment if they do not get a response. In contrast, if others do respond then both parties successfully engage with each other, which could enhance their relationship. This finding particularly applies to individuals who are geographically distant from each other, where social media platforms such as WeChat are the space that enables co-present interaction, and the creation of 'lore'

between friends. In general, online 'specific to you' practices are a lore-generation and lore-testing process. When the strength of the social relationship largely depends on recognition and immediate response, this makes the mediated relationship so fragile that even a minor misunderstanding might result in the termination of a mediated relationship.

7.3.3 The Fragile Mediated Relationship

When responding to the question of how they would respond if their close friends do not reply to their 'specific to you' posts, participant 37 (female, aged 22, second-tier university) answers as:

> One or two time[s] is ok, maybe they are too busy or did not see it, but if it happens every time I would wonder what has happened to them. First, I might send an instant message to check whether they are ok, then make a phone call, and then maybe contact mutual friends to check on them. I would understand if there was something serious [that] happened that they cannot respond to my posts, but if they are doing well and simply ignoring my posts, messages and phone calls, then there could be problems between us, and I would try to contact him/her to find out why. If all these practices do not work, I think there is no point to try further and that the relationship just finishes like this. Life changes, people change. I have some friends who this happened with, you just do not know what happened, they just disconnected.

Participant 37 develops explains several steps that she developed to identify the status of a relationship with a friend with whom she sustains a relationship via online interaction. Participant 31 (male, aged 24, first-tier university) notes there is a simple way to observe when there are changes in a relationship:

> We all have mutual friends on WeChat, when they do not reply to my online posts, I check whether they will reply to our mutual friends' online posts or not. If they reply to mutual friends' posts while ignore mine, which I think that is clear enough, they just do not care about me

as much as they used to be, then I know there is no need to contact them further and seek for reasons.

People validate their self-presentation practices by observing audiences' responses (Goffman, 1959). In the online environment, similarly, participants wait for 'imaged audiences' online responses, especially those they have targeted (boyd, 2007). Goffman (1967) notes that individuals can experience disappointment or embarrassment when they do not receive the responses they expect.

In this study, even though participants note that they consider close friends as siblings and aim to sustain long-term relationships with them, they nevertheless appear to be calm and accepting when deciding an online relationship is weak or should be terminated (Liu, 2009). This leads to fluidity in the level of friendship associated with online contacts, as close friends, for example, can move from the core zone to the reliable zone. Nevertheless, there are always people in the different zones, thus indicating that people have a need for strong ties with close friends even if the individuals who could occupy these positions may change. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, people carefully develop rites to produce lasting and useful relationships to secure material and symbolic advantage. Participants in this study suggest that compared with long-term relationships, useful relationships seem to be more appropriate in interpreting their connections with others. As participant 32 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) notes:

> It is very normal that we have good friends at primary school, good friends at middle school, then high school and now. Every period of our life we need some close friends to share things with and to help each other. Some people who used to be close may become strangers, while others we are not familiar with may become best friends.

7.4 Mediated Interaction Ritual on WeChat

This theme is inspired by Ling's (2008) discussion of mediated ritual interaction over the mobile phone. Based on his work, I interpret three kinds of interaction rituals that Chinese young people practice in managing their relationships online. The first is 'Add you on

WeChat', a ritual practice of inviting others to one's solidarity social group; second, 'liking' is a supportive practice between members, as well as practicing deference and demeanour in social interaction; and third, 'display' is a ritual interaction among close friends, as well as a strategic self-presentation to gain the trust of others.

7.4.1 'Add you on my WeChat': A Way of Offering Friendship

Madianou and Miller (2012) suggest that social media creates an environment in which media and relationships are mediated by each other. In this research, youth confirm that they alternate between different social media platforms to manage their social relations. WeChat is one of the main platforms they use to interact with others because it includes the features of multiple platforms.

Participants in this research hold special attitudes about whether or not to add an acquaintance on WeChat. Those who have been using WeChat for one or two years, often first- and second-year undergraduates, tend to consider WeChat as private and accepting others' friend request is an indication of their willingness to develop a relationship. As participant 13 (male, aged 22, second-tier university) notes:

> WeChat is more private, so I only add people that I am familiar with or
> trust on my WeChat or QQ.

Those who have used WeChat for longer, in contrast, consider themselves as 'experienced' in life and focus on the need to stimulate social capital for future development.

> After dealing with so many people and being clear about your future,
> you will know what kind of person you should deal with. Such like-
> minded people are important as they can understand your posts and be
> supportive when you need, and you can exchange useful information
> with them (Participant 17, male, aged 24, second-tier university).

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For participant 17, the quantity of his WeChat connection enhances his social capital, as it increases the chances for both parties to benefit from each other. Therefore, young people are aware of the potential of constructing a beneficial relationship with others when asking to add others on WeChat. It is a way to be polite and a conduct of ritual practices to invite someone to join his/her social group. The gesture of invitation is similar to previous practices of asking for people's phone numbers, a gesture to be polite with the intention to connect with others. The intention of building social connections are always the same, while only media that help to sustain the connections keep updating.

7.4.2 'Likes' – A Pat on Your Shoulder

Participants prefer to develop and strengthen the social ties with offline weak ties step by step. If connecting with each other on the most frequently used social media platform— WeChat—is the first step, then clicking 'like' for each other is an interaction ritual to enhance familiarization. Lim and Basnyat (2016) describe online 'likes' as a pat on the shoulder, which expresses encouragement, congratulations or even sympathy. Participants similarly state that they conduct supportive practices out of politeness and empathy; their online supportive practices range from online 'likes' and online 'comments' to responding to others' online call for help, e.g. to share others' online posts and vote for someone. As mentioned in Chapter 5, among all these kinds of online supportive practices, youth praise online 'likes' as 'effortless', 'neutral' and 'effective' in online interaction.

Meanwhile, participants are aware of their responsibility to support the online practices of others as a way of protecting them. However, the feeling of responsibility derives from reciprocal empathy because participants state that they feel good and look forward to receiving the online support of others when they create online posts. For instance,

> I try to like everyone's online posts. Because when I post something, I
> would expect others' feedback, such as 'likes' or 'comments'. I know
> they are interested in what I post online. I think others may have the
> same feeling, when they post something, I also like theirs. The implicit

rule on WeChat is you like my posts, I like yours feedback, so both us feel happy. (Participant 16, female, aged 21, second-tier university).

As mentioned in Chapter 5, participants give higher value to online 'comments' than online 'likes', not only because online 'comments' take more time and effort to edit but also because it can create a dialogue that increase the chances for experiencing online rebuff. For instance, participant 8 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) explains:

If you comment on close friends' posts, they will reply. If that person is not close to you, they may not know how to reply your comments.

The prioritising of 'likes' over 'comments' frequently happens when individuals are not familiar with others. Moreover, as participant 10 (female, aged 21, second-tier university) explains:

'Comments' has a different meaning; it takes a long time to edit and I need to ensure that I understand the intention of my friends. It would be embarrassing if they mean one thing, but I comment on something else. Also, I would not comment on others' posts except I want to start a conversation and want to know something further. Otherwise, I comment, they reply, and I need to think of what to reply again. To avoid this trouble, 'liking' is so much easier to express my support, without extra feelings or misunderstanding.

Girls who post edited selfies online prefer the quantity of online 'likes' rather than the quality of 'comments'. They assert that they are aware that their online selfies are edited pictures to enhance self-confidence. As Participant 4 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) explains:

Sometimes I post selfies online just to receive online 'likes' and feel good about it. If people comment 'what a beautiful girl' or 'the beauty god', I will feel embarrassed and do not know how to reply. Because I know it myself that I am not that beautiful, and they are just complimenting me.

The effortless online 'likes' also form a new kind of relationship, which is *dian zan zhi jiao* (online likes friendship), which refers to relationships limited to clicking 'like' on each other's posts. This relationship is more than connection but not yet friendship, due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and online efforts to sustain the relationship. Compared with the 'online likes party' mentioned in Chapter 5, the participants of which carry out their mission massively out of personal willingness, participants express resentment toward individuals who try to enforce 'likes' on online posts. For instance, online *jizan* (collect likes) practices are those where individuals share the post of an advertiser and ask WeChat connections to 'like' this post to receive certain rewards or prizes from the advertiser.

All participants state that most of their online supportive practices are not of their own initiative but stem from others, such as a call for WeChat connections to 'like' their posts, share their posts or participating in online polling. All participants expressed their dissatisfaction of such online practices.

Participants describe others' 'collecting likes' as 'understandable if the gift is worth it', 'acceptable if they are close to me', 'misuse [of] the friendship just for a water bottle', 'wasting others' time to do the useless thing' and 'mak[ing] the friendship look cheap'. Participants describe people who collect online likes to exchange gift as 'petty' and 'insincere'.

> They are so petty that they make our relationship look cheap. Sometimes people click 30 likes just for a 2 RMB (about 0.25 pounds) WeChat Red Envelope.[36] I would like to give them 2 RMB myself instead of clicking likes for them (Participant 20, male, aged 24, second-tier university).

Ironically, their resentment does not prevent them from responding to friends' online requests. As participant 18 (male, aged 24, second-tier university) notes:

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[36] WeChat Red Envelope is a money transfer feature on WeChat app. WeChat users can connect their bankcard with their WeChat account and then send money to WeChat connections via the Red Envelope feature.

We are friends, this is something they need us to do, so we should do it.

This notion is consistent with Hwang's (1987) interpretation of *renqing*, in which people have an obligation to meet the requests of others. It is also consistent with Goffman's (1967) notion of demeanour as a presentation practice that helps to sustain the definition of the situation, valuing the impression others try to present within a situation so as to protect others from feeling embarrassed. The same for Bourdieu's (1986) notion on social capital that people follow certain rites in the institution to sustain the beneficial social connections and enjoy the material and symbolic benefits it could bring.

7.4.3 'To be Funny' – A Symbol of Trust

This theme encapsulates a special kind of online ritual that participants develop to signify their closeness with others, as well as a symbol of trustworthiness and an easy-going character. Participants name this special ritual in different ways, such as *dou* (amusing), *doubi* (funny), *er* and *er bi* (stupid), which often involves humour. For participants in this study, presenting to be humorous is effective in claiming the image of being outgoing and magnanimous in social interaction. In the power relation, people from higher social position have the authority to decide when to tell a joke and what people can joke about, and they believe that bantering between higher level and lower level can enhance group solidarity (Ling, 2008).

> *Dou* (Being funny) is not a negative word; it is an intimate way to address people who are close to me. Being funny can make my close friends feel happy and even people who are not close to me may consider me as positive and full of energy. Most people think I am silent and shy when they meet me in person, [but] they will know me as a witty person after a while. (Participant 5, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

For participant 5, the aim of being funny and playing dumb is to create laughter among friends and collective effervescence, which helps to strengthen social relationships and

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social bonds (Goffman, 1967; Ling, 2008). Participants in this research state they tend to set up a line of defence before allowing others to enter their friend circle; trust is the ticket for entering this circle. They state that sincerity and sense of humour are important in creating trust with others. Thus, giving an impression of a sense of humour, interestingness or funniness seem to be the easy ways to fit into a social circle and to enhance one's social capital.

> To be funny can lower the acceptance level for an individual because others will be less defensive if they think I am funny and magnanimous. When we start playing jokes on each other, then we are close to each other. Being a funny person suggests that I am a person who they can play joke at and will feel free to get close to. (Participant 17, male, aged 24, second-tier university).

Duncan, Smeltzer and Leap (1990) suggests understanding humour as a kind of social bridge that enables people to reach others when they want to escape from the tensions of life. Participants similarly are aware that a sense of humour and funniness in front of others can ease their social connection and relationship development process.

7.4.3.1 Gender and Joking Comments

According to my participants' accounts, there are significant gender differences in practicing online humour. Male participants practice online joking comments accompanied by banter, flirting and even harsh words. In contrast, female participants apply these practices as a presentation of personal humour, and they are less likely use harsh words to express their strong feelings toward people who are close to them. Moreover, male participants explicitly state that the harsher words they use, the closer relationship they have with others:

> My close friends know me as outwardly quiet, but inside passionate, while the ordinary friends only know me as quiet. (Participant 5, female, aged 23, second-tier university)

Commenting on others' posts means you care more about them. Especially when my close friends who are straight-forward but suddenly create some emotional posts on WeChat, then I will start taunting at him for being so emotional. (Participant 7, male, aged 20, second-tier university)

The gendered notion of poking fun at one another online reflects that the stereotype of women and men extends from offline to online interactions. As mentioned in Chapter 5, participants consider practices of taking selfies as 'girly' and that men should focus on career development. Participants similarly note that men should be open-minded enough to be able to bear the sarcasm of others, while women need to watch their words and present themselves properly even in the online environment. In fact, gendered online practices are the result of gendered social practice stereotypes in the offline environment. The 'imagined audiences' and 'collapsed context' in social media might have enhanced people's awareness of gendered online practices, as users might be consciously aware that their online practices create a consistency between online and offline impressions, such as femininity or manliness.

One reason that female participants find WeChat helpful in overcoming this gendered online expectation is that WeChat online interaction creates an enclosed space for its users; people can only view how their mutual friends react to each other's posts. Hence, participants explain that this enclosed space makes them feel comfortable to present in the way they like.

The harsh comments are only for close friends; the closer we are the harsher the comments can be. (Participant 14, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

If you leave a comment to taunt your friends and they do not reply to you or reply in a polite way, then you know you have offended your friend. (Participant 36, female, aged 22, first-tier university)

For the potential risk and embarrassment that may arise, participant 27 (male, aged 22, first-tier university) explains:

Generally, playing jokes or taunting others' online posts are because we are close friends. That is the game between boys, and only close friends can understand. I would not do that if you are not close to me, I might just be polite and say some nice words.

All participants are aware of the possibility that harsh online comments and taunting could result in offending someone. Compared with women, men seem more open-minded in normalizing the possible harm these harsh comments could have on others, especially male friends. As participants 14 and 27 note, playfulness is essential for people to present closeness with others, while female participants are bold enough to ridicule others online while holding the concerns that overdoing it may offend others. Just as people respect formal rituals in everyday life, participants express their respect for ritual between others. Participant 29 (female, aged 24, first-tier university) states:

You can see some posts are not for you, if you fail you see and still comment, especially in a taunting way, then people may get offended. If you really want to show your presence to others, just click 'likes'.

7.5 Conclusion

Participants in this research are young people between 18 and 24 years old who are in the early stages of exploring their life possibilities and self-identity. All participants expressed the freedom they have enjoyed in attending university and being away from parental supervision. The intention to develop relations with others can be out of the need for ontological security, as Giddens (1991) suggests is typical of the insecurity and anxiety that individuals feel during the trajectory of self-development. He states, 'people who fear the future attempt to "secure" themselves -with money, property, health insurance, personal relationships, marriage contracts' (Giddens, 1991, p. 73). Therefore, young participants face the dilemma of getting away from traditional social connections with relatives and creating personal relationships with others who they consider potentially beneficial for their future and their identity. If we think back to the period of collectivism in China, which researchers believe originates from the agricultural context

of ancient China in which people depended on collective communities to survive, this provided ontological security (Fei, 1948). In contrast, Giddens (1991) notion is based on late modernity, or post-traditional society, in which people face more changes in seeking inner security and possible self-development. Giddens (1991) also points out the instability of interpersonal relationship and suggests that people who want to develop self require need self-reflection, self-anticipation and to achieve self-actualisation through relationships.

