Like a "Frog in a well"? An ethnographic study of Chinese rural women's social media practices through the WeChat platform

Yini Wang & Judith Sandner

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

Like a "Frog in a well"? An ethnographic study of Chinese rural women's social media practices through the WeChat platform

Yini Wang[a]* and Judith Sandner[b]

[a]*Hunan University, Changsha, China;* [b]*University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia*

In the Chinese context, prior research has investigated internal migrants' and rural residents' uses of information and communication technologies (ICT), but studies on rural women's social media practice are rare. Moreover, the role that social media platforms, such as WeChat, play in rural women's everyday lives and their transformations based on their online interactions lack a qualitative nuanced account. Based on an original study that explored the use of WeChat by 25 rural women aged from 40 to 52 years in Hanpu Town in south-central China, the data explored in the present study were collected during a 5.5-month period in 2015. Contextualizing this sample of rural women's platformized interests within the socio-political framework of Chinese government Internet Plus strategies, the discussion considers how the women used (and were likely to continue to use) WeChat to engage in online activities related to their offline experiences, thus aligning them with entrenched Chinese socio-cultural values. An ethnographic fieldwork methodology and a social constructionist theoretical framework were used to investigate these rural Chinese women's daily experiences in using WeChat. The findings provide evidence of their knowledge-building, business acumen, emotive communicating, and new levels of self-awareness through using WeChat.

Keywords: social media; WeChat; rural women; platformization; Internet Plus

Introduction

People like us are already "frogs in a well," seldom going out. If we want to entertain, we entertain close by. In this [WeChat], [I] can learn a lot of things. Sometimes, like classmates, posting photos of them going out, and … something reposted, knowledge I have learned [from this], quite helps! It is usually difficult to see these, if it is not through *WeChat*, I rarely get in touch with these things.

– Xin Huang, Participant[1]

In the Chinese idiom "a frog in a well," the frog is not a good model of learning. Narrow-minded and short-sighted, the frog is ensconced in his stinky well and even brags about his living environment to the turtle of the Eastern Sea. Only after the turtle tells him how deep and extensive the sea is does he realize how shallow he is (Shanshan Yang, 2016). By initially comparing herself to this character, paradoxically, research participant Xin Huang demonstrates both the limitations of her social position and a new-found awareness of it, which the platform WeChat enables. The difference between Xin Huang and the frog in the well is that WeChat has the capacity to connect her to broad community networks and information, thus helping her to feel less isolated and potentially socially cultivated.

---

*Corresponding author. Email: yini_wang@hnu.edu.cn

Chinese social media platforms have been designed to offer a plethora of net-working functions, and they have been developed to align with key political and economic incentives in order to facilitate certain patterns of user behavior (Stockmann & Luo, 2017). WeChat, the most popular Chinese social media plat-form, was launched by the Internet business tycoons Tencent in 2011 (Tencent & CAICT, 2015). It offers multifarious services, including instant messaging, social networking, reading, shopping, gaming, taxiing, and online banking options. Regarded as a platform that builds networks of private and close social contacts (Harwit, 2016), its popularity has expanded in recent years. However, the ways in which the platform has affected and has been adopted by rural Chinese women remains largely unexplored. Prior research has investigated the uses of information and communication technologies (ICT) and social media by internal rural migrants (Wallis, 2013; X. Wang, 2016) and rural residents (Oreglia, 2012, 2014; Wallis, 2015). Oreglia (2012, 2014) found that the use of ICTs by rural people was motivated by entertainment and communication incentives and enhanced their social, economic, and educational opportunities. However, older women were always marginalized by the rural patriarchy. Wallis's (2013, 2015) exploration of female migrant workers in the city and rural entrepreneurs in the countryside revealed that engagement with the Internet and mobile phones reproduced gender hierarchies. Unlike their male peers, entrepreneurs used their mobile phones mainly to maintain their limited social networks rather than to expand them, to enhance their business, or participate in informal learning. X. Wang's (2016, p. 154) textual analyses of social media postings shared by Chinese rural migrants showed that "social media has served to reinforce, disrupt or simply shift gender roles in different situations". Wallis's (2018) more recent ethnographic analysis demonstrated the empowering role of social media in enabling therapeutic emo-tional expression and individual encouragement in female domestic workers in Beijing. These previous findings suggest that new media platforms may be both promising and constraining for rural Chinese women. Through its various affor-dances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), could WeChat be considered an empowering and transformative tool especially for rural Chinese women, such as Xin Huang? Contextualizing these rural women's platformized (van Dijck, 2012) interests within the socio-political framework of Chinese government Internet Plus strat-egies, the discussion considers how the women used (and were likely to continue to use) WeChat to engage in online activities related to their offline experiences, thus aligning them with entrenched Chinese socio-cultural values.

Technology and the Chinese rural context

Since the 1980s, rural urbanization and industrialization in China have led to the considerable growth of the rural economy particularly during the early 2000s (Shen, 2006). Investment in infrastructure construction and social development in rural areas has further modernized rural centers (Chen, 2010). A prominent achievement has been the proliferation of ICTs, which resulted from the imple-mentation of government supported informatization programs (Liu, 2016) that were aligned with the broad blueprint of promoting the development of the infor-mation economy (CAICT, 2016b). There has also been rapid growth in the Internet and social media use in China's rural regions. According to the Chinese

Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2018), by the end of 2017, the number of rural Internet users reached 219 million, accounting for 27% of the overall 772 million Internet users in China. WeChat was the most popular networking application among the rural population, attracting 27.9% of users and far exceeding the Twitter-like microblogging platform Weibo (CNNIC, 2017).

Corresponding to the Chinese government's strategic Internet Plus project, which was unveiled in July 2015, Tencent initiated the Internet Plus Countryside model a month later. This model was designed to increase rural interconnectedness to not only information, but also "emotion" and "fortune" to "achieve leapfrog development in the countryside in virtue of mobile Internet" (Feng, 2015). WeChat, the flagship product of Tencent, has without doubt become the buttress of this plan because of its social, mobile, localized appeal (Negro, 2017). This platform has penetrated the political, social, and economic lives of ordinary rural Chinese people (CAICT, 2016a). With its wide endorsement, WeChat may well indicate what the China Academy of Information and Communications Technology (CAICT, 2016a) referred to as the platformization of Internet businesses in China. Daily activities, such as information seeking, social networking, reading, learning, seeing a doctor, shopping, and enjoying entertainment, are facilitated through WeChat's platform capabilities.

Rural Chinese women

Since the upsurge in China's Internet economy, the opportunities and challenges brought to rural Chinese women by social media platforms, such as WeChat, are both similar to and different from those at the national level. Although rural urbanization and informatization have highly improved the rural economy and living standards, the 60-year implementation of the household *hukou* registration system[2] has created entrenched rural and urban structural inequalities (Wu & Treiman, 2007), which have caused rural residents to be less entitled than their urban counterparts are with regard to employment, education, medical services, and social welfare (Li & Tsang, 2003). Discrimination motivated by gender distinction has also affected rural Chinese women's education and employment opportunities, and they have been regarded as less valuable than their rural male counterparts (Li & Tsang, 2003). For those born in the 1960s and 1970s, when equal rights for Chinese women were arguably neglected and resources were limited, there was only a slim chance of their self-betterment through education and employment. Additionally, because they live in a patriarchal society that is based on Confucian cultural values, rural Chinese women are also bound by the role of "housewife" (Zhang, 2014), in which prescribed duties and codes of conduct underpin their social responsibilities. Because of these institutional, historical, and socio-cultural factors, this cohort of rural Chinese women could potentially be considered disadvantaged, similar to "a frog in a well … confined to the limits of [a] hole" (Shanshan Yang, 2016), compared with the younger generation of rural Chinese women, their rural male counterparts, and urban citizens. However, because of the penetration of Internet services and mobile phones in rural areas, these elder women have gained access to WeChat through their smartphones. What might this access mean for some of these women according to their individual motivations for both overcoming social boundaries and working within them?

Ethnographic methodology

Twenty-five rural women aged from 40 to 52 years living in the township of Changsha, China participated in the broad research project on which this paper is based. An ethnographic fieldwork methodology (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and a social constructionist theoretical framework (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008) were used to investigate these rural Chinese women's daily experiences in using WeChat. The 25 participants were selected through opportunistic and snowball (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) sampling methods. The initial contact was made through the ethnographer's (Wang's) existing town-based offline and online social networks, and extra recruitment occurred through introductions by the participating women. Among the participants, no one had attended university, one had a college degree, two had vocational training, and three had finished high school. Fifteen had gone to middle school, but three had withdrawn. Four had attended primary school, and one had withdrawn in her fifth year. The main reason for their incomplete schooling was that their families were too poor to fund their educations, and in many cases, a family had more than one child to feed. All participants were married with children, and they had never migrated to the city. Although they lived in the countryside, some differed from traditional peasants who worked exclusively on farms and fed livestock.

Between February and July 2015, online participant observations of WeChat interactions and 50 face-to-face in-depth interviews took place. The participant observations focused on the online space, which is considered a legitimate field site in ethnographical research (Hjorth, Horst, Galloway, & Bell, 2017). On WeChat Moments, users post texts, photos, short videos, and web links to share aspects of their everyday lives. WeChat users can also subscribe to various official accounts that produce news and other user created content, and they share what they find on these accounts on Moments. Reading posts from participants, liking, reposting, commenting on them, and having conversations about the posts (via other social media platforms) allowed the ethnographer to obtain rich first-order constructs[3] (Schutz, 1962), gain insights into the data, and build and maintain good relationships with the participants (Baker, 2013). Texts, photos, videos, links, conversations, and a vast range of threads posted by the women were captured using screenshots (1927 in total) and NCapture (789 links), which is a feature of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) *NVivo* (Ezzy, 2013). The results were categorized, codified, and subsequently analyzed after follow-up interviews, during which the motivations for much of their communication on WeChat were identified.