Adult participants face these dilemmas of modernization in China while their moral education suggests to them to follow and respect traditional virtues. They are interested in developing social connections by themselves instead of through their parents (Yan, 2010). However, the relationships they are developing tend to be self and instrumentally oriented: either the intention to connect with 'people from same circle' and 'people who are helpful' or to keep distance from 'people who [do] not belong to the same circle' out of the anticipation of future reciprocity. Young participants believe selective connection is the strategy for them to adopt to the mediated urban life, creating their social circle and accumulating social capital for future development. In this chapter, we have seen a variety of strategies through which young, educated Chinese who have moved from the traditional communities of their home town and family aim to manage both traditional relations and entry into an increasingly individualized, future conscious and insecure social life.

Participants in this research note the fragility of the mediated online relationship and they have developed different mediated rituals to interact with others online and to sustain and manage their social connections. For instance, youth in this study focus on the construction and reconstruction of social networks; therefore, they update their profile and revalue their online connections to sustain the continuity and value of online social relationships. Furthermore, youth in this study express enormous interest in connecting with people who they consider as having made equal or greater social achievements than themselves. They offer friendship to others by connecting with them on WeChat, clicking 'like' on their posts and presenting a sense of humour to reinforce their social bonds. Ritual in everyday life creates and sustains the feeling of being special for individuals, which helps to generate the sense of self, pride, honour and self-esteem. The mediated interaction ritual in WeChat strengthens their relationship with special others instead of

all their online connections.

There is a suggestion based on my interviews that the contemporary social context in China makes young people lack confidence in fully pursuing self-actualization. As Yan (2010) suggests, the intention of individualization is rising in China without a developed social support for individualism. Within this context, my participants believe that social media brings them opportunities to strengthen connection with resource allocators (Hwang, 1987). As when participants constantly explain the effort and time they have spent in expanding social networks and sustaining relationships, they are also suggesting how anxious they are in accumulating social capital for future development. Miller (2008, p. 290) interprets online communication as 'more ephemeral and more akin to an exchange of data than deep, substantive or meaningful communication based on mutual understanding'.

Ironically, participants' constantly update, renew and evaluate the benefits they can enjoy from their social connections while complaining about the frangibility of their mediated relationship. In fact, WeChat is just a platform that provides individuals with chances to connect with others, whereas strengthening their connections and turning these into social capital still largely depends on their offline interactions. Therefore, instead of suggesting that mediated communication enables participants to present themselves freely, it is more realistic to state that online communication makes people more conscious of the impressions they present online and increases their intention to benefit offline through online performance.

Chapter 8—The New Moral Duty: Spreading Positive Energy Online

8.1 Introduction

Online facework and online social ties are well-established areas of research in social media that are reflected in my research findings. However, an unanticipated theme emerged during my interviews; that of positive energy. As my interviews continued, I noticed people talking about positive energy in relation to their use of social media. In the last few interviews, I asked participants to talk more about their interpretation of positive energy and what kinds of online posts they considered as examples of positive energy. There is a limited but emerging academic literature on positive energy and I begin the chapter with a review of that literature before presenting my interpretation of the theme of positive energy from my interviews.

As I engaged with the academic literature, I became convinced that the theme of positive energy was rich and intriguing and worth investigating as a significant part of the contemporary digital media environment in China. Participants in my study were enthusiastic about positive energy and believed that a positive attitude and hard work will equip them in the competitive job market. Much of what they said about positive energy contrasted with what they were saying about the complexities of facework and social ties. A feature of that analysis was the sensitivity of my participants to trivial aspects of everyday life that concerned them or made them feel depressed for a while. Part of their response is to attempt to connect to individuals with positive energy to inspire them. For instance, 'Everyone likes to stay with people who have positive energy because they can bring happiness.' (Participant 31, male, aged 24, first-tier university). In contrast, participants dislike those who are pessimistic in the offline world and those who display pessimism in the online environment. The idea of positive energy seems to be an important part of the affective climate of the online world. I began to think about the implications of these ideas about positive energy. If people are searching for friends with positive energy, what does that mean for self-presentation and social ties in the online world? How did the idea of displaying positive energy online originate and how did it

become desirable and an obligation? The story that emerged is that positive energy appears to be an example of the State of China adopting an online phrase created by the grassroots, and adapting the phrase as a way of influencing online conduct. I will argue that this use of the idea of positive energy is linked to broader initiatives in international diplomacy, cyberspace management, and the regulation of everyday life in China as a form of soft power.

This chapter is organised into four sections. The first section is a literature review of the origin of positive energy in Chinese philosophy and how this was taken up in the online community, followed by appropriation by the state of China in several plans to encourage Internet users to spread positive energy in the online environment. The second section includes findings from a thematic analysis of my interview material, which discusses the interpretation of positive energy by my participants, the practice of positive energy online, and examples of indifference towards positive energy. The third section links my research findings to previous studies, to explain why certain online practices are linked to positive energy and others to negative energy, and how these are influenced by online practices. The final section discusses some limitations of the research, and ideas for future studies of this interesting emergent phenomenon.

8.2 Literature Review: Positive Energy

Reflecting on participants' notion of positive energy that emerged during interviews, I developed a literature review exploring the popularity of 'positive energy' from three perspectives. First, I traced the origins of positive energy in ancient Chinese philosophy and Chinese traditional medicine, in which the notion of 'qi' and 'energy' are understood as psychophysical energy, the "primordial energy of the universe that constitutes whatever exists" (Lee, 2014, p. 42). The long-embedded traditional notion of 'energy' creates the context for engagement with government-guided initiatives in positive energy (Hird, 2017). For instance, Yang (2013, p. 297) notes that happiness in China is a combination of "pre-existing cultural values, folk ideologies, and expert knowledge". The phrase 'positive energy' originated in Chinese social media participants' support for the nation during the London Olympic Torch Relay in 2012 and was subsequently developed into a political discourse (Du, 2014). The state of China encouraged Chinese citizens to

act with responsibility and to spread positive energy in both mediated and non-mediated environments (Yu, Lin, and Tan., 2014). In Chinese Higher Education, also there is a belief that enhancing ideological awareness of online civility and media literacy in class can enhance university students' awareness of the obligation to spread positive energy in the interest of the nation aligned with their personal interests (Mao et al., 2013).

8.2.1 The Origins of Positive Energy in Chinese Philosophy

Both Chinese philosophy and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) are deeply embedded in Chinese culture, and Chinese people considering them as cultural wisdom and the heritage of the ancestors. Other than the lay application of Chinese philosophy and TCM theories like Yin–Yang, Qi-Blood frequently to interpret symptoms and provide a rationale for self-treatment (Chung et al., 2014). Chinese people's lifestyle and belief in health-keeping are all closely related to Chinese philosophy and TCM, which make the TCM's rhetoric omnipresent in Chinese everyday life (Chung et al., 2014). Chung et al. (2014) also find Chinese customs and Confucian philosophy in health decision-making, the recommendation of TCM treatment frequently happens among family members and close social contacts. Reflecting on the discussion of energy in Chinese philosophy and TCM, I believe that the reception of positive energy partly depends on the way it resonates with deeply held views, derived from ancient Chinese philosophy and medicine about the power of positive energy.

Chinese people link *qi* (air, 气) to nature and life. The Chinese phrases *tian qi* (weather), *zheng qi* (steam), *wu qi* (mist), *xiang qi* (smell)*, qi xi* (breath) relate to nature, while the phrases *jing qi* (spirit) and *sheng qi* (anger) relate to the spirit and the emotion of beings. The Chinese character 气 analysed from the pictographic perspective, the 三 is like floating air. Coincidentally, in Taoism, the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi[37] (604–531 BC) explains that the *Dao*, as '*dao (tao) sheng yi, yi sheng er, er sheng san, san sheng wan wu* (Dao generates *yi*, *yi* generates *er*, *er* generates *san*, and *san* generates all the beings)' refers to the process of creation and to the creation of being as a process from few to many because *san* (三 three) refers to 'many'. Laozi also notes '*wan yi fu yin er*

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[37] Laozi, 604 BC – 531 BC. Dao De Jing (in Chinese). Available at: http://www.daodejing.org/ (Accessed on 23rd Sept. 2016).

bao yang, chong qi yi wei he' by which he means beings that embrace the positive/bright side and turn their back to the negative/dark side. *Yang qi* (positive energy) and *yin qi* (negative energy) surge into a harmonious mode, reaching a balance of *yin* (negative) and *yang* (positive), thereby being able to generate more beings[38]. Laozi adopts the notion of *yin yang* (positive and negative) and *qi* to explain the production and continuity of lives. *Qi* (energy/air) is virtual and untouchable and the essence of everything.

The close relations between *qi* and the origin and continuity of life prompts Chinese philosophers to propose the *qi ben ti lun* (the ontology of *qi*) as a way of explaining *qi* as the core concept of traditional Chinese philosophy. Wang Yun, who lived in the East Han dynasty states '*qi zhi sheng ren, you shui zhi wei bing ye. Shui ning wei bing, qi ning wei ren*' (*qi* is to people what water is to ice, water crystallizes into ice, *qi* crystallizes into humans) (Lun Hen, Lun si Pian, East Han Dynasty, AD 25–220). Zhang Zai (AD 1020–1077) attributes the existence of all things to *qi*, he says '*Fan ke zhuang jie you ye, fan you jie xiang ye, fan xiang jie qi ye*' (Things that describe means being, all beings have its appearance, all appearances are the results of *qi*)[39]. He also defines *qi* as '*suo wei qi ye zhe, fei dai qi zheng yu ning ju, jie yu mu er hou zhi zhi; gou jian shun dong zhi, hao ran zhan ran zhi de yan, jie ke ming zhi xiang er*'[40] (*qi* does not limit its form to steam or its crystallization, everything that is expansive and profound can be the appearance of *qi*). The other notable statement that Zhang Zai makes is about the continuity of *qi* and the existence of *taixu*, Zhang Zhai proposes the existence of *taixu* (great emptiness), which he suggests '*tai xu wu xing, qi zhi ben ti, qi ju qi san, bian hua zhi ke xing er*'[41] (*taixu* is the ontology of *qi*, which does not have shape, while the *qi* can change its shape through condensing and splitting).

The Chinese philosophical reflections on *qi* also serve as the conceptual foundation of TCM, including acupuncture, herbal medicine, and physical therapy (Jahnke et al., 2011). In TCM, *qi* is the resource of nature that circulates in an orderly way through the body to sustain well-being (Jahnke et al., 2011). Yan Chen lived in the Song Dynasty in China and wrote the first book to explain the cause of disease, *San Yin Ji Yi Bing Zheng Fang*

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[38] As footnote 1
35 Zhang, Z. North Song Dynasty. *Zheng Meng QianChengPian ShiQi (in Chinese).* Available at: http://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=987183&remap=gb (Accessed on 23rd Sept. 2016).
[40] As Footnote 35
[41] As Footnote 35

Lun. He stated three causes of disease *nei yin* (inner reasons), *wai yin* (outer reasons), *bu nei wai yin* (neither inner nor outer reasons) (Hsu, 2001). *Nei yin* refers to the irritation of seven emotions hurting the organs and showing on the body (Chey and Davis, 2011). The seven emotions are *xi* (happiness), *nu* (anger), *you* (worry/concern), *si* (missing), *bei* (sadness), *kong* (fear), and *jing* (shock) to which humans have physical and psychological reactions. According to TCM, strong emotional change reorients the direction of flow of *qi* in the body, which damages the organs. For instance, happiness can hurt the heart, anger can hurt the liver, missing can hurt the spleen, worrying can hurt the lungs, and fear can hurt the kidneys (Chey and Davis, 2011).

TCM is the integration of Chinese philosophy and the accumulation of people's social experiences, which emphasises the close connections between the social and natural environments (Lu et al., 2014). Therefore, TCM frequently adopts natural methods to enhance people's resistance to disease. Exercises like *qi gong* are popular health maintenance practices that aim "to cultivate or enhance the inherent functional (energetic) essence of the human being"[42] (Jahnke et al., 2011). Inspired by Chinese philosophy, Chinese people believe there are 'external *qi gong*' and 'internal *qi gong*'. The former, based on the TCM, refers to the therapist's diagnosis of the patient according to the flow of *qi* in the body and the use of 'emitted *qi*' to heal disease (Jahnke et al., 2011). The 'internal *qi gong*' requires personal practices, so as to internalize cosmic energy as physical, mental, and moral energy (Chen, 2003; Jahnke et al., 2011). *Qi gong* practices include orchestrating physical posture, breathing exercises, and meditation. Medical research has proven that practising *qi gong* has a positive impact on both mental and physical health. For instance, *qi gong* practice helps people to have tranquillity of mind, feel relaxed, improve self-confidence, work efficiency, be confident, and have an optimistic outlook towards life (Woodyard, 2011). On a physical level, it is helpful in increasing blood flow, reducing back pain, and the risk of heart attack (Jahnke et al., 2011). These ancient philosophies and traditional medical practices create a cultural context in China that, I will argue, provides a conducive environment for the reception of ideas about positive energy.

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[42] Jahnke, R., Larkey, L., Rogers, C., Etnier, J., Lin, F (2010) A Comprehensive Reivew of Health Benefits of Qigong and TaiChi. Available at: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3085832/ (Accessed: 21st Jan. 2013).

8.2.2 Popularization of Positive Psychology in China

Accompanying the popularizing of positive energy among Chinese people is the notion of happiness. Around October 2012, Chinese Central Television (CCTV) conducted a programme called 'visit the grassroots: hear ordinary citizens' voices', in which the host interviewed Chinese people from different professions with the question *'ni xing fu ma'* (do you feel fulfilled?). The interview videos went viral on Chinese social media platforms and aroused lively discussions among Chinese netizens. It is rare for the official government media CCTV to conduct interviews with ordinary Chinese citizens and broadcast the video clips without over editing. Several video clips went viral online due to the amusing dialogues between the host and interviewee. For instance, one interviewee misunderstood *'ni xing fu ma'* as 'is your first name fu?', and replied as 'no, my first name is *Zeng*'. One interviewee notes he is not happy as someone jumped into the queue when he took part in the interview. These entertaining video clips not only changed people's impression of governmental media but also prompted online discussions of whether Chinese people understand the notion of happiness and are happy with their lives.