Motivations for rural women to use *WeChat*

Managing/marketing rural businesses with WeChat

Firms can use WeChat as a platform to market products and maintain customer relationships (Shuai Yang, Chen, & Li, 2016). Ordinary WeChat users also sell products through WeChat's official accounts and Moments (Fan & Cao, 2017). This developing phenomenon of doing business through social media platforms is widely called "*weishang*" or "micro-business" in China. The terms *"weishang"* or "micro-businessperson" are also used to denote the salespersons. Ng, Huang, and Liu (2016) identified three types of business models adopted by salespersons on WeChat: delivery-by-producer *weishang*; agent *weishang*; and purchase-on-behalf *weishang*. The rural women who sold commodities on WeChat did not fall into

these categories, yet they undoubtedly tried to benefit from social media marketing by using their nascent skills. Ten women ran small businesses with their husbands, which ranged from a stationery and convenience store to a hardware store, a noodle shop, butchery, fishing gear store, clothing shop, home appliance repair store, electronic appliance store, and a mahjong parlor, in Hanpu Town. These shops were mainly based in the women's houses in different areas of the region. Five women had adopted WeChat as a potential platform for promoting their traditional businesses based in their physical stores, which was observed in three main online activities: exhibiting products on Moments; communicating on WeChat; and learning strategies from official accounts.

Xia Zhang had been running a clothing shop for 16 years in Shizilu, the center of Hanpu Town. She named her store after her real first name; it sold both men and women's clothing. Until 2014, Xia Zhang had managed her business without the assistance of digital technology with the exception of mobile phone calls. Then she employed WeChat to increase her business profile, display products, learn strategies, and communicate with suppliers and customers. Her transformation did not occur immediately after she registered her WeChat account. A year after adopting WeChat in her business, she was still adjusting to this new phenomenon. She did not realize that using WeChat would become so valuable until her customers asked her to use it so they could get information about her products. Xia Zhang explained:

> Now many others are using WeChat. [They] say, I manage this business. They ask, do you have WeChat? I think it's like if you don't use WeChat, you don't keep up with the pace! So catering to everyone's need, I've added this stuff. I didn't use it before.

With her 16-year-old daughter's help, Xia Zhang set up a business profile to promote her clothing store. She used the name of the business as her WeChat name, and she posted a picture of the shop as her profile photo. In the What's Up section, she wrote the following appeal: the "most beautiful clothes are about to set off your very pretty and charming figure. Come quickly to ×× clothing store and have a look." A new type of business started to unfold as a matter of course. Xia Zhang's WeChat contacts extended from her relatives to suppliers, other businesses, and customers. She discussed the availability of clothing styles and sizes, negotiated prices and meeting times for stocking products, and considered promotional strategies with wholesalers. She also observed how other business operators promoted their businesses on Moments. She subscribed to official accounts, such as "Teach You How to Dress," and acquired additional sales skills. Xia Zhang learned to provide customized services for clients; she chose new styles that suited individual customers and sent them photos privately on WeChat. This technique kept her customers informed and provided personalized recommendations. However, Xia Zhang exhibited her commodities with photos on Moments only after her customers had requested her to do so. She explained:

> Some people came and said, "You have new arrivals?! I don't know when you have new arrivals and what they look like! You [should] post on that [Moments] so that I can see if you have what I like." Some people are lazy to come. They see you stock new goods, they come.

The consumption behavior of Xia Zhang's customers had been shaped by her popular social networking business or *weishang*. They experienced the facility of

online shopping from other merchants, such as *weishang*, and they expected a similar service to be provided. Xia Zhang chose to share only one group of photos of new arrivals on Moments each time to avoid annoying her customers. She reasoned that posting these exclusive photos on WeChat was more convenient for her customers because they did not have to come to the physical store to see if there were clothes that they wanted to buy. They could view the new styles on Moments and then visit her store in person. WeChat acted as an online window to her offline store, which not only cultivated more personal connections with existing customers, but also drew the attention of potential new customers who visited her clothing shop. Nonetheless, Xia Zhang was conservative in adopting other innovative ways of showcasing products on Moments, such as videos. When she saw that her supplier had posted a video showing customers snapping up clothes in a store, she commented:

> I saw what was hot fashion yesterday, the scene of snapping up clothes … showing clothes were all sold out, you need to make a reservation. I was thinking, whether that was true or not … [A]s a merchant, managing a business, in fact I need to learn from that. But I haven't adapted to it yet. Maybe I would get there this year. I have the intention, but I haven't started it. I just got to this last year. It seems like everything will go well if I start posting like that. Looks like it is very easy, like an everyday job, but I haven't got accustomed to this yet.

Fang Liu, the owner of a convenience store in the Hanpu community, was more proactive than Xia Zhang in adopting WeChat to generate offline business. For instance, shortly after she posted a photo of two bottles of her newly stocked beer products, Fang Liu wrote a positively themed comment to entice customers: "Soloking beer. Tasty. Convenient. Friends come and have a taste and buy. Welcome everybody." She used inclusive words, such as "friends," "welcome," and "tasty" to appeal to the sensory responses of her customers in advertising alcohol. She also strategically presented her business identity as industrious and inspirational by using the WeChat name, "No Pain No Gain," which demontrated her determination to be successful.

Fang Liu also spoke about the progressive benefits of living in the network age, emphasizing that "everybody" should learn how to use the Internet:

> This network era, everybody needs, and could use … . Anyhow, if we want to follow the era, we need to learn from them, learn every day. It's right that it's never too late to learn. Knowing nothing, like us, you don't know how to use QQ[4], how to use WeChat; business gets tough sometimes. Now all use that online, some payment, transfer, can directly transfer on mobile phones. We haven't started it yet.