Yang (2013) investigated one television counselling programme on CCTV and discovered that marginalized Chinese citizens tend to be the main protagonists on such programmes. Unemployed workers, disabled individuals, and people in poverty appeared on the show and the host of the programme frequently asked these people to explain the benefits of conducting self-psychotherapy. For instance, a taxi driver told his story of a middle-aged man who suddenly lost his job and indulges in the misery of being jobless. Then, one day he decided to pick himself up by giving positive psychological hints to himself. Because of his self-psychotherapy, he claims that he managed to develop positive thinking, get a new job, and provide free psychotherapy for his customers. The program is full of similar cases which exaggerate the power of self-psychotherapy and positive thinking, as well as the overwhelming results of being happy ever after (Yang, 2013). In contrast, Yang (2013) suggests that the happiness that marginalized people feel through mutual counselling is 'fake happiness', stating that marginalized groups are victims of socio-economic dislocation, unequal resource distribution, and the stratification of the society. Yang (2013) goes on to argue that the Chinese government failed to provide a comfortable life as it had promised and so needs a positive happiness

index as evidence of economic development, governmental efficiency, and benevolence towards its people. In harmony with these policies, the state media adopt 'psychologization' to promote self and group psychological counselling and positive thinking as the best ways to achieve happiness.

Both the notions of positive psychology and the happiness index originate from Western countries (e.g. America) rather than China. For instance, in contrast to Yang's (2013) notion of 'fake happiness' is Seligman's (2002) work on 'authentic happiness'. As a key figure in the study of positive psychology, Seligman explained this concept in his book *Authentic Happiness* and notes that authentic happiness is more than a sequence of momentary happy feelings, but also the gratification that individual feels through personal involvement and achievement (Hwang, 2008). By emphasizing the importance of a happy life, Seligman argues that a full life should be pleasant, good, as well as meaningful and that an individual should utilize their ability to contribute rather than focusing on personal issues (Hwang, 2008). Along with the notion of happiness is the promotion of positive psychology. Maslow (1954) first mentioned the importance of considering the positive side of psychology. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) developed this idea and suggested positive psychology, which emphasised individuals' role in valuing subjective experiences, developing positive traits and civic virtues. For instance, individuals should enjoy the present, have hope and be optimistic for the future; develop traits such as wisdom, love, and interpersonal skills to be able to enjoy life as individuals, be aware of one's citizenship and roles in institutions, to be responsible, altruistic, civil, act with moderation, tolerance, and adopt a positive work ethic (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Researchers believe positive psychology will allow individuals, communities, and societies to flourish (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In 1972, the fourth King of Bhutan, King Jigme Singy Wangchuck suggested giving equal importance to the non-economic aspect of well-being and noted that "Gross National Happiness (GNH) is more important than Gross Domestic Product (GDP)"[43]. Compared with GDP, GNH provides a holistic way to measure the quality of a country on the

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[43] Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Index. *Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative.* Available at: http://ophi.org.uk/policy/national-policy/gross-national-happiness-index/ (Accessed 23rd Mar. 2018).

assumption that "material and spiritual development should occur side by side to complement and reinforce each other" (Ura et al., 2012, p. 7). The 10th plan of Bhutan mentioned four pillars of GNH, which are "sustainable and equitable socio-economic development; environmental conservation; the preservation and promotion of culture; and good governance" (Ura et al., 2012, p. 9). These four pillars include nine dimensions, which are "psychological well-being, health, education, cultural diversity and resilience, time use, good governance, community vitality, high living standards, and ecological diversity and resilience" (Ura et al., 2012, p. 10). In 2011, the United Nations adopted the Bhutan General Assembly, noting that the 'pursuit of happiness is a fundamental human goal'[44]. It also suggests that member states should guide their public policies with the awareness of sustainable development by balancing economic development with promoting happiness and well-being among all peoples. In 2012, the Royal Government of Bhutan suggested developing a new economic paradigm based on well-being and happiness to the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness[45]. The United Nations also released the first World Happiness Report at this meeting and have since issued a report every year except 2014.

As a country that underwent dramatic socio-economic and political transformation in its recent history, China has achieved great success in improving the incomes and living standards of its citizens. In contrast to the country's significant socio-economic achievements, however, its citizens' subjective well-being ranks relatively low in the World Happiness Report. For instance, it ranked 83 among 157 participating countries according to the 2016 report[46], 79 among 155 participating countries in 2017[47], and 86 among 156 countries in 2018[48]. By reanalysing data from previous World Value Surveys

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[44] Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 19 July 2011(2011). United Nation. Available at: http://repository.un.org/bitstream/handle/11176/291712/A_RES_65_309-EN.pdf?sequence=3&isAllowed=y. (Accessed 23rd Mar. 2018).
[45] Defining a New Economic Paradigm, (2012) *The Report of the High-Level Meeting on Wellbeing and Happiness.* Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/617BhutanReport_WEB_F.pdf. (Accessed 22nd Mar. 2018).
[46] WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT 2016/VOLUME 1. Helliweel, J., Layard, R., Sachs, J. (Eds). Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2016/HR-V1_web.pdf (Accessed: 23rd Mar. 2018).
[47] WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT 2017. Helliweel, J. Layard, R., Sachs, J (Eds). De Neve, J-E., Huang, H, F., Wang, S. (Eds). Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2017/HR17.pdf (Accessed: 23rd Mar. 2018).
[48] WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT 2018. Helliweel, J., Layard, R., Sachs, J. (Eds). Available at: https://s3.amazonaws.com/happiness-report/2018/WHR_web.pdf (Accessed: 23rd Mar. 2018).

conducted in China in the 1990s, 1995, 2001, and 2007, Steele and Lynch (2013) found that Chinese people are increasingly prioritizing individualistic values when evaluating their subjective feeling of happiness and life of satisfaction. These findings indicate that although the Chinese government emphasizes the collective character of Chinese society, increasing individualism among Chinese people might make them expect more than what the country has given or promised to them.

Moreover, although Chinese official media produce different programmes to suggest that Chinese people are happy and have relatively high subjective well-being, researchers consider these as propaganda with the intention of covering up existing problems within Chinese society. For instance, Fenby (2012) expresses her attitude towards the development and future of China by citing the Chinese idiom Tiger Head and Snake Tails (*Hu Tou She Wei*). She suggests people focus on down-to-earth factors that exist in China rather than its eye-catching economic development and that the Chinese government's projection of a prosperous future for its citizens is masked by divisions such as those between urban and rural areas as well as the problem of environmental degradation. Therefore, when the economic improvement is at the cost of physical and psychological pressure, it is not surprising that people are not as happy as the government expected them to be. Yang (2013) also notes the reason that the Chinese government suddenly cared about Chinese citizens' happiness is consistent with the intention of improving their political achievement, rather than launching effective measures to eliminate social inequalities in China and providing social care to marginalized people. Through the promotion of happiness and psychologization, the Chinese government links pressure, inequality, and the depression that individuals suffer in social life as individuals' lack of positive thinking. In this way, the Chinese government "puts the onus on the individual to uncover and resolve internal struggles" (Yang, 2013, p. 294).

In fact, the most common criticism that the Chinese government receives reflects the discrepancy between the government's promise of a prosperous life and its citizen relatively low subjective well-being satisfaction. Compared with the promise of a bright and happy future, encouraging others to be positive seems to be inspiring, nevertheless, there is a risk of failure in meeting these promises. Therefore, instead of encouraging Chinese people to be happy, the Chinese government adopted the term positive energy to

suggest that people should be self-motivated, self-responsible, with the awareness of acting out one's social responsibilities.

8.2.3 An Online Meme Becomes Political Discourse

In the online environment, positive energy first showed up on *Weibo* (Micro Blog) to encourage people to unite and have faith, particularly in the face of violence, inequality, or disaster (Du, 2014). During the 2012 London Olympic torch relay, the Chinese grassroots rose up with an 'ignite positive energy' movement on Chinese social media, and this Internet meme's explosive effect lasted until after the London Olympics. 'Positive energy' was the number one catchphrase in Chinese media in 2012 (Du, 2014). As such, 'Positive energy' has potentially transformative power in the socio-political and globalized landscape of China (Du, 2014).

Bandurski (2015) explains *Zheng Neng Liang* (positive energy) as being the main political discourse in the Xi Jinping era (from 2012 until now). Chinese President Xi cited *Zheng Neng Liang* (positive energy) to describe the relationship between China and America in 2012 suggesting that the two countries should honour each other's pledges, overcome difficulties, trust and respect each other, and thereby reach a mutually beneficial relationship. A Hong Kong news commentator notes, "The official statement of China indicates that China is trying to send the information that the development of China will not be a threat to America, instead, it brings positive energy to America rather than negative energy[49]". He further states that the positive energy that China could bring to America is a metaphor for the bright and prosperous future of China (Lu, 2013).

Within China, positive energy is closely related to the realization of the Chinese Dream. The Chinese Dream is another concept that Xi raised after his visit to the exhibition of the Rejuvenating Road of China at the National Museum of China on the 29th Nov. 2012[50]. Xi developed this notion through a more detailed explanation on his inauguration

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[49] Lu, Y. (21st Dec. 2012). Xi Jingpin, Wang Qishan Changdao de 'Zheng Neng Liang' Shi Shenm? (in Chinese). VOA. Available at: https://www.voachinese.com/a/xi-jinping-wang-qishan-20121220/1568796.html. (Accessed 21st. Jan. 2016).

[50] Xin Hua News, (30th Nov. 2012). Xi Jing Ping Zong Shu Ji Shen Qing Chan Shu 'Zhong Guo Meng' (In Chinese). Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/30/c_124026690.htm (Accessed: 21st Jan. 2016).

as the President of China on the 17th Mar. 2013. Xi stated that the Chinese Dream is aimed at achieving the revival of China, making it a prosperous nation by the 100-year anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 and making China a democratic, civilized, harmonious, and socialist modern nation 100 years after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949[51]. Significantly, the President of China Xi called for the unity of the country, nation, and people, advocating that Chinese citizens align their personal interests with the interests of their nation to contribute to its ambitious economic and political aims.

Xi emphasized these thoughts through a presentation at the National Publicity and Ideological Work Conference in March 2013[52]. Xi stated that the kernel policy of ideology is to insist on positive publicity reflecting unity, stability, and encouragement. Xi notes that China and its people are facing a struggle with historic challenges and difficulties, which require everyone to consolidate and strengthen mainstream ideology and public opinion. To do this, people need to carry forward the main theme, that of spreading positive energy, inspiring the whole society to forge ahead and strengthen this powerful force. Xi emphasizes giving full play to the positive publicity that ideological work should improve its quality, be effective and efficient, as well as attractive and appealing so that the masses can listen and resonate, be inspired and motivated.

The then Minister of the State Internet Information Office, Lu Wei, proposed 'six wishes' and 'seven bottom lines' to Internet celebrities at the Network Celebrity Social Responsibility Forum in August 2013[53]. These six wishes and seven bottom lines are implicit commands and instructions for Chinese Internet celebrities to exercise their initiative in creating and spreading positive energy online. Lu also pointed out that Chinese Internet celebrities should take their social responsibilities seriously to safeguard the interest of the nation. To do so, Chinese Internet celebrities were expected to play an

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[51] Ren, Z, P. (1st Apr. 2012). Renmin RiBao RenZhongPing: Zhujiu Minzu Fuxing de 'Zhong Guo Meng' (In Chinese). People.cn. Available at: http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2013/0401/c1003-20979482.html (Accessed: 21st Jan. 2016).

[52] Ren Min Net (21st Aug. 2013). Xi Jingping: Xionghuai Daju Bawo Dashi Zhuoyan Dashi Nuli ba Xuanchuan Sixiang Gongzuo Zuode Genghao (In Chinese). Available at: http://cpc.people.com.cn/n/2013/0821/c64094-22636876.html. (Accessed: 21st Jan. 2016).

[53] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China (14th Aug. 2013). Lu Wei Zai Wangluo Mingren Shehui Zeren Luntan Shang Tichu Liudian Xiwang he Qitiao Dixian (In Chinese). Available at: http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwbjs/zygy/lw/hd/Document/1343739/1343739.htm (Accessed: 23rd Jan. 2016).

exemplary role in following the law and moral standards, advocating a legal and social ethos, honesty, and preventing practices that might harm others' reputations and interests.

After setting rules for Internet celebrities, Lu proposed instructions to maintain news-streaming portals and major commercial websites. At the 13th China Internet Media Forum that took place on the 30th Oct. 2013, Lu made a presentation on the theme of 'Unite online positive energy, build the Chinese dream'. Lu argued that Xi's advocacy of positive energy to unite the people and to build the Chinese dream was an expression of the will of the nation and its people. He explains positive energy as people or things that are positive, healthy, inspiring, and give other people power and hope to share positive energy[54]. He believes positive energy should enhance people's confidence, raise their hopes, and encourage them to love their country, their community, and pursue good things in life. Consequently, Lu argued that China has the goal to build a 'clear and clean cyberspace'. To realize this goal, mainstream news portals and major commercial portals were expected to play a leading role in "strengthening management, developing health trends, pooling positive energy and contributing to the Chinese dream" (Zhou, 2013)[55]. These statements were reinforced through instructions and information that Chinese officials expressed in different government conferences and forums suggesting that spreading positive energy online was a central theme of this era. For instance, at the first Central Internet Security and Information Leading Group (CISILG) in 2014[56], Xi called for the imbuing of cyberspace with positive energy and mainstream values to create a clean and righteous online environment. Then Xi reemphasized these ideas at the third CISILG in 2016[57], promoting cyber and information technology among Chinese people; making people feel free to express their thoughts in cyberspace while monitoring cyberspace to ensure positive publicity and a focus on the main melody of patriotism. By

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[54] XinHua Net. (2013). Luwei Zai Di Wujie Zhongying Hulianwang Yuanzhuo Huiyi Shang Fabiao Zhuzhi Yanjiang (in Chinese). Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/zgjx/2013-09/10/c_132706197.htm (Accessed: 23rd Jan. 2016).

[55] Zhou, Z. (2013). *Chinese websites to 'spread positive energy' (In Chinese).* CHINA DAILY. Available at: http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013-10/30/content_17069677.htm (Accessed: 23rd Jan. 2016).

[56] Xinhua Net. (2014). *Xi jingping: Jianding ZhiDu Zixin bushi Yao Gu Bu Zi Feng* (In Chinese). Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-02/17/c_119373758.htm (23rd May 2016).

[57] Xinhua Net. (2016). *Xi jingping Zai Wangxin Gongzuo Zuotanhui Shang de Jianghua Quanern Fabiao* (In Chinese), Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/25/c_1118731175.htm. (23rd May 2016).

this time, spreading positive energy was not merely a widespread online meme, but a set of edicts on online practices and a standard for the good Chinese netizen and even citizen.