It was imperative for her to have a WeChat and/or a QQ account to ensure her economic viability; otherwise, her business would fall behind those that had merged into the "network." Fang was open to every opportunity the Internet provided to develop her business. Displaying products on WeChat was her first move in following such opportunities. E-commerce would be her next move in advancing her offline business.

Most rural women's business practices were aimed at securing offline sales generated by displaying products online and learning effective online communication strategies to promote their traditional offline trade. Their practices showed their

active engagement with innovative ways of managing small businesses by using WeChat as well as their openness to explore transformative business methods despite challenges. They considered WeChat a valuable platform for demonstrating product availability, enhancing communication and relationship management, and developing their business acumen. These rural businesswomen were not as adept at promoting products using polished photos and highly technical advertising messages as *weishangs* were. Nonetheless, by using WeChat to advertise their enterprises, they improved their digital literacy skills, thus potentially empowering themselves as emerging small-scale businesswomen.

The practices of these rural women were also subject to the larger political and economic forces that shape China's market economy. The thriving *weishang* business ethos and the broad information economic boom in China have transformed Chinese lifestyles and consumption behaviors. In 2016, the *weishang* market in China was valued at $51.4 billion (RMB 328.8 billion), and it is expected to grow 30-fold by 2019 (iResearch, 2017). Not only *weishang* but all forms of social networking commerce are encouraged by the Chinese government because they align with the business model and development philosophy of being "innovative, harmonious, green, open, and shareable" proposed by the Ministry of Commerce (MOC), the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) (2016). WeChat's well-rounded technological infrastructure affords functionalities for almost every business procedure (Yanes & Berger, 2017), and it is used to build integrated online and offline social networking interactions (Shuai Yang et al., 2016). Without doubt, WeChat has become the major platform used to manage business and consumer lifestyle relationships. Traditional retail businesses, severely affected by this new economy, have been urged by the government to transform to Internet convergence (MOC, 2014; MOC & CIECC, 2017). Situated in this macro political and economic context, rural Chinese women who do not have high levels of education and lack opportunities for self-advancement elsewhere are acquiring the social awareness that online business has a huge economic potential for self-advancement. Therefore, rural Chinese women's WeChat business operations are included in the classifications of economic governance by the Chinese government. Their activities are by-products of the development of China's information economy and the stimulation by governmental and industrial stakeholders. However, such renewed economic benefits are accompanied by the pressures of meeting customers' requests, adapting to new business models, constantly changing online dynamics, and digital literacy demands. With limited resources, many rural women (especially older rural women) are challenged in using new information technologies. A rupture exists between the government's and the society's construction of technology and rural women's attempts to use technology to reconstruct themselves, particularly in their socio-cultural contexts. This dichotomy is often implicit and disregarded by rural women, but is identifiable through exploring their individual uses of the WeChat platform.

Making use of WeChat official accounts

WeChat's subscription feature provides users with reading opportunities. The subscription content is generated by official accounts[5] that are registered by

individuals, media institutions, and corporations, and it can be shared on WeChat Moments. Reading and sharing this content was one of the main activities in which the rural women participated.[6] It was through reading and sharing WeChat articles that these rural women developed the motivation for learning and experimenting, through which they discovered a channel for self-expression.

Twenty identifiable themes emerged from the linked articles, the most prominent of which were the following: life philosophy; fake information; nourishing of life; women; useful tips; public affairs; folk culture; gender relations; and social relationships. The themes relevant to this discussion of the women's emotional self-expression and learning were the following: life philosophy; nourishing of life; women; useful tips; gender relations; and social relationships.

Learning and experimenting

As a peasant and the mother of a child with a mental deficiency, Xin Huang had many home-based domestic tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and farming. Even though her father-in-law occasionally assisted, unlike other women, she could not leave her home unattended. In her WeChat networks, she learned about events in the outside world, which she had no opportunity to experience, such as attending festivals, traveling in other parts of China, or working in the city. Browsing WeChat's Moments and reading public articles became her main online activities. By reading articles about women, marriage, friendships, and life, Xin Huang also learned how to take care of herself and conduct herself in different relationships:

> Sometimes in it, [I] learn many things, like relationship between husband and wife, how to get along, like how to be sincere to friends. [I've] learned quite a lot in it.

> [They] tell you to tolerate when you need to tolerate. From within, [I] can see other men are ... can objectively see how men live and their personalities, can compare with the man at home, sometimes take a change.

Xin Huang shared an article that was generated in the official account, "Learn to be Smart Women." The title of the article was "'If I marry you, you'll be the president!' There is a kind of woman who is happy no matter whom she marries!" The article started by relating a story about former US President Barack Obama's wife Michelle, but continued with an extended story about how a happy and confident woman can maintain a happy marital relationship through a strong sense of self. Another article entitled, "Meet with you sooner or later, it is good as long as you are sincere," encouraged both women and men in relationships to cherish, forgive, respect, and tolerate. From these similar articles, Xin Huang learned skills that she thought would be beneficial to her own marriage. Min Wang shared Xin Huang's ideas and talked about applying them:

> [T]he phenomenon talked about in these [articles] indeed exists in life. Just to say, in the future, you have this kind of idea, when you come across the same problem, you then consider it to some extent to avoid it as much as possible.

'Articles about nourishing life, which provided methods of keeping healthy and improving well-being as well as information about practical life skills, received much attention. Xin Huang recalled how this knowledge had some transformative effects:

> I think I am not doing badly in taking good care of myself. Before I did not read WeChat, I did not think in this way. Oh, [I] think it [the article] makes a point! I value myself more. That is not to, like working, not to tire out myself. What I want to eat and is good for myself or so, will change gradually. Before I used WeChat? I did not value myself like this. If I had my period before, I never paid much attention when I was working. Now I attend to my body a little more. Valuing self, now it is valuing myself through WeChat.

She learned to appreciate herself by eating healthily, pursuing beauty, and keeping fit. Hence, the articles she read about the reality of social organization and reflections on the core structures of Chinese society, such as *guanxi*, friendship, and family were prevalent. Confucian ideas about how to maintain good relationships and how to exercise and exhibit filial piety were among the most popular. One post forwarded by Bin Dong advised thinking about and tolerating others and taking responsibility for family members, which are Confucian precepts that are usually promoted in Chinese society and accepted as social norms to instruct and guide people in behaving properly (Y. Wang & Balnaves, 2017). In Bo Liao's opinion, this kind of article reminded her about how to be filial in her relationship with her parents:

> After I read this kind of article, I may go … or, emm … if parents have some shortcomings, go to forgive them. Or, don't find fault with them no matter what. Anyhow everybody has this kind of shortcomings or that kind of shortcomings. People are all like this. Having a read, I think it is beneficial.

Moreover, Chinese people value their relationships with friends. As Xiaotong Fei's (2012) "differential mode of association" indicated, in the flexible circles of *guanxi*, friends follow family. However, the cultivation of contacts and connections among friends is essential because they are a very important type of social capital (King, 1991). Thus, it is necessary to behave properly in interpersonal relationships in order to maintain positive, strong friendships. Articles that reflected this philosophy frequently trended on the rural women's WeChat Moments, as Qin Li explained:

> Having a look at those articles, [I] feel people should be easy-going. Don't divide with them because of minor contradictions. Having read them, myself would reflect on myself sometimes. [I] think some friends, sometimes myself too, [have] trifled with friends or some minor conflicts. After reading those articles, spontaneously these small conflicts would be resolved. [I] would not be too particular about it sometimes.

This kind of content advised people to be tolerant and generous, to have an open mind to earn the trust of friends, enhance friendships, and gain advantages in interpersonal relationships. Through their reading and sharing on WeChat, in their 40s and 50s, this cohort gained knowledge and self-advancement, and they sought to be healthier and attain greater quality of life.

Experiencing emotional self-expression

In contrast to direct online self-disclosures and interactions, the rural women expressed their emotions implicitly, particularly by reading and circulating selected WeChat articles. Various articles reflected empathy with rural women's thinking and touched on their lived realities. Min Wang offered the following:

> Because many times those articles are written, I think, sometimes suited to my state of mind very much! I really feel that my thoughts at that moment, what I wanted to say was, "it quite makes sense. It is indeed like this." I very much agree with what it says. Sometimes it is indeed like that. When you are upset, it says in a way that can get to the bottom of your heart. It speaks out all that you want to say.

The 70 articles were about women's real-life situations and roles in their marriages, in their families, and at work. For example, "Women's story, just published yesterday … men cannot stand after reading it!!!" was shared by Fang Liu, who wrote about the hardship of being a woman by depicting every aspect of a female's expected social function: "Women are living a quite hard life: heart belongs to parents, body belongs to husband, time belongs to children, only wrinkles belong to themselves." This article reminded rural women of their positions as daughters, wives, and mothers, communicating the challenges faced by all Chinese women. In its conclusion, the article appealed to women to love themselves.

Emotional expressions were also prominent in articles about gender relations, especially spousal relationships. The article entitled "Nobody lives very easily" included stories about normal married life and women's difficulties in maintaining good relationships with their husbands. Min Wang posted, "these are the microcosm of reality, but they reflect much helplessness in life …" Regarding a post that described how sad a woman feels when her husband offers no consolation when she needs it, Min Wang commented, "It quite makes sense. I agree very much."

These articles disclosed Chinese women's fragile affections and real-life situations, empathizing with women's frustrations and the associated social responsibilities as wives, mothers, and daughters. The articles that appealed to men to love and care for their women expressed rural women's similar aspirations. Because they live in a patriarchal society, Chinese women are always demeaned and restrained by traditional gender norms (Leung, 2003), and their emotions are devalued. In hierarchical familial relationships, it is the unspoken norm that women hide negative emotions about their marriages and families from the public because they are regarded as family secrets (Pik-chu, 2012), which, if disclosed, could damage "face" and bring shame to the family (H. Wang, 2011). Reading and sharing the WeChat articles opened up a collective channel that was an outlet for the expression of the rural women's feelings about their social roles, which they routinely suppressed.