8.2.4 Good Netizen, Good Citizen, and Positive Energy

The state of China embraces the metaphor of the nation as a long-suffering mother who does not waste energy on her revival but provides a safe, stable, and prosperous life for her children. For instance, accounts of recent Chinese history suggest that the Opium War between the Qing dynasty and Britain from1839-1842 was a disgrace and the beginning of long suffering for China that led to a complacent Confucian culture struggling to find its way in the face of the 'social Darwinist' capitalist world system (Liu, 2011). The context of World War II and the civil wars within China are also frequently described as arduous times that left China as an inferior in the hierarchical ranks of world nations. All these shameful events and sufferings make the revival of China a consistent theme of Chinese nationalism (Liu, 2011). Xi's first advocacy of the notion of the 'Chinese Dream' during his visit to the 'Road of Revival' exhibition in 2012 included a review of Chinese history from the Opium War to the development of China after following the socialist road[58]. Xi notes that the kernel of the Chinese dream is an insistence on the socialist road and on the creation of an ideal socialist nation for the people of China[59].

In 2012, the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) also defined the core values of socialism at three levels in 24 Chinese characters. The first level reflects the national value goals, which are 'prosperity (*fu qiang*), democracy (*min zhu*), civilization (*wen ming*), and harmony (*he xie*)'. The second level explains the social value orientation in Chinese society, which include 'freedom (*zi you*), equality (*ping deng*), justice (*gongzheng*), and the rule of law (*fa zhi*)'. Then the third level includes the value guidelines for each Chinese citizen, which are 'patriotism (*ai guo*), dedication (*jing ye*),

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[58] Xinhua net (2012). *Xijingping: Cheng Qian Qi Hou JiWangKaiLai JiXu Chaozhe Zhonghua Minzu Weida Fuxing Mubiao Fenyong Qianjin* (in Chinese). Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/29/c_113852724.htm (Accessed: 23rd Jan. 2016).
[59] As Footnote 12.

integrity (*cheng xin*), and friendliness (*you shan*)'[60]. In this way, patriotism in China is not a personal choice but an obligation and a duty.

The public space on the Internet enables Chinese people to explore social and political topics and to create a version of popular nationalism (Liu, 2011). Zhang (2016, p. 233) suggests that bourgeoning social media has become the "battleground between authorities and citizens in competing for agenda setting for the Chinese public". Social media empowered ordinary Chinese citizens to report, moderate the reported issues, as well as bypassing the "hierarchical state media" to present their issues directly to the masses (Zhang, 2016, p. 233). Zhang (2016) notes this dramatic change turns Chinese netizens into information producers rather than merely state media information consumers, which eventually challenge the agenda setting that used to be a privilege of the state and elites in Chinese society. However, in an authoritarian society like China, the Chinese government also wants its people to use the Internet to publicize and contribute to the economic development and modernization of China rather than free expression and participation (Liu, 2011). Liu (2011) conducted an ethnographic study among Chinese youth to explore their Internet use and found that Chinese youth reconceptualise political participation, nationalism, and patriotism in the online environment. Liu (2011) notes that government-designed political, ideological, and patriotic education are mandatory among young people, with the aim of enhancing their awareness of the duty to serve the country and the nation. However, university students, who are the future elite, distinguish nation from the party government and believe the interest of the nation should be above the interests of the party. Therefore, university students prefer to describe themselves as 'apolitical' even when they use the Internet for nationalistic expression, for instance, against the Western media's negative reporting of China. They see themselves as protecting the national image out of personal pride, rather than merely responding to the government's call for patriotism.

Han's (2016) study of Chinese *Weibo* (microblogging) users' online reactions towards political issues characterizes Weibo users as supporters of universal values. For instance, some Chinese Weibo users react swiftly towards government-related online news,

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[60] Ren Min Newspaper (12th Feb. 2014). Shehui Zhuyi Hexin Jiazhi Guan Jiben Neirong (In Chinese). Available at: http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2014/0212/c40531-24330538.html (23rd Feb. 2016).

actively speak out for the party whom they consider as victims, and then urging the relevant government departments to act on the issue. Meanwhile, there are also Weibo users who condemn these people for creating a negative image of the Chinese government by criticising governmental practices. Those who support universal values consider themselves as those who are able to identify "China's failure to democratize, lack of human rights, official censorship, and crackdowns on rights activities", rather than advocating state propaganda (Han, 2016, p. 167). Conversely, government supporters support the idea of positive energy and believe that patriotism means to present and protect the positive image of the nation and combat criticism of the regime.

Ironically, existing research on Chinese university students' perceptions of positive energy criticises their failure to express either their patriotic or nationalistic enthusiasm in cyberspace. After inviting 600 Chinese university students to read through a list of news items and rate their reflections from 'permissive' to 'positive', Yu and collaborators (2014) suggest that Chinese university students lack media literacy. They claim that participants in the research fail in distinguishing positive news from negative news and do not express enough resentment and criticism towards negative news by giving them a low rating. For instance, researchers criticise students for not giving negative ratings on news like China and Japan's conflicts on the Diaoyu Island, students cheating on examinations, and obsession with sports stars. Lin and collaborators (2014) also criticise students for being parochial and for defaulting on their social responsibilities because students prefer to spread personal-life-related positive energy and give low ratings to news items reporting public issues (Mao et al., 2013). Therefore, Mao et al. (2013) suggest including media literacy in political and ideological education. They believe only professional lecturers can help to educate and cultivate students' awareness of Internet morality, improve students' media literacy from the positive side to enable students to discern and spread positive energy and criticise and report negative energy online.

Mao et al. (2013) are not alone in suggesting the introduction of positive energy in higher education. Wang et al. (2013) conducted a similar survey among 1200 Chinese university students to explore their attitudes towards the spreading of positive energy on micromedia in both ideological and psychological terms. By classifying students according to their political roles in the CPC, they find 46.62% of participants who spread positive energy online are members of the communist party and 44.71% are members of the communist

youth league. A related idea is that young people are impulsive and tend to mimic others' practices, making them susceptible to negative energy and spreading false information online. Wang et al. (2013) suggest that media ideological education at university level could enhance students' media literacy in distinguishing positive from negative. Zhang and Ouyang (2015) point out that negative online opinions tend to exaggerate the unfairness of Chinese society, which negatively affects Chinese university students' trust towards country and society, and weakens their nationalist and socialist values.

A criticism of the research method in these studies is that none of them explain the standard for measuring 'positive' news and 'negative' news, nor do they discuss the criteria they use to select news for the questionnaire. Researchers potentially make normative assumptions about which kind of news is positive/negative and which reactions are appropriate. Students who meet their expectations are right and 'positive', and students who express different ideas are said to lack Internet literacy and to need further political and ideological education. In this present study, instead of expecting students to respond according to normative expectations, I seek to listen to students' views and their understanding of positive energy and negative energy and aim to contribute to the research area by investigating young Chinese people's narratives of their online practices and interpretations of positive energy.

8.3 Analysis and Findings

Three themes related to positive energy emerged in the analysis of my interview data: desirable positive energy, the state's influence on positive energy, and indifference to spreading positive energy online.

8.3.1 The Desired Positive Energy

This main theme includes two sub-themes. One sub-theme explores participants' understanding of positive energy and negative energy and how their perceptions of these two terms relate to their online interactions through WeChat connections. The other sub-theme focuses on the psychologization of positive energy and negative energy, to explore

the ways that young participants interpret these two terms from psychological perspectives.

8.3.1.1 Astonishing Positive Energy and Depressing Negative Energy

Participants state that young people should be brimming with youthful vigour and that being an individual with positive energy means having youth and vitality. They equate positive energy with presenting a positive attitude towards life, believe positive energy can stimulate good luck, and that a positive attitude is critical to realizing one's dreams and can lead to a bright future. For instance, female participants use the colloquial expression 'girls who like smiling never have bad luck'. The belief that energy is transferable makes young participants note that they prefer to connect with others who have positive energy, so as to enjoy the collateral benefits of others' positive energy.

> People with positive energy are outgoing, have big hearts would not get upset with others' small mistakes, and can always cheer people up (Participant 11, female, aged 19, second-tier university).

> People with positive energy are also accompanied by good luck; you will get good luck when you stay with people who have good luck. Similarly, you have bad luck when you stay with people with bad luck, and people with negative energy tend to have bad luck (Participant 1, male, aged 22, second-tier university).

In contrast, participants consider that negative energy is linked to a negative attitude towards life. Young participants note individuals with negative energy are blocked by their emotional predicaments, are 'depressive', 'isolated', 'like to complain', and have a 'negative impact' on others.

> People with positive energy are like sunshine; they warm you up; people with negative energy drain your energy (Participant 11, aged 19, female, second-tier university).

Instead of saying youth in this study despise people with negative energy, I would say they admire people with positive energy and take them as role models. Participants' attitude towards individuals with positive energy and negative energy share some similarities with the term 'emotional cogitation' (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson, 1994). While with a negative attitude towards the possible cogitation of negative emotions, especially the concern that others' online negative expression might generate a negative online context. Therefore, participants noted they prefer to be surrounded by individuals with positive energy rather than negative energy. Conversely, individuals with negative energy can negatively affect their perceptions of different issues in life. For instance:

> I have a friend, she is always full of energy; she is funny and optimistic. I consult her whenever I face problems; she can ease the troublesome issues into trivial things (Participant 2, female, aged 24, first-tier university).

> My roommate always stay in her dorm and watch Korean Soap Series. She is full of negative energy and always suggest that I test my boyfriends' loyalty to me. I try not to spend time with her and hide her posts from appearing on my WeChat friend circle. Because I know she posts nothing but negative energy … (Participant 3, female, aged 23, second-tier university).

As a result, many participants state that they are conscious of not frequently spreading negative energy online, to create a friendly and positive cyberspace for their WeChat friends.

> I think cyberspace is still a public space and a lot of people are in it, such as teachers, parents, friends, classmates, and even future colleagues. It is better to create a positive space online because it is a place to relax not to listen to people's moaning (Participant 37, female, aged 22, second-tier university).

> … better to be positive … I prefer keeping negative energy to myself; it is not helpful to express online. WeChat should be a place for friends

to communicate, better to talk about casual topics rather than heavy topics … (Participant 32, male, aged 22, first-tier university).

Such statements resonate with the state of China's advocacy of spreading positive energy online to help achieve the Chinese dream and to create a positive 'emotional climate' (Rivera, 1992). Instead of stating their online 'positive' practices as a response to the state's advocacy of carrying out their social duties to achieve the Chinese dream, participants suggest their internalization of spreading positive energy as an online norm. They are aware of people's preference to be happy and optimistic individuals and therefore edit their online posts in certain ways to meet this criterion. For instance, Participant 31 (male, aged 24, first-tier university) notes:

> I prefer to share useful information with my friends rather than especially creating positive energy posts … (Interviewer: what kinds of useful information) … like links on the CFA (Chartered Financial Analyst) examination and articles, not advertisements or inspirational information.

Responding to the earlier discussion in Chapter 5, as university students, participants have a high preference for and good impressions of individuals who share study-related information on WeChat. According to Participant 31, these useful links help him to create a favourable impression as hard-working and professional. As Participant 3 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) notes, 'what you post online reflects part of who you are'. In fact, compared with constantly presenting as positive and spreading positive energy online, participants are more concerned about not being stigmatized as having psychological problems.

8.3.1.2 Psychologization—Happiness and Depression

This sub-theme captures the internalized psychologization among young Chinese participants. Participants frequently note that individuals' online posts reflect their mental state. For instance, they appear to believe that individuals who spread negative energy are either 'posers' who intend to attract sympathy and attention or 'losers' with psychological problems.

Girls like to moan online as it is a way to attract boys' attention. I do not like men to do the same thing. For instance, one of my friends just broke up with his girlfriend. He creates posts to express how bad he feels and how much he has been hurt. He has kept doing this for a week now … I just think he is *you bing* (has a psychological problem) … it is ok for a girl to do this, while a man doing this is weird … (Participant 10, female, aged 21, second-tier university).

Participants also attribute failing to spread positive energy online as a symptom of having psychological problems and believe individuals can become psychologically healthy and imbued with positive energy by thinking and acting positively.

If I have a friend who expresses negative energy online I will comfort them a few times but if they keep complaining I may give up. Like people say, 'you cannot wake up individuals who are pretending to sleep.' They should think positively to move forward. Otherwise, no one can help them (Participant 30, male, aged 20, first-tier university).

Participants discourage emotional catharsis online and chalk it down to psychological problems consistent with Yang's work on the psychopolitics in China (Yang, 2013). The government media suggest that people reflect on their personal problems from a psychological perspective. Liu (2009) charts the recent shift in China from a focus on somatic explanations for psychological problems to an increasing recognition of psychological causes. This shift in recognition has created an enormous strain on mental health services. Stigmatization and insufficient mental care support mean that 90% of Chinese patients with mental disorders do not seek professional treatment (Xu et al., 2016). There were 4.3 million people registered as having mental disorders in 2014, but only 1650 registered mental health institutions in China, 228000 beds, and about 20000 psychiatrists available in the psychiatric departments[61]. This number increased rapidly to 2936 mental health institutions, 433000 beds, and 27733 licenced psychiatrists and 5759

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[61] Ren Min Ri Bao (13th Jan. 2016). Zhong Guo Yan Zhong Jing Shen Bing Huan Zhe Da 430 Wan (in Chinese). Xinhua Net. Available at: http://news.xinhuanet.com/health/2016-01/13/c_128623113.htm (Accessed 23rd Nov. 2016).

mental health nurses, and about 5000 therapists in 2015[62]. These institutions are mainly located in urban centres rather than local villages or towns. Notably, the report indicates that 3.59% of the Chinese population has depression and 4.98% are affected by an anxiety disorder, while there were only 5.4 million registered patients with a mental disorder in 2016. In response, the state of China launched a mental health law in 2012 and designed the National Mental Health work plan (2015–2020) to enhance mental health care in China, especially in rural areas (Xu et al., 2016). Private mental consultation is still the main place that Chinese people seek professional help, but high therapy fees keep most patients outside the door.

There have also been criticisms of the lack of comprehensive media coverage of mental disorders. Ren and Kang (2015) criticise Chinese TV programmes for biased coverage of individuals who suffer from depression. From instance, instead of reporting depression as a mental disease and advising people on prevention, TV programmes are more interested in reporting incidents that trigger individuals' depression and sensationalising the condition by focusing on individuals who mutilate themselves or commit suicide. According to Ren and Kang (2015), these media reports expose patients and their families' privacy and depict depressive individuals as fragile, sensitive, and even violent.

In relation to my research finding, participants' descriptions of individuals who express depressive emotion (negative energy) online reflect their negative attitude towards individuals with psychological problems. Because of the longstanding stigma that Chinese people have for individuals with psychological problems, participants noted they prefer to avoid individuals who have psychological problems rather than encouraging them to have professional counselling. For instance:

> I like to comfort people who have problems, as I am glad to help. However, if there is no change, I will try to avoid them. Because their negative energy may affect me. I do not want to tell her to see the psychological therapist, as she may consider I am suggesting she is mad. I will just absent myself from her slowly and let her reflect on

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[62] Zhon Guo Xin Wen Wang (2017). *Yi Yu Zheng, Jiao Lv Zhang Ai Zhong Guo Ren de Jing Shen Wei Sheng Zhuang Kuang Ru He? (in Chinese)*. Available at: http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2017/04-08/8194011.shtml (Accessed 23rd Nov. 2016)

herself, maybe one day she could realize her problems … and be happy

… (Participant 25, female, aged 23, first-tier university).