Some articles empathized with rural women, advocating modern values, such as autonomy and independence in a straightforward manner. The article "Things that women should insist" listed nine things that women should do for themselves. Except the traditional proverb, "be elegant in the drawing room and skillful in the kitchen" (*shang de chufang, xia de tingtang*)[7], the tips motivated the women to embrace modern attitudes, such as independence from their husbands and personal pursuits of beauty and health. These contemporary values were a striking

contrast to the realities faced by rural Chinese women, because they depicted perspectives that were vastly different from traditional women's roles of being a good housewife, always thinking about the family but neglecting themselves, and restraining their behavior in accordance with customary social values. These guidelines represented what was on the rural women's minds: the desire for more autonomy in marital relationships and self-development. By sharing these thoughts on WeChat, the rural women gained emotional sustenance, especially in light of the different realities they were confronted with in their offline lives.

Engaging with the WeChat articles led to some changes in the rural women's daily lives, but their interpretations of them also highlighted some of the structural conditions that have long been established in Chinese society. The Chinese Confucian cultural tradition includes prescriptions for the gender roles and social responsibilities of Chinese women, which emphasize being a filial daughter, a virtuous wife, and a good mother (Leung, 2003). The concept of "good housewife" (Wallis, 2015; Zhang, 2014) epitomizes these characteristics, and it has a much stronger hold in Chinese rural areas than in Chinese cities. Despite some transformative social media experiences and knowledge acquisition, these rural women sought to fulfill their "good housewife" duties inside the family while cultivating themselves to be socially competent outside it. These prescribed socio-cultural norms were not challenged by the spread of modern values on WeChat, but were incorporated through it, which corresponded with Wallis's (2015) finding that Chinese rural women's uses of new media technologies did not break but reproduced gender hierarchies. Although an emerging group of rural Chinese women celebrate their acquisition of information, knowledge, civilization, and improvement, those who are unaware of or underprivileged in accessing new forms of information technology remain disadvantaged.

Discussion and conclusion

The women in this study appeared to be enlightened and empowered through the WeChat platform, demonstrating an emancipated sense of self in their everyday online interactions. They experienced more than a simple connection with a broad social network, and they explored innovative ways of achieving economic benefits. Their use of WeChat opened opportunities for learning and self-advancement, including coping strategies for expressing suppressed emotions, which were unavailable to them before their implementation of social media. The circulation of articles that were imbued with both traditional values and modern principles conveyed ideas about the modern Chinese female to the rural Chinese women who participated in this study. By reproducing the ideology embedded in traditional Chinese female roles and delineating an idealized picture of independence and freedom, these articles were resonant with rural Chinese women's disadvantaged realities, emotions, and cultural values, reinforcing their ideas that being a good woman meant both adhering to Chinese cultural rituals and cultivating modern values by being self-enterprising, independent, and knowledgeable. This duality corresponds to the Chinese government's policy for women's development and rural modernization. In 2013, shortly after Jinping Xi was inaugurated as the Chinese president, the initiative for women's development was launched by the cadre of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF). In addition to promoting

equal rights for Chinese women, Xi underscored the responsibility of women to carry forward Chinese family traditions and family virtues, facilitating the continuance of civilized and harmonious social morals in the great national rejuvenation, such as respecting the elderly, loving the young, bearing hardship, withstanding hard work, and improving the self constantly (' People's Daily, 2013). Flourishing Chinese traditional culture, especially Confucianism, has been leveraged strategically by Xi to realize the great revival of the Chinese nation, increase social cohesion, and consolidate the legitimation of the Communist Party's leadership (Perry, 2017). The project of female emancipation therefore has been imprinted with cultural symbols and core socialist values, highlighting the significance of social morality and self-autonomy. ACWF, which is the official organization that represents all Chinese women's rights and interests, ensures that these top-down concepts are passed to the common Chinese females. An example is the recent implementation of the Women's Action of Rural Revitalization strategy.[8]

The official accounts of the use of WeChat examined in this research speak to the cultural development of rural Chinese women's online practices. However, the content is subject to the political guidelines of the Chinese governments' citizenship program because the circulation of information on WeChat is formal and structured (Stockmann & Luo, 2017), and it is regulated by policies that conform to socialist values and social morality.[9] Hence, WeChat also serves as a tool for cultural governance, and it facilitates the construction of "ideal" modern female citizens. Because WeChat shares its advertising avenue with the owners of official accounts through "Social Ads" (Xiang, 2014), increased readership means increased profits. WeChat articles are therefore created by official accounts with "catchy" words, sensational titles, affective images, and appealing music to attract rural women's attention to opportunites for commercial development and self-promotion. By enabling these technological, economic, political, and cultural capabilities, WeChat's platform has become embedded in individuals' everyday lives, governing their economic and cultural practices while ensuring the retention of user agency. These findings echo' Wallis' (2018) study on female domestic workers in Beijing, which found that through sharing social media postings about indirect virtual care work, self-care, and words of wisdom, Chinese women gained in positivity and self-realization. Their expression through social media engagement signaled not only their empowerment but also their participation in therapeutic governing (Zhang, 2017). Based on the findings of this study, it could be argued that rural Chinese women may be considered both beneficiaries of and vulnerable to the platformization of Chinese society.

Notes

1. This study was approved by the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee protocol H-2014-0348. Written informed consent was obtained and anonymity was addressed through the use of pseudonyms.
2. *Hukou* is a unique system of managing China's population. It represents an individual's civil identity. Implemented by the Chinese government in 1955, this household registration system divided Chinese *hukou* into "agricultural" *hukou* and "non-agricultural" *hukou* to differentiate between rural and urban residents. In July 2014, the Chinese central government proposed abolishing the dual *hukou* system and merging the rural and urban *hukou* into a univocal "resident *hukou.*" By 2015, when this study's fieldwork was conducted, this reform had not been implemented by many

local governments, except in Henan, which implemented the new policy in November 2014. In 2016, other local governments started to regulate the policy gradually.
3. The ethnographer observed the subjective knowledge and experiences of rural women through their social media use, which were first-degree constructs in the' Schutzian (1962) sense. The analysis yielded the researcher's second-degree constructs, which were crystalized in the forms of themes, patterns, and theoretical conceptualization.
4. Launched by Tencent in 1999, QQ is a social networking platform similar to WeChat.
5. A report by the CAICT (2016a) showed that by 2015, over 10 million official accounts had been established, which remained one of the main sources of information for WeChat subscribers.
6. The fieldwork captured more links (798) to subscribed content than the number of original posts (23.4%) created by the rural women on their Moments accounts. These links were coded into 20 themes with some overlap among them. For example, links coded in the category "nourishing of life" could also be coded in the category "fake information."
7. This Chinese proverb gender stereotypes a perfect Chinese woman, that is, being a good housewife in the family and being sophisticated in social experience outside the family'(Xiao, 2006).
8. In February 2018, the ACWF issued the Guidance on Promoting Women's Contributions to Achieving Rural Revitalization. In March 2018, the vice-president of the ACWF introduced the Women's Action of Rural Revitalization strategy.
9. WeChat's Public Platform Service Agreement states that the owners of official accounts are forbidden to produce and circulate content that violates "the law, socialist system, state interest, citizens' legal rights, public order, social morality, and the authenticity of information."

Notes on contributors

Yini Wang is an assistant professor at Hunan University, Changsha, China. In her current research, she uses ethnographic methods to explore the online practices of Chinese rural women and youth through their engagement with social media. Her expertise comprises identity construction, social media, advertising, and quantitative and qualitative methodology.

Dr. Judith Sandner is a mid-career researcher with expertise in critical discourse studies, the application of communication theories, and multidisciplinary research methodology training for honors and postgraduate students in communication, design, and information technology. Dr. Sandner's current teaching profile includes Communication and Discourse and Digital Communication Production Studies at the University of Newcastle, NSW, Australia.

References
ACWF. (2018, 23 February). ACWF issues guidance on promoting rural revitalization. Retrieved from http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/news/action/1802/3818-1.htm
ACWF. (2018, 21 March). ACWF VP calls on women to contribute to efforts for rural revitalization. Retrieved from http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/news/leaders/1803/3875-1.htm
Baker, S. (2013). Conceptualizing the use of Facebook in ethnographic research: As tool, as data and as context. *Ethnography and Education*, 8(2), 131–145. doi:10.1080/17457823.2013.792504
Bucher, T., & Helmond, A. (2018). The affordances of social media platforms. In J. Burgess, T. Poell, & A. Marwick (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of social media* (pp. 233–253). London: SAGE.
CAICT. (2016a). *Weixin jingji shehui yingxiangli yanjiu baogao.* [WeChat's economic and social impact report]. Retrieved from Tencent Research Institute website: http://www.tencentresearch.com/4500_51

CAICT. (2016b). *Zhongguo xinxi jingji baipishu*. [White book of information economy development in China]. Retrieved from China Academy of Information and Communications Technology website: http://www.caict.ac.cn/kxyj/qwfb/bps/201609/P020160918606005659368.pdf

Chen, X. (2010). Issues of China's rural development and policies. *China Agricultural Economic Review*, *2*(3), 233–239. doi:10.1108/17561371011078390

CNNIC. (2017). *Zhongguo shejiao yingyong yonghu xingwei yanjiu baogao in 2016*. [Report on social networking applications in China in 2016]. http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/sqbg/201712/P020180103485975797840.pdf

CNNIC. (2018). *The 41st China statistical report on Internet development*. Retrieved from China Internet Network Information Centre website: http://www.cnnic.net.cn/hlwfzyj/hlwxzbg/hlwtjbg/201803/P020180305409870339136.pdf

Ezzy, D. (2013). *Qualitative analysis: Practice and innovation*. Hoboken, NJ: Taylor & Francis.

Fan, H., & Cao, H. (2017). A study on the discourse construction of WeChat salesmen's personal identities: Based on data from the Moments of WeChat. *World Journal of Social Science Research*, *4*(4), 307–317. doi:10.22158/wjssr.v4n4p307

Fei, X. (2012). *From the soil: The foundation of Chinese society*. (G. Han & Z. Wang, Trans.) Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Feng, M. (2015). *Tengxun qidong "hulianwang + xiangcun", dazao quanguo zhihui xiangcun*. [Tencent initiates "Internet Plus Countryside" project, building national intelligent countryside]. http://zj.qq.com/a/20150819/039563.htm

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. (3rd ed.) London: Routledge.