Participants' notion of managing personal online practices and leaving others to reflect on their own problems indicates the rising individualism among Chinese youth. The rising awareness and prioritizing of individualistic factors among Chinese youths could be the result of dramatic socio-economic and political transformation in China. As compared with collectivist factors, individuals give priority to individual factors in their evaluation of personal happiness and life satisfaction (Steele and Lynch, 2013). For instance, individuals feel happier about an increase in personal income rather than about their company selling more products. Hence, Steele and Lynch (2013) argue that the national ideology advocating loyalty to the nation has waned over time and that individualistic moral codes have trumped collectivist moral codes in today's Chinese society. However, based on my participants' statements in this study, I think a more nuanced explanation is appropriate, such as Wang's (2002) idea that the CPC will not risk its legitimacy by promoting Westernized individualism in China. The findings in this study reflect the widespread internalization of nationalism among Chinese youths as participants, are consciously aware of their social responsibilities in creating a positive national image through spreading positive energy online although this is also mixed with a concern for their individual feelings and personal ambitions.

8.3.2 Deontology—the Duty to Spread Positive Energy

Deontology means 'science of duty' in Greek, and "A deontological theory of ethics says that some acts are morally obligatory regardless of their consequences for human happiness" (D'Amato and Eberle, 2010, p. 8). This idea is reflected, I will argue, in participants viewing the spreading of positive energy online as part of their social responsibility.

8.3.2.1 Positive Thinking and Citizenship

In general, participants show indifference or even distaste of political discussions on WeChat. However, an exception arises when online issues relate to the interests of China

and other countries, or when there is a negative report on China in Western-based media. In these cases, people tend to unite and follow the mainstream attitude to protect the national image of China. Hence, positive energy diffuses in defence of the national image and interests of China, which is a form of popular nationalism in a global context.

> Those Western countries are being unfair to China. Problems in China and development in China are two different things; we are focusing on development right now. However, Western countries like to grab the downside and start criticizing (Participant 17, male, aged 24, second-tier university).

Another concern that participants express is social inequality in media access. For example, participants mention their limited access to Western-based social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. A few admit that they have obtained a VPN code to break the Chinese firewall so as to access Western-based social media. Nonetheless, the inconvenience of traversing the firewall remains a constraint. Participants expressed the concern that limited interaction between Chinese people and people from other countries online eliminates opportunities both for Chinese and other nationals to get to know each other. Participants partly feel they are unable to take the responsibility to present positive accounts of China and to challenge the stereotypes and bias towards China circulating in social media in the rest of the world.

> You [researcher] have stayed abroad, you know how the situation is, most foreigners do not know China, and they have stereotypes and biases towards China. We cannot access Western social media freely, but they have access to our social media. We should publicize the positive aspects of China to change their bias and stereotypes, and to gain their respect (Participant 19, male, aged 24, first-tier university).

Both Liu (2011) and Fong (2011) note that patriotic and civic education in China emphasize individuals' responsibility to be loyal to the state and serve the nation as one's family, without granting its people civil rights to make them aware and participate in political discourse and protect personal rights and interests from state encroachment. They also note that Chinese university students take their patriotic responsibilities so

seriously that they cannot accept Western-based media's negative reports on China, nor do they accept being accused of betraying their nation. Hence, for Participant 19 (male, aged 24 years, first-tier university), it is his responsibility to spread positive energy online and change foreigners' stereotypes of China.

Yang and Zheng (2012) note that the increasing global economic status of China stimulates Chinese young people's nationalistic sentiments; they call for respect from Western countries and are sensitive towards criticisms from Western media. However, Liu (2011) notes that young Chinese citizens' sensitivity towards the West is not as strong as in previous generations who tend to idolize Western developed countries. To promote socialism, the Chinese government allows its media to propagandize the Western lifestyle, as the goal for the Chinese socialism development (Fong, 2011). Chinese people who were born before the 1970s consider life in Western developed countries as perfect, while with the popularization of a capitalist economic marketing within China, people have more chances to go abroad, to gain information about Western countries. Consequently, the idolized image of Western developed countries is not as strong as it used to be (Fong, 2011).

As Michael Herzfeld notes, 'if the nation is credibly represented as a family, people are loyal to it because they know that families are flawed—that is part of love—and so they rally to the defence of its compromising but warmly familiar intimacy' (cited in Fong, 2011, p. 65). It appears from my study that even participants who are dissatisfied with the nation do not consider WeChat an appropriate place to vent these views. Participants condemn people who use the WeChat space as a place to air their grievances, as they regard discussing politics on WeChat as ineffectual.

> I dislike people who criticise every new policy that the Chinese government makes, they do it just because they want to criticise, and they express their opinions online, but nothing changes, no one listens to them. In the end, they may even forget what they have said themselves … (Participant 8, female, aged 21, second-tier university).

Participants name individuals who vent negative feelings online as '*fen qing*' (the angry youth), those who openly express their vigorous resentment towards politics and

government policies, reflecting resentment-venting *fen qing* (Yang and Zhang, 2012). Yang and Zheng (2012) suggest that there are three kinds of *fen qing* in today's China: China-critical, resentment-venting, and nationalistic *fen qing*. They argue that the rise of China-critical and resentment-venting *fen qing* reflects social problems in China. For instance, people's awareness of social inequality, express anxiety and pressure in the job market. The online space that is supposed to provide them with the freedom to express their opinions, while turning out mainstream media and the dominance of elite voices, leaves limited channels for Chinese people to make their voice heard. Alternatively, participants may believe that they are contributing to the nation by pointing out and criticising existing social problems. Based on the rationality of *fen qing* as a commentary on government policies, Yang and Zheng (2012, p.652) call such young people 'aspiring youth', 'angry youth', and 'excrement youth'. Aspiring youth are positive and rational when commenting on government policies and current social events. In contrast, the rationality of excrement youth is so low that they are considered destructive (Yang and Zheng, 2012).

Participants appear to admire aspiring youth and have an aversion to angry and so-called excrement youth for expressing their dissatisfaction with the government in the online environment. One reason is the concern that expressions of anger online can potentially affect others' emotions. Participants also criticise the inconsistency between *fen qing* criticism online and actions offline, as they believe that most *fen qing* limit themselves to flaunting online, rather than taking further actions in the offline environment.

> *Fen qing* (angry youth) are strong in words, as they spend so much time online; however, they are likely to be losers in life. They spend time in complaining rather than working hard to change their life and contributing to society. They just complain and criticise … (Participant 16, female, aged 21, second-tier university).

Participants expect to have more and more aspiring youth among their compatriots, who can discover problems in society, provide rational solutions or suggestions, and influence mainstream media and elites with social support from the grassroots, ending up with policy adjustments in China.

During the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong[63], one of my friends wrote a letter and posted it on his WeChat. He was writing like a child suggesting that people in Hong Kong should understand we are all Chinese people who should unite and work for a better future. I read his post but did not give any comment, because I think if he were a child at 7 or 8 years old, I would click like and comment with some encouraging words. But as an adult still posting things like this I would say he is immature. (Participant 30, male, aged 20, first-tier university).

He further states:

If he has been to Hong Kong and tried to talk to people in Hong Kong and spread his thoughts there, and start a successful campaign, then I would have admired him.

Participants adopt a down-to-earth attitude towards online political participation. Instead of supporting individuals who express personal resentment online, they believe that well thought out and rational online activities are respectful and worthy of support.

Yang and Zheng (2012, p. 68) note that, "from the history of China, one can see that the alternation of dynasties and governments were often caused by the anger of pipsqueaks". The use of the Internet provides people with more channels to spread and access information, especially enabling disadvantaged groups in China to protest their right. Researchers suggest that state power loses its force in online environments, which "creates a spectre of the possible spread of revolt" (Karatzogianni and Robinson, 2014, p. 24). Unfortunately, compared with an online protest that requires official sanction, online monitoring, and online censorship, a revolt in China does not seem to appear through the use of the Internet.

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[63] Umbrella Movement, also known as Occupation Movement, is a pro-democracy political movement that took place in Hongkong from 26th Sept. 2014 to 15th Dec. 2014. It resists the decisions of Standing Committee of the National People's Congress on 2017 Chief Executive Election and the 2016 Legislative Council Election Framework and Candidate Nomination Scheme, they protest for citizen nomination for the Chief Executive Election, and the abolition of the legislative Council Functional Constituency.

8.3.2.2 Moral Duty Within the Community

In addition to national pride, which motivates participants to spread positive energy, participants also spoke about the role of positive energy in sustaining social ties, including those with parents, teachers, employers, and their peer groups. There is a common understanding among participants that positive energy is important and nuanced with the strength of social ties. For example, participants state that their peer group can understand their online ridicule of party policies as part of a commentary on social events. However, parents may advise them not to make such interventions because they consider them too young to predict the effects of their online speech.

> My parents always remind me 'not get involved in useless things, mind your own business, graduate and find a job first, otherwise, nothing matters' (Participant 30, male, aged 20, first-tier university).

> I do not participate in these online incidents, I may share posts and support them at the beginning, but when it loses control I delete posts and keep away from them because you never know what might happen next, if the event results in social chaos I would feel guilty about it and people who have seen my posts might consider me *fen qing* (Participant 31, male, aged 24, first-tier university).

Participants show a disposition to participate in online political discussion when there is a role model involved. Role models from school or at work have a high impact on young people, followed by parents and peer groups. For instance, if teachers or employers comment on political issues online, then students have a higher tendency to participate in online political discussion.

> My supervisor has radical ideas about politics, so she likes to comment on politics from the academic and professional perspective. I respect and admire her; therefore, I mimic her online practices from time to time to comment on politics. She clicks like or comments on my posts from time to time. I feel quite happy when she reacts to my posts (Participant 27, male, aged 22, first-tier university).

Mimicking teachers' and future employers' online practices may stem from the ideological belief of following the instructions of individuals' positions of authority. However, participants note that most people are wary in their online practices in China, therefore, instead of creating or sharing posts that might spark controversy, people perceive neutral and positive posts as safe and appropriate. This reinforces participants' sense of responsibility to create an enjoyable and harmonious online environment for others. As participants note,

> Do not let negative personal feelings affect others and make them worry. To present positive energy is neutral, as it may not make everyone happy, but at least it will not make people upset by looking at it (Participant 20, male, aged 24, second-tier university).

> WeChat is an enclosed place for entertainment and friendly communication; I think everyone should spread positive energy if they can. If not, at least do not spread negative energy. It is better to share insignificant or annoying things than to post something to make people upset or *hui san guan* (destroy your outlooks) (Participant 28, male, aged 23, first-tier university).

There are two ways to understand participants' notion of following instructions, one is from the traditional style of authority and governance, the other one is the internalization of authoritarian political culture in China.

8.3.2.3 Confucian Origins

As mentioned in previous chapters, Chinese social networks emphasize *lun li*, *lun* representing the Confucian social order, which emphasizes the rituals and responsibilities of the inferior towards the superior. According to the recorded interactions between Confucius and his students, Confucius promoted close, equal, and mutual respect in the relationship between teachers and students (Zhao, 2013). In contrast, participants' notion of the relationship with the teacher is more like subordinates being loyal to their leader.

There is a long history between Confucius' era and today's China, however, in this study, the authoritarian political culture in China appears to predominate.

The authoritarian political culture in contemporary China is a combination of communist and socialist thoughts and Confucian traditions. On the one hand, the CPC conducts political and ideological work in higher education emphasising the Basic Principles of Marxism, Mao Ze Dong's Thoughts, Deng Xiao Ping's Theory and these 'Three Representatives' are the compulsory courses that university students are required to take every semester. However, the Confucian traditions have relatively less importance in contemporary China. While the traditional subordinate relationship between inferior to authorities, especially children's responsibility to be obedient and devoted to their parents become the ideological root of the Chinese term '*zu guo mu qin*' (mother country), as well as the idea of filial nationalism (Fong, 2011) that underpins many of the online practices of participants in my research.

8.3.3 Authenticity

This theme encapsulates three sub-themes; tranquillity of mind, *wen yi qing nian (arty youth)*, and authentic communication. The first sub-theme includes an introduction of laid-back youth, who want to pursue tranquillity of mind and the desire of living a simple life. *Wen yi qing nian* is a controversial term among participants, as laid-back participants value it as it represents their taste and differentiates them from the masses, while participants who dislike it consider it as kitsch. All in all, participants express their desire for sincere and authentic communication with their online friends, as the commercialization of mediated friendship makes it difficult to sustain friendship online.

8.3.3.1 Tranquillity of mind: *wen yi qing nian*

An interesting response to the politicization of online identities is the valorisation of particular ways of living that appears to sidestep the pressures of duty and responsibility online. Participant 20 (male, aged 24 years, first-tier university), a first-year postgraduate student, from the *Gansu* province of China practises *qi gong* and is active on the *qi gong* BBS in China. He is one of the few participants who talks about positive energy from the

perspective of *qi* and explains the essential need to ensure the circulation of *qi* within an individual's body to achieve mental and physical well-being.

> When you learn *qi gong*, you are taught to use the inner power of your
> body, the physical movement looks slow and gentle, but the power can
> be active … However, the right way of practising is important, as it can
> generate positive energy.

Participants frequently express their admiration towards individuals with a tranquil mind. They believe that the calmness that individuals have when dealing with daily issues reflects a good education, productive life experience, and valuable self-cultivation, and that these good qualities tend to make the individual have *mianzi* in social interaction.

> I like people who have good self-cultivation, they have studied abroad
> and are influenced by foreign culture, they have a calm mind and are
> kind to people. They are different from residents who are irritable and
> noisy. These people are well-educated and receive respect whenever
> they go; I consider these people as having *mianzi* (Participant 35, male,
> aged 22, first-tier university).

Participant 35's value of self-cultivation, experience of living in foreign countries, calmness and kindness towards others, reminds me of Liu's (2011) work on urban youth in China. Liu (2011) discusses the dilemmas of being 'local' and 'global' at the same time. Young people receive an 'ideal' representation of other nations via the mass media, which makes them admire the material condition, cultural civilization, and the freedom that people enjoy in developed Western countries. By romanticizing the life in developed countries, participants express their discontent with their lives in the local context. By idealizing individuals who have studied abroad as having good self-cultivation, Participant 35 might be expressing her resentment towards the rapid and busy life in urban China. TCM and ancient Chinese philosophers suggest mental and physical practices are essential to having a tranquil mind, achieving both physical and mental well-being. Whereas, when facing the rapid and competitive lifestyle at school and in the job market, participants find them drifting into the trend of modernity leaving less time and space to conduct self-reflection and therefore have difficulties in achieving tranquillity of mind.

Sometimes, I want to slow down like foreign kids (e.g. children in West European countries) who can have a gap year and find out what they want, but the situation in China makes me keep moving, otherwise, I will fall behind. Like people say, the sad thing is not that you are not working hard enough, but that individuals who are better than you in every way still work harder than you do (Participant 32, male, aged 22, first-tier university).

Within this pressured social context, participants find they need to have friends with tranquil minds. Not only because such friends have mild and genteel characters that are friendly and kind but also because such an individual tends to have an ordinary state of mind and less motivation to participate in competition. In addition, not everyone is keen on physical or mental practice to balance and stimulate positive energy within them, therefore, finding someone with positive energy to imbue them seems to be a quick and convenient way to gain positive energy. Participants use a metaphor for the subtle social influence of people with a tranquil mind; the spring rain, which falls stealthily at night with the wind, soaks everything noiselessly.

8.3.3.2 *Wen Yi Qing Nian*

This theme emerges as a sub-theme of the tranquil mind theme, as young people believe the lifestyle known as *wen yi qing nian* is arty, simple, and of high quality, which contrasts to the modern, rapid, and competitive life that most people live. Twenty-seven participants in this research mentioned *wen yi qing nian*, eight describing themselves as *wen yi qing nian*, or aspiring to it in the future. Twelve participants expressed admiration for their friends who are *wen yi qing nian*, or who present themselves like that online, although they are aware that these friends might not be a *wen yi qing nian* in their offline lives. Participants who express interest in and favour towards *wen yi qing nian* describe it as 'knowledgeable', 'having good taste', 'artistically accomplished', and 'living an exquisite life'.

Participant 37 (female, aged 22, second-tier university) frankly expressed her desire to be a *wen yi qing nian*:

The initial thing to be *wen yi qing nian* is to have the financial resources;
I am not a *wen yi qing nian* right now because I am not financially
wealthy enough to enjoy the life I want. People I know who are real
wen yi qing nian have high financial resources but are rustic,
knowledgeable, and remain modest. They live a quality life and have
exquisite taste in art, they are calm and silent most of the time. While
they can also be sharp and direct whenever needed. They are realistic,
meanwhile, have a sense of romance and humour.

Although participants do not think personal fortune is the key factor for an individual to
be *wen yi qing nian*, they do agree that the main advantage of this way of being is to have
freedom, and not to suffer from a competitive life. In addition, this desire reflects young
people's dreams, which mix a modern life that prioritises fortune with a rustic life that
allows for freedom and a tranquil mind.

You need to have money to be indifferent to fame and fortune, then you
can pursue the life you want, rather than joining in the busy mass
(Participant 30, male, aged 20, first-tier university).

Participants point out that there are also fake, or hypocritical *wen yi qing nian* on WeChat.
They describe the fake *wen yi qing nian* as people who moan constantly about imaginary
illnesses to seek care and attention.

Some people need to perform as *wen yi qing nian*, while real *wen yi
qing nian* do not want to attract others' attention. Some people post a
picture of scenery with the text 'I am a girl with sadness, I expect long
travel', or 'my mind is full of sorrow'. These people are performing
like they have comprehended the myth of life and suffering from having
too much sensation (Participant 25, female, aged 23, first-tier
university).

Participants distinguish these online 'posers' from real *wen yi qing nian*; as the former
ones are 'fakes' who claim characteristics that they do not have, while the latter have all
the good characteristics that an artistic young person is supposed to have, most

importantly being positive. In fact, people's attitude towards *wen yi qing nian* changes according to the social development. Yang and Huang (2016) compare the lexical meaning change of *wen yi qing nian* from the 1980s to the present, noting that people appreciated and admired *wen yi qing nian* who participated in literary and artistic creation in the 1980s, while nowadays people describe *wen yi qing nian* as unrealistic and as a lack of achievement motivation. For the money-oriented in contemporary China, *wen yi qing nian* has become another name for individuals who cherish fanciful ideas and have impractical plans (Yang and Huang, 2016). What I find interesting among youth in my study is the way they combine the idea of meeting financial needs and artistic sensitivity. They are not only interested in literary and artistic creation but also emphasize the living standards required to be literary and artistic. Participants are presenting both the character of moving upward and making money, while their aim is to live both a wealthy as well as an artistic life. This can be interpreted as the modernized Taoist thoughts, which suggest that people pursue the authentic beauty of living by discarding desires and doing nothing. According to participants' explanation in my study, I understand them as having the desire to participate in social competition, while deeper in their mind they are working for the moment to be able to stop or moderate working and enjoy the authentic beauty of life. The moment means by the time they can provide a living for themselves and their parents, without feeling the pressure to work and the need to compete.

8.3.3.3 Online Authenticity

Other than expressing their preference for individuals who strategically present favourable online impressions, participants noted that they would like to have authentic online communications. As Participant 3 (female, aged 23, second-tier university) notes:

> If an individual is presenting who they really are, I like their posts.
> Sometimes, you can feel which individuals are presenting as nice and
> kind online; girls may like to present their emotional and weak aspects
> online to attract the attention of boys. None of these practices are good,
> just being sincere and presenting who they are is enough.

Some participants claim that they post what they want without thinking too much, although further discussion suggests otherwise. Respondents prefer to describe WeChat as their personal space and declare themselves to be spontaneous while creating or sharing

posts online. Younger, male participants have a higher tendency to indicate that they are carefree while creating or sharing online posts:

> I do not care about what others' think, I just post what I want and what I feel like posting at that moment (Participant 12, male, aged 20, second-tier university).

> I do not think of others' comments or liking, I just post what I want to post (Participant 17, male, aged 24, second-tier university).

Almost all participants state that the frequency of online posting is very important. High posting frequencies can create a negative impression on others. On the one hand, participants note an individual's frequent posting costs them time in exploring other friends' online posts. On the other hand, participants consider it is acceptable for an individual to complain, moan, and present resentful feelings from time to time, as they consider it venting or expressing human instincts. In contrast, increasing frequencies of positive energy spreading make participants suspicious of the aims behind the perfect impression that individuals try to make.

When explaining online authenticity, Lim et al. (2015) suggest a two-factor model, one is the 'sense of real me'(SMRE), the other is the 'expression of the real me'. The former relates to the 'trait authenticity that maintains self-coherence', while the latter relates to the 'state authenticity that governs individuals' self-concordant cognition and behaviour in a momentary situation' (Lim, Yang, and Kim, 2015). While most participants' understanding authentic self-expression results from SMRE, as Participant 26 (female, aged 20, second-tier university) notes:

> If you think too much, it is difficult to decide what to post online. You may just share something ordinary, while others may think you are showing off. You share something positive, they might think you are being meticulous … I just post what I like for my friends, how others think I do not care …

Lim et al. (2015) suggest in many cases that the communicator needs to decide in both online and non-mediated environments either to incur the negative social judgement from others by expressing their authentic self or to present the inauthentic self to receive positive responses from audiences. Therefore, Participant 26 claims she is expressing her authentic self to 'friends' by creating whatever she likes on WeChat. Reflecting on Goffman's (1959) work on performance, Participant 26 has started her online performance the moment she decides to post online as she is selecting posts according to her friends' expectations and preference, which might only reflect part of her true self.

The other reason that motivates participants to call for sincere communication is out of their disdain towards commercializing friendship. All participants in this research are vexed that WeChat contacts those who use WeChat to sell products, which they find troublesome and repulsive. As Participant 12 (male, aged 20, second-tier university) says:

> I dislike *Weishang* (WeChat businessmen), they are troublesome and create lots of posts a day, which can make me miss my close friends' new WeChat posts. I have put most of *Weishang* that I am not familiar with in the blacklist. The most difficult part is close friends who become *Weishang*. I cannot put them on the blacklist and feel obligated to like their posts from time to time to show my support … it is tiring to sustain this type of friendship online …

By 'this type of friendship', Participant 12 describes customized friendship as a strategic social communication with the expectation of economic reward. Chambers (2013) has stated that social media do not merely provide users with its technologies but allow users to be creative by using these technologies, sometimes, to use these technologies differently from the inventors' original plan. For instance, *Weishang*, by taking advantage of WeChat as an enclosed online space that is frequently filled with people that individuals have known or met in person. The other notable point is the multiple convenient online financial transfer methods make WeChat a perfect platform for e-commerce. The commercialization of WeChat results in commercialized mediated communication. While enjoying the convenience of commercialized functions on WeChat, participants also seek authentic and simple online communication. This theme

of back to basics is inspired by the Chinese term *fan pu gui zhen*[64], which suggests that only if people remove external décor and focus on self-cultivation can they find the authentic self as well as the authentic life.

Participant 12's statement also indicates that individuals' online posting frequencies and their relationship with their offline friends affect their judgement of whether others are authentic. On the one hand, participants note increasing frequencies of positive energy make them suspicious of the aims behind the perfect impression these individuals try to project. On the other hand, participants appear to be more supportive and have higher tolerance towards close friends who do not present positive energy online. This suggests that if individuals want to strengthen their social ties with others, then sincere offline interaction is much more efficient than spreading positive energy online.

8.4 Conclusions

The findings presented in this chapter explain the popularity of spreading positive energy online among participants from three perspectives. First, the cultural background of positive energy suggests that the embedded socio-cultural context enhances people's awareness of the effects of being positive. Second, the psychologization perspective reflects both government involvement in cultivating nationalism among young Chinese people as well as young Chinese people's internalization of individual responsibility and duty. Third, although participants enjoy using social media and being able to present themselves and connect with others they value authenticity online against the tendency of the commercialization of mediated communication.

The youth in this study believe one can imbue others with energy. Therefore, participants value positive energy while expressing an aversion towards negative energy. They equate positive energy with a positive attitude, good luck, and inspiring online information. Correspondingly, they consider issues that can arouse participants' negative feelings are negative energy and describe individuals with negative energy as depressive, lacking in vigour, and having a negative impact on others. According to participants' cognition,

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[64] BaiduBaiKe: *Fan Pu Gui Zhen* 返璞归真 Available at:
https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E8%BF%94%E7%92%9E%E5%BD%92%E7%9C%9F/5105 (15th April 2016).

being positive and having positive energy can result in healthy mental and physical well-being. In contrast, being negative can be a symptom of being mentally ill and lacking determination.

Participants are aware that they have the responsibility to spread positive energy and to defend the image of the nation against negative portrayals of China in Western media. Popular nationalism (Liu, 2011) and filial nationalism (Fong, 2011) help to explain participants' special feeling towards their country. Popular nationalism represents individuals' respect and loyalty to their nation rather than to the CPC, and filial nationalism indicates participants see their nation as a long-suffering mother who deserves the devotion of her children even if she has flaws. Participants ascribe youth who are interested in commenting on government policies as *fen qing* and regard individuals who habitually vent personal resentment and criticize Chinese government policies as detestable. Instead, they respect and expect to have more aspiring youth who can detect social problems, as well as understand how to communicate with government agencies to solve certain social problems.

The third theme of this chapter includes participants' reflections on the notion of spreading positive energy in the context of competitive modern life. Compared with the vigorous positive energy supporters who advocate spreading positive energy when participating in online social interaction, there are laid-back youths who express personal thoughts and pursue a simple life. They have less expectation of developing a mutually encouraging situation for personal achievement through mediated communication. Meanwhile, they are vexed at the commercialization of friendship and call for online authenticity.

Chapter 9 — Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This study has combined the traditional Chinese social relational concept of face and reciprocal social ties, with the Western concept of social interaction, aiming to articulate contemporary youths' management of traditional family and community ties and their engagement in the digital environment of social media. The participants in the study were young adults studying in Beijing and the focus was their use of the social media site, WeChat. The study recognised the context of modernisation in China, including the rapid development of communication technologies. The findings demonstrate that young people's reflections and attitudes towards social media, which are an inherent part of their everyday lives, aim at doing justice to traditional values, as well as recognising the new circumstances within which they will live their lives. The overall impression is thus of young people aiming to show respect for the past, while embracing the future, and that they are enabled in this difficult task by being able to manage multiple relations at a distance through social media. What emerged was a more individualistic and pragmatic account of social relationships which, nevertheless, recognised the continuing relevance of key concepts from Chinese culture, Traditional concepts such as face, *mianzi* and *lian,* and reciprocal social relationships in the form of *guanxi,* or *renqing* still retain an important role in the way that young people make sense of, orient themselves and account for, their online social practices.

An emergent theme in the analysis of the empirical material in this project was positive energy, built on studies of concepts related to face in traditional Chinese culture. This idea originated in the online community and has been picked up by governments and returned to the online world as a way of asserting the importance of civility in online social interactions. These findings were also shown to demonstrate a number of features regarding change in the recent modernisation of China. Rising individualisation in China emerges as 'state guided' with new ideas about the relationship between collective values and individual freedoms being renegotiated by both the Chinese government and the individual participants in this study. The

meaning of individualism in China seems to be shifting from an account of rebellious and anti-authority youth to a notion of individual autonomy that means being independent in both mind and action, emphasising one's identity as an independent individual rather than a member of a community. An important theme emerging from the analysis can be identified as the way the meaning of *wen yi qing nian* has changed over time. For instance, from the 1920s to 1980s, the connotations of *wen yi qing nian* were positive, passionate, and responsible, but from the 1980s until recently, *wen yi qing nian* began to contain negative meanings and refer to individuals who are unrealistic and moan about imaginary illnesses (Yang and Huang, 2016). Participants in this study enrich the meaning of this term by suggesting being a wealthy *wen yi qing nian* represents good taste and a better life style. The willingness to be better seem to be the main factors in constructing participants' notion of being successful and saving face.

Yan (2003) suggests that rising individualism in China emphasises personal rights and overlooks people's obligations to the community, thus leading to 'incivility'. Accompanied by the 'uncivil individual' is the spread of egotism in China, and the 'primacy of personal happiness and individual realization' among Chinese youth (Yan, 2010). Much of what was said by the young participants in this research offers an alternative, more positive account of young people's sense of autonomy. The participants here expressed their ambitious aims to be 'better', with the notion of 'better' referring to living a better life as well as being competitive and emerging as 'better' than others, including one's peers. For youth in this research being 'better' is a sign of making progress, a way of propelling social mobility, which enhance their self-esteem and feel of having face.

Giddens (1991) claims that what he calls late modern society compels individuals to be self-determining, responsible for their own problems and reflective about their future development. These ideas, developed in the west to understand an emerging sense of reflexive identity were apparent in the accounts provided by the young Chinese participants in this study. This research has demonstrated that they were aware that they have responsibility for tackling their own problems as well as those of their families. Democracy and welfare are two essential elements in realising

cultural democratisation and individualism in European countries (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), but in China rising individualism is not based on democracy and welfare. People in European countries can rely on institutions and welfare to manage their anxieties and their 'ontological security' (Giddens, 1991). In contrast, young Chinese people manage conditions of ontological security through their own skill and social networks, and they are determined to achieve social mobility primarily through education. 'Moving upwards', looking after one's family and engaging with one's peers in a situation of reciprocal social interaction is what provides 'ontological security' for the youth in this research. The participants were strongly motivated by trying to achieve the social mobility necessary to enable them to live stable and prosperous lives.

9.2 *Mianzi* as Social Face, *Lian* as Moral Face

According to the young adult participants in this study, sociability is important in gaining *mianzi* from others in social interaction. The participants described two kinds of person that they consider as having high sociability. The 'kind person' refers to individuals who dare to reach out to strangers, and who quickly make friends or develop a relationship with people they meet for the first time. The other kind of person includes those individuals who do not reach out to strangers, but do develop positive relationships, both with friends and acquaintances. Participants expressed recognition of the latter kind of individual. Who individuals are socialising with, and the sustained or even the reciprocal bond in the parent child relationship, count in terms of an individual's sociability evaluation process. For the participants, being able to reach out to strangers is reflective of an outgoing personality and sociability.

Corresponding to social face, *mianzi*, is moral face, *lian*. Despite youths' need for socialisation and to share or exchange resources with others, they still believe people should follow the 'basic lines'. While these basic lines are blurred and difficult to define, and contrast with traditional morality, the participants in this study believed that following moral rules is more like making a commitment towards friendship. People who do not keep such commitments and protect their social connection represent individuals who value their dignity, which the participants name as 'you

liang xin' (have dignity). Additionally, the participants have experienced and seen immoral things both offline and online, and instead of being negative toward the moral standards of Chinese society, they understand incivility more as a social phenomenon that tends to happen during social transformation.

Almost all the participants in this research had friends who cared about their *mianzi*, and who flaunted their wealth; they also had friends who did not like to study and were jealous of the achievements of others. Interestingly, I did not encounter any youth who expressed resentment toward peers who worked hard and maintained a low social profile. On the one hand, using Goffmans' work (1959, 1967), I can understand that the participants in my research tried to present an image of being easy-going about the achievements of others and the importance of practicing self-discipline to realise personal ambition. On the other hand, subconsciously, the youth in this research may be aware that being 'positive', 'hard working', and 'having the strong determination to work for a well-provided future' are the correct and approved practices that exist alongside the moral rules that they were immersed in at school, as well as in everyday life. For example, education in China places significant importance on children's academic achievements and praises obedient children.

9.3 Independent Youth and Mediated Relationships with Parents

In this research, participants expressed their concern about their parents' presence online. On the one hand, they could be seen to carry out filial piety by creating virtual co-presence with their parents on WeChat; on the other hand, they remained aware of the necessity to present themselves in the online environment according to their parents' expectations. There are two kinds of practices which the participants developed in their online practice in order to manage the parental relationship: avoidance and correction. Both practices lead to one aim: children protecting the impression that their parents have about them.

For youth in this study, online avoidance and correction represent a Chinese way of managing intergeneration communication problems. These are peaceful and harmonious ways for managing parental relationship, which also allow for traditional filial piety. As

mainly only children, the youth in this study regard themselves as torchbearers for their family, with an awareness not of conforming to their parents' instructions but rather, appreciating their parents' efforts in raising them. When my respondents expressed understanding towards their parents for working hard to provide them with good living and study conditions, some got quite tearful. I think this is reminiscent of Hwang's (1987) work on expressive ties which acknowledges the emotional and functional needs between parents and children, and what he suggests as a reciprocal relationship. Hwang (1987) argues that the expressive component between individuals and parents always takes precedence over the instrumental component. Findings in this research support Hwang's argument, while what is worth noting is that parents are still willing to provide expressive and instrumental help to young people, while young people are working to eliminate their expressive and instrumental needs from their parents. Chinese youths' independence not only reflect their willingness to leave home and avoid being stifled by their parents, but also reflects them giving up the social networks created by family, along with a determination to develop their own social network in urban cities.

The thesis has provided material on the nature of filial piety, or the respect and care shown by children to their parents and by parents towards children. Industrialisation, urbanisation, the movement of people to urban cities, and even a new Chinese law that regulates children from visiting parents after a certain time, are all factors that might reduce the sense of duty in parent-child relationships, as young adults express their enthusiasm for individualism and develop an interest in west European culture. However, the research findings do provide a new way of understanding the relationship between Chinese parents and children. For instance, the participants can be seen as demonstrating a strong awareness and sense of respect towards their parents. Most of the time they express sympathy and gratitude to their parents for working so hard to provide a safe environment in which they could grow up in. Young people also appear to be eager to reciprocate their parents' kindness by being obedient, not worrying them, and reassuring them parents that they will have a decent future. However, in comparison to Hwang's (1987) broad definition of family which suggests kinship with parents, relatives, and even close neighbours or friends, the participants' conception of family frequently focused on the relationship with their parents. For them, parents make up their main expressive tie, are the people whom they can turn to when they have emotional needs, and who they would like to maintain a reciprocal relationship with, both in online and offline worlds.

The thesis also demonstrates that Goffman's (1959) work on team work in social relations applies to Chinese child/parent online interactions; beyond self-presentation and distinctions between public and private, the family works as a team. Self-presentational elements were evident, for instance, when the participants selectively decided what to present and what not to present on WeChat, thus managing the impression they made on their parents. From this perspective, young people can the information they express online so to leave an impression as obedient, positive, and hard-working. On the other hand, participants and their parents work as each other's online agent, supervising each other's online practices, so to present a decent image to people outside the family, including relatives.

The research findings indicate that it is inappropriate to attribute leaving family in response to parents' over caring attention or interference to young people. Children leave home to improve their educational and work opportunities and to explore possible identities. On the one hand, the participants, especially those not from Beijing but studying at second-tier universities in Beijing, frequently mentioned inequality in the university enrolment system in China, which required them to expend extra effort in becoming enrolled by the same university as their Beijing peers. Their sense or experience of inequality may either motivate them to work harder at university or force them to reproach themselves for their failure, putting their relationship with their parents under strain.

In this study, the young people who considered themselves as having failed the university entrance examination were more likely to mention their personal achievements through class ranking at university, gaining work experience in the student union, and internship experience with professional companies outside university. Not being able to enter their preferred university was a major blow to these students, causing them to spend more effort working in different areas to compensate, as they continued striving for upward social mobility through education. For the participants, education achievements presented not only a key aspect of their identity, but also increased their ontological security about both the present and the future (Giddens, 1991). Compared with hard work, which is more predictable, their anxiety around the risks they may face in the future, could lead to them making negative predictions.

The term 'possible selves' refer to an individual's anticipation of the possible identities that he/she may have based on personal experiences and self-knowledge (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Possible selves are different from ideal selves which concentrate on the positive side of one's future self, as an individual's anticipation of the future also involves elements that the individual tries to avoid and is afraid to experience (Bak, 2015). The positive anticipation of future and self refers to the hoped-for self, and concerns and fears about the future reflect the feared self (Bak, 2015). For the participants, their possible selves could be said to include both the hoped-for self, which would achieve self-improvement, enhance self-esteem, and bring honour to the family, as well as eliminate discrimination of him/herself and their family. It is normal to have fears and anxieties, but most of the participants were experiencing anxiety due to risky and unpredictable futures (Giddens, 1991).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) observe that a risk society begins when tradition ends as the loss of traditional security makes people anxious about their unpredictable future. The colonisation of the future is one way in which parents try to manage personal anxiety, for by investing in their children, parents can experience their own ambitions and dreams. The notion that children should have better things is not only about having an ambition for the children, but also for the parents themselves (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). The participants in this study repeatedly emphasised this point by suggesting that their mission was to be better and to achieve upward social mobility. When I reflect on the Chinese notion of the 'future of the mother country', I wonder whether it is just parents who take children as their dream carriers, or whether there is a broader social responsibility for easing social tension during the period of China's modernisation.

The young Chinese people in my studies also feared being like their parents' generation whom they considered as lacking individuality, thinking that their parents spent extra (but meaningless) effort managing social relations with others, especially managing kinship ties. Fei (1948) considers kinship as one of the most important relationships that the Chinese people have. Wang (2008) explains that people born in the 1960s' have an attitude towards kinship echoing *da gong wu si* (prioritize the public and neglect the private), which goes against the Chinese tradition of respecting the broader family or kinship group, while becoming increasingly dependent on their own self to find a job and

make a living. Wang (2008) argues that after struggling with the tensions between collectivism and individualism, when people who were born in the 1960s recall the past and contrast it with the present, they decide to spend more effort on maintaining relationships with their kin in a return to Chinese cultural traditions. However, compared with people who were born in China in the 1960s, and tend to have siblings, the current generation of young people in China are more likely to be only children, which makes it 'difficult' to manage relationships with relatives, especially relationships with the older generations and broader family.

My research therefore reflects the narrowing range of kinship and strengthening of the relationship ties between parents and children. The participants have documented how this narrowing of 'family' increases pressure on both parents and children. Parents spend more effort ensuring children are developing in the right way as to improve their social position, and children carry a greater obligation to please their parents and take care of them in the future. Fei (1948) notes that the scope of the 'family' circle depends on individuals' ability to provide favours, resources and assistance to others. For instance, people who are wealthy and from a high status background, may have an extended 'family' made up of both close kinship ties, more remote relations, neighbours, and other people they are connected with. My research findings indicate a weakening of the breadth of family ties among Chinese people, and the prevalence of smaller families. As participant 32 noted "We still carry out what we should do in front of my aunts and uncles, while in the deep mind we all know we are not that close, and that we are all thinking about our own family."

9.4 Mediated Friendship

Most participants in this research narrated themselves as open-minded and magnanimous in dealing with the flexible friendship networks that they sustain online. Some noted that they care more about friendships that can provide immediate help, and which involve face to face interaction. However, some participants can be perceived as actively developing mediated interaction rituals to connect with people whom they consider as beneficial and work hard to sustain relationships with their online contacts. Reflecting on the intimate co-present interaction that Chinese youth need from close friends and their calm in the

face of weakening friendship bonds, I would like to explain my interpretation of this phenomenon from three perspectives.

First, is the high level of educational mobility in China. Social mobility can be seen as salient to participants, reflecting the many media reports about migrant workers and students in China. Many young Chinese leave home and are determined to work and live in an urban city. The inequality present in rural villages and urban cities has resulted in a rising number of migrant students in China (Lai et al. 2014). In fact, most of the participants not local to Beijing can be identified as migrant students and some talked about the experience of inequality in the College Entrance Examination; for example, needing to achieve a higher score than people from other places to be enrolled in the same university. In addition, what awaits them in the future is the inequality caused by the *hukou* system. High levels of educational mobility are accompanied by fragile relationships among Chinese young people, separating them from classmates much more than in their parents' generation (McDonald, 2016). On the other hand, such experiences make individuals develop as people, so therefore, it is not surprising that the participants expressed a passion to be friends with others, while also demonstrating a calm way of dealing with disconnected friendships, which they attributed to a "life change".

Second, the changing social structure in China and rise of an expanded elite group is a major change being experienced by the younger generation. For instance, in Mao's era, workers and peasants were elites, while landowners and intellectuals were considered as low social classes. In contrast, in contemporary China, landowners and intellectuals are elites while workers and peasants belong to a relatively lower class. Apparently, young people are experiencing this social change, which leads them to emphasise the importance of education and preference of connecting with people who go to similar ranking universities as them. History repeats itself in amazing ways, as elite groups increase the barriers to entry and limit their interactions with people from lower classes (Granovetter, 1973). In this study, participants can be seen as having the ambition to connect with people whom they consider as equal or better than them, meaning the need work their way upwards, and eventually enter their ideal social circle. As participants explain, in the *guanxi* society, they need people from different areas to meet their different needs. The contributions from participants in this thesis demonstrate the value of social media in achieving a balance between these competing tendencies.

When people create an instrumental social network, their friendships and relationships become fragile. As Hwang (1987) notes, people with instrumental ties work together to meet personal goals and depart after the goal is achieved. Hwang (1987) distinguishes instrument ties from mixed ties, with the involvement of *renqing*, the emotion through which people affect other's social practices and create reciprocal obligations in relationships. As Zhai (2005) suggests, underlying *renqing* exchange or emotional communication is the context for resources and power in society. My particpants understood this notion, frequently mentioning the "competitive world" and "competitive society" as well as how their anxiety about the future gives them an imperative to connect with others for instrumental reasons, and then to include affection and affiliation so as to strengthen their relationships. In summary, even after more than half a century, Fei's (1948) work on the differential pattern of affiliative social ties still explains Chinese people's social networks, including how individuals' social networks are relatively small when they are in a disadvantaged position in society. The Chinese term *'ren qing leng nuan'* (the fickleness of human nature) explains this youthful interpretation of the fragility of friendship.

Third, is the fragility of mediated relationships. The participants demonstrated that the majority of Chinese youths' online connections develop from an offline *guanxi* base, especially among classmates. Social media platforms like WeChat enable people to renew their relationships with previous classmates and maintain relationships with large sets of weak ties at a low cost (Ellison et al. 2014). The issue raised by my participants was that although people enjoy the convenience of using social media, the emotional and psychological costs have increased, especially when participants expect immediate symmetrical and personalized responses from others to prove the strength of their relationship and the position they occupy in others' social networks. Participants' anxiety in responding to friends' online posts makes me think of a question proposed by Turkle (2011) as to whether the intensive use of mobile and social media is narrowing our sights and causing loneliness.

9.5 Positive Energy

Positive energy emerged as a theme in my data analysis and was shown to be a potential new norm for social interaction in Chinese society. In the thesis, I documented the change in positive energy from an online meme to a political discourse, which then became a social interaction norm linked to support for the nation in a more individualised society. However, according to participants' discussions of positive energy, it did not seem they were aware or prepared to discuss the state's influence on promoting positive energy in cyberspace and in social life. The participants in this research tended to view positive energy from a psychological perspective as a matter of personality and attitude. For the participants in this study, being positive in this respect emerged as an ideal status. In addition to self-consciously managing online social practices to give an impression of being positive, participants also expressed disdain towards individuals who are negative, considering them as having psychological problems. Yang (2013) suggests that the Chinese government adopted psychologisation as a political tool promoting 'fake happiness' among marginalized groups, thus encouraging them manage their internal struggles alone. In my research, positive energy may also have emerged as a kind of psychologisation. Indeed, it appears to have been internalised by Chinese people as a self-comforting attitude.

However, this focus on positive energy is complemented by a focus on the importance of authenticity, with participants reflecting on being positive and consciously managing mediated relationships with others. The young people in this research called for authenticity in social communication along with skills in self-presentation. They also expressed concerns about the need to make communication easier rather than adding too many commercial elements to online interactions.

9.6 Reflection on this study

As I discussed in the methodology chapter, the researcher's identity might have an influence on participants' responses during interview. The participants in this research frequently praised the living standards as well as welfare service in China.

I am not sure whether the participants in this research made these statements because they know I am studying in England or if they simply overestimate the benefits of welfare services and freedom of individuals in other cultures. If they provided these statements because of my identity, then we can understand that statements are social gestures to present politeness and maintain my face in social interaction. To be polite, I should have stated that western culture is not as ideal as the media describes, and compliment the comfort and convenience they enjoy in China. Take the statement by participant 19 (male, aged 24, first-tire university) as an example, when he noted, 'I am the middle level', I could not just ignore his statement and carry on asking the next question. No one would like to consider himself a second-class citizen or student; the reason participant 19 provided that statement ca due to his politeness in downgrading himself a little bit to compliment the interviewer. Hence, the interviewer should have noticed this signal and praised him for working hard and managing to undertake postgraduate study in Beijing after working for a year. If the participants were overestimating the benefits that exist in western culture, then they might need to be made aware that factors like face, social comparison, and competitive job markets exist not only in China but also in other countries. What makes each culture interesting is the possibility of learning about the characteristic ways in which people deal with these social interaction factors, and what motivates them to do so.

Additionally, a questionnaire based on the qualitative research findings might be helpful in increasing the generalisability of these findings through survey research. Despite this, I still believe qualitative research enabled the participants to record the varieties of reflections that participants have on face, social ties, and the use of social media. A questionnaire can also help validate the findings and increase the generalisability, although I think it is better to distribute surveys in person rather than conduct an online survey. Participants in this research noted an increasing number of research using university students as research samples that tend to use online surveys. Online survey distribution is based on individuals' social networks, which may result in researchers' indulgence in getting more respondents, while respondents who take part in as favour to friends without necessarily interest in the research.

9.7 Future Research

A number of issues emerged but were not able to be developed in the interviews I conducted for this research. For example, one was the high mental line of defence by people in China. One possible explanation for this is the traditional collective culture influence. As Fei (1948) notes, the differential pattern relationship among Chinese people means that Chinese people have a higher tendency to rely upon people who they are familiar with and a need to avoid or keep their distance from strangers. For instance, the reason Chinese people create *guanxi* or develop relationships from a *guanxi* base is because the underlying connection ensures them feelings of familiarity and trust. Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 6, the morality change in contemporary China has given rise to a question of a morality crisis in China (Yan, 2003) and trust issues for the Chinese people (Yan, 2010). Whom to trust and be close friends with has become an important decision to make, while in the meanwhile, how to present an impression as a trustworthy person has become an essential task for youth to learn and to practice.

Being funny and presenting a sense of humour is a kind of mediated online interaction ritual. As Goffman (1967) notes, in interaction rituals, even a glance between friends can be ritualised. There are no universal rules defining whether an individual is interesting or has a sense of humour or not. As Goffman notes, an individual within a group can understand the meaning of another member's glance. Therefore, presenting the funny and humorous aspects of life to one's close friends is ubiquitous among Chinese youth, for it presents a favourable image and prevents the possibility of online embarrassment.

The other research area worthy of further exploration is the commercialisation of online relationships. Further back in this research, all participants noted they connected with at least one *Weishang* and have one friend who is *Weishang*. For participants in this study, *Weishang* refers to individuals who advertise on WeiChat Moments and sell products to WeChat connections. In China, *Weishang* refers to 'We Business', which is a kind of marketing model based on an individual and shared economy. It is a new kind of people-centred business based on mobile Internet space, using social software as a tool. The Chair of the Chinese *Weishang* Association Ling Lin Feng spoke at the 2017 *Weishang* Worlds Conference, stating that in *Weishang* business will be the future business pattern. The

rising *Weishang* business also corresponds to Chambers' (2013) suggestion that 'commercialization', 'privacy' and 'trust' would be the forefront themes for future discussions on 'friendship.

The other point that I would like to note is Chinese young people's awareness of Chinese ancient philosophy. Yan (2010, p. 492) points out Maoist socialism in China disconnected individuals from their "traditional, networks, of family, kinship, and community and the constraints of the traditional, mostly Confucian and patriarchal, value and behavioural norms." In contemporary China, the state encourages individuals to reinvent the individual as a citizen of a nation state, not merely as a member of a family. For instance, by suggesting the country is the *zu guo mu qi* (mother nation), and referring to Chinese citizens as *zhong hua er nv* (the sons and daughters of China), Chinese citizens' social role has shifted from being members of a key family to being members of national-state family (Liu, 2011). The way the government reframes the traditional concept that it once discouraged, and turn it into a new notion for enhancing nationalism and contentment among its citizens worth further exploration.

Appendix 1: Online Advert (Translation)

Dear Students:

I am a Ph.D. students from Media and Communication Department at University of Leicester.

I am collecting data for my Ph.D. work which needs your participation.

My thesis is about Chinese youth' understanding of mianzi, and their use of WeChat. The main research method is one to one face to face in-depth interviewing. I might need to check your WeChat Moments as well as make audio record of this interview. Each interview would last 45 mins.

If you are WeChat user, interested in participation, or want to know further information please contact. （Researcher's phone number, and the Research WeChat QR code）.

If you are interested in studying abroad, I would like to provide something after the interview.

Researcher: Shuhan Chen
Date: 25/09/2015.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

When Traditional Concept Meets New Media: An In-depth Interview Study on Chinese Youth' Understanding of Face and Use of WeChat

My name is Shuhan Chen and I am conducting this research as a Ph.D. student from the Media and Communication Department at University of Leicester, Leicester, England.

What is the study about?

The aim of this study to explore the Chinese young people's reflection on the traditional social interaction concept with the use of social media. The face practices (*lian/mianzi*) is almost a cultural phenomenon in China, which plays an important role in Chinese people's social life. Chinese young people (18-24years old) who are known as digital natives have developed their native way in using social media. By selecting WeChat as the social media platform, researcher aims to capture Chinese young people's reflection on the concept of face and their face practices in everyday life, especially on WeChat.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

An appropriately 45mins in-depth interview will take place between researcher and participant. The only thing that interviewee need to do during the interview is to feel comfort and feel free to express their understandings and reflections on the research topics

The researcher will invite participants to present their WeChat Moments (*Peng You Quan*) at the later stage of the interview. By referring to interviewees' online posts, interviewees may need to explain reasons for creating certain posts, the expectations they have, the responses they have received, and their reflections on these responses. Researcher will invite participants to take some screenshots of their WeChat posts after the interview.

After the interview, the researcher would like to connect with interviewee on WeChat with interviewees' confirmation. Interviewees have the right to refuse this request if they

do not feel like to do so. The interviewer will observe participants' practices on WeChat for three months after the interview date, keep interviewees updated with the interview transcript progress, and interviewees can contact interviewer on WeChat whenever they have concerns and questions about their participation and the research.

Will my data be Identifiable?

The information you provide is confidential. The data collected for this study will be stored securely and only the researchers conducting this study will have access to this data:

- o Audio recordings will be destroyed and/or deleted once the project has been submitted for publication/examined *[by the final submission of Shuhan Chen's Ph.D thesis]*.
- o The screenshots and Images that are collected will be used anonymised in data analysis. Researcher will blur any identifying personal information, such as cover the WeChat name of individual and cover the eye of figures in the photographs.
- o The typed version of your interview will be made anonymous by removing any identifying information including your name. Anonymised direct quotations from your interview may be used in the reports or publications from the study, so your name will not be attached to them.
- o All your personal data will be confidential and will be kept separately from your interview responses.
- o The files on the computer will be encrypted (that is no-one other than the researcher will be able to access them) and the computer itself password protected.

What will happen to the results?

The results will be summarised and reported in my Ph.D. thesis and may be submitted for publication in an academic or professional journal.

Are there any risks?

There are no risks anticipated with participating in this study. However, if you experience any distress following participation you are encouraged to inform the researcher and contact the resources provided at the end of this sheet.

Are there any benefits to taking part?

Although you may find participating interesting, there are no direct benefits in taking part.

Who has reviewed the project?

This study has been reviewed by the Department of Media, Communication, and Sociology, and the approved by the Department Research Ethics Committee at University of Leicester.

If you wish to make a complaint or raise concerns about any aspect of this study and do not want to speak to the researcher, you can contact:

My Ph.D. supervisor: Professor. Peter Lunt.
Email: Pl108@le.ac.uk
Phone:0116 252 3863
Address: 132 New Walk, Leicester LE1 7JA

Appendix 3: Consent Form for Interviews

CONSENT FORM FOR [NAME OF PROJECT]

Please tick the appropriate boxes	Yes	No
Taking Part		
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated DD/MM/YYYY.		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to connect with researcher on WeChat and participate in participant observation		
I agree to take part in the project. Taking part in the project will include being interviewed and recorded (audio or video)[a]		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary; I can withdraw from the study at any time and I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part.		
Use of the information I provide for this project only		
I understand my personal details such as phone number and address will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs.		
Please choose one *of the following two options:*		
I would like my real name used in the above		
I would **not** like my real name to be used in the above.		
Use of the information I provide beyond this project		
I agree for the data I provide to be archived by the researcher		
I understand that other genuine researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		

So we can use the information you provide legally		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials related to this project to [Shuhan Chen].		

Name of participant…………………………………….

Signature …………………………………….Date ………………………

Researcher ……*Shuhan Chen*……………….

Signature …………*Shuhan Chen*…………………………. Date ………………

Project contact details for further information: Names, phone, email addresses, etc.

Notes:

a Other forms of participation can be listed.

b More detail can be provided here so that decisions can be made separately about audio, video,

   transcripts, etc.

Adapted from UK Data Archive (2011) 'Managing and Sharing Data: Best Practice for Researchers   (available   at   http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/media/2894/managingsharing.pdf).

Appendix 4: Interviewee Information Form (Sept. 2015-Oct. 2015)

Participant	Interview Time	Age	Gender	Year of study	University	Family Background	Social media use
1	Sept 8th	22	Male	First year PG	BIGC	Zhe Jiang	WeChat Weibo QQ Blog
2	Sept 8th	21	Female	Second year UG	BIGC	Beijing	WeChat Weibo Rarely use QQ
3	Sept 9th	23	Female	First year PG	BIGC	Ji Lin	WeiChat Weibo
4	Sept 9th	23	Female	First year PG	BIGC	ShanXi	Fan page WeChat Weibo QQ
5	Sept 10th	23	Female	Second year PG	BIGC	Shanxi	WeChat Weibo QQ
6	Sept 11th	20	Female	Second year UG	BIGC	Heilong Jiang, HaErBin	WeChat QQ
7	Sept 11th	20	Male	Second year UG	BIGC	GuangDong	WeChat QQ

8	Sept 11th	21	Female	Second year UG	BIGC	HeBei	WeChat QQ Tieba BBS
9	Sept 12th	21	Female	First year UG	BIGC	Ji Lin	WeChat QQ
10	Sept 12th	21	Female	First year UG	BIGC	He Nan	QQ WeChat
11	Sept 13th	19	Female	First year UG	BIGC	HaErBin	WeChat QQ
12	Sept 13th	20	Male	First year UG	BIGC	Shan Dong	WeChat QQ
13	Sept 14th	22	Male	First year UG	BIGC	Hu Bei	WeChat QQ
14	Sept 14th	22	Male	First year UG	BIGC	Guang Dong	WeChat QQ
15	Sept 14th	23	Female	First year PG	BIGC	HeNan	WeChat Weibo QQ
16	Sept 15th	21	Female	First year UG	BIGC	Hei Long Jiang	WeChat
17	Sept 16th	24	Male	First year PG	BIGC	Beijing	WeChat
18	Sept 16th	24	Male	First year PG	BIGC	He Nan	WeChat QQ
19	Sept 16th	24	Male	First year PG	CUMT	Nei Meng Gu	WeChat QQ
20	Sept 17th	24	Male	Fourth Year UG	BIGC	Gan Su	WeChat QQ Tie Ba (BBS

21	Sept 17th	24	Female	Second year PG	PU	Guang Dong	WeChat qq
22	Sept 18th	21	Male	First year PG	CNU	Zhe Jiang	WeChat qq
23	Sept 18th	22	Female	Second year UG	RMU	Beijing	WeChat Weibo QQ
24	Sept 18th	21	Female	Second year UG	PU	Jiang Xi	Weibo WeChat QQ
25	Sept 19th	23	Female	Second year UG	PU	Nei Meng	Weibo WeChat QQ
26	Sept 19th	20	Female	First year UG	BIGC	HeNana	WeChat Weibo QQ
27	Sept 20th	22	Male	First year PG	PU	Guangzhou	WeChat QQ BBS
28	Sept 21	23	Male	First year PG	PU	Hunan	WeChat
29	Sept 22nd	24	Female	First year PG	PU	Nei Meng	WeChat QQ
30	Sept 23rd	20	Male	First year UG	CNU	HeNan	WeChat QQ
31	Sept 24th	24	Male	First year PG	CNU	HeNan	WeChat QQ

32	Sept 26th	22	Male	First year PG	BUPT	Shang Dong	WeChat QQ Weibo
33	Sept 27th	23	Male	First year PG	BUPT	He Nan	WeChat
34	Sept 28th	22	Female	First year PG	BUPT	TaiYuan	WeChat
35	Sept 28th	22	Male	First year PG	BUPT	Henan	WeChat QQ
36	Sept 29th	22	Female	First year PG	BUPT	Henan	WeChat
37	Sept 29th	22	Female	First year PG	BIGC	Henan	WeChat
38	Oct 8th	20	Female	Second year UG	RMU	Henan	WeChat
39	Oct 9th	22	Male	First year PG	RMU	Anhui	WeChat QQ
40	Oct 9th	19	Female	First year UG	CUMT	Anhui	WeChat Weibo
41	Oct 10th	23	Female	First year PG	CNU	Zhejiang	WeChat QQ
42	Oct 12th	20	Male	Third year UG	CNU	NeiMeng	WeChat QQ

Notes:

UG: Undergraduate Students

PG: Postgraduate Students

BIGC: Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication

BUPT: Beijing University of Posts and Telecommunications

CUMT: China University of Mining and Technology

CNU: Capital Normal University

PU: Peking University

RMU: Ren Min University

Participants who take part in Participant Observation and Mediated Interviewing				
Participant 1	Participant 2	*Participant 3*	Participant4	Participant 6
Participant 10	Participant 11	Participant 14	*Participant 15*	*Participant 19*
Participant 20	*Participant 23*	Participant 24	Participant 25	Participant 29
Participant 30	*Participant 31*	*Participant 32*	*Participant 34*	*Participant 37*

Note: Number of Participants who took part in Mediated Interviewing are highlighted in Bold and Italic

Appendix 5: Initial sub-themes (code)for Transcribed Interview

Face:

1. Important
2. Diu Ren (loss of face)
3. Proud
4. Parents
5. Education and score
6. Wealth
7. Nice Appearance
8. Others

Social Ties:

1. Online Connections
2. Parents' expectation
3. *Quanzi* (social circle)
4. Exchange Information
5. Beneficial Relationship
6. Close friends
7. Likes and Comments
8. Dou (Funny)

Positive Energy

Appendix 6: Frequently used interview questions:

1. What do you think *mianzi/lian* is?
2. Have you experience the issues that make you have *lian/mianzi* or loss *lian/mianzi*?
3. Who do you think have *lian/mianzi*?
4. Who do you think do not have *lian/mianzi*?
5. What kind of online practices make you feel of having *lian/mianzi*?
6. What kind of online practices that make you feel loss *lian/mianzi*?
7. Do you think people's online practices makes them loss/have *mianzi/lian*?
8. What others' practices on WeChat you like/dislike?
9. What others' o practices on WeChat that you do not like?
10. What kind of post do you like to create on WeChat?

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