Harwit, E. (2016). WeChat: Social and political development of China's dominant messaging app. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *10*(3), 312–327. doi:10.1080/17544750.2016.1213757

Hjorth, L., Horst, H., Galloway, A., & Bell, G. (Eds.). (2017). *The Routledge companion to digital ethnography*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (Eds.). (2008). *Handbook of constructionist research*. New York, NY: The Guildford Press.

iResearch. (2017). *Zhongguo weishang hangye yanjiu baogao in 2017*. [Report on weishang industry in China in 2017]. http://report.iresearch.cn/report_pdf.aspx?id=2985

King, A. Y. C. (1991). Kuan-hsi and network building: A sociological interpretation. *Daedalus*, *120*(2), 63–84.

Leung, A. S. M. (2003). Feminism in transition: Chinese culture, ideology and the development of the women's movement in China. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, *20*(3), 359–374.

Li, D., & Tsang, M. C. (2003). Household decisions and gender inequality in education in rural China. *China: An International Journal*, *1*(2), 224–248. doi:10.1353/chn.2005.0037

Liu, C. (2016). Sustainability of rural informatization programs in developing countries: A case study of China's Sichuan province. *Telecommunications Policy*, *40*(7), 714–724. doi:10.1016/j.telpol.2015.08.007

MOC. (2014). *2014 qiansan jidu woguo lingshouye fazhan qingkuang fenxi*. [An analysis of domestic retail industry development in the first three quarters of 2014]. http://ltfzs.mofcom.gov.cn/article/date/201411/20141100804256.shtml

MOC, CAC, & NDRC. (2016). *Dianzi shangwu shisanwu fazhan guihua*. [The thirteenth five-year plan of e-commerce]. http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zt_dzsw135/lanmufour/201612/20161202425237.shtml

MOC, & CIECC. (2017). *Zhongguo lingshou hangye fazhan baogao (2016/2017)*. [Report on retail industry in China (2016/2017)]. http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/ae/ai/201707/20170702602975.shtml

Negro, G. (2017). *The Internet in China: From infrastructure to a nascent civil society*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ng, J. C. Y., Huang, M. M. D., & Liu, Y. (2016). The "feminine" entrepreneurial personality trait: the competitive advantage of female college-student entrepreneurs in Chinese wei-shang businesses? *Asian Business & Management*, *15*(5), 343–369.

Oreglia, E. (2012) *The sent-down Internet: Going online in rural China*. Paper presented at the 10th Chinese Internet research conference: Social media, digital entertainment, governance & public movements, Los Angeles, CA. Retrieved from https://www.ischool.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/eoreglia_the_sent-down_internet.pdf

Oreglia, E. (2014). ICT and (personal) development in rural China. *Information Technologies & International Development*, *10*(3), 19–30.

People's Daily (2013, 1 November). *Zhongguomeng xuyao guangda funu xianzhi xianli*. [China Dream requires women to serve their intelligence and strength]. Overseas edition. Retrieved from http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrbhwb/html/2013-11/01/content_1318707.htm

Perry, E. J. (2017). Cultural governance in contemporary China: "Re-orienting" party propaganda. In V. Shue & P. M. Thornton (Eds.), *To govern China: Evolving practices of power* (pp. 29–55). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pik-chu, T. (2012). Privacy in the family. In C. Kwok-bun (Ed.), *International handbook of Chinese families* (pp. 453–465). New York, NY: Springer.

Schutz, A. (1962). *Collected papers. Volume I: The problem of social reality*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.

Shen, J. (2006). Understanding dual-track urbanisation in post-reform China: Conceptual framework and empirical analysis. *Population, Space and Place*, *12*(6), 497–516. doi: 10.1002/psp.426

Stockmann, D., & Luo, T. (2017). Which social media facilitate online public opinion in China? *Problems of Post-Communism*, *64*(3–4), 1–14.

Tencent. Weixin *gongzhong pingtai fuwu xieyi*. [WeChat public platform service agreement]. https://mp.weixin.qq.com/cgi-bin/announce?action=getannouncement&key=1503979103&version=1&lang=zh_CN&platform=2

Tencent, & CAICT. (2015). *Weixin de "yingxiangli": shoufen weixin pingtai shujuhua yanjiu baogao*. [WeChat's "influence": The first statistical research report on WeChat platform]. Retrieved from Tencent Technology website: http://tech.qq.com/a/20150127/018482.htm#p=1

van Dijck, J. (2012). Facebook and the engineering of connectivity. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, *19*(2), 141–155. doi: 10.1177/1354856512457548

Wallis, C. (2013). *Technomobility in China: Young migrant women and mobile phones*. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Wallis, C. (2015). Micro-entrepreneurship, new media technologies, and the reproduction and reconfiguration of gender in rural China. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, *8*(1), 42–58. doi:10.1080/17544750.2014.988633

Wallis, C. (2018). Domestic workers and the affective dimensions of communicative empowerment. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *11*(2), 213–230. doi:10.1093/ccc/tcy001

Wang, H. (2011). *Protecting privacy in China: A research on China's privacy standards and the possibility of establishing the right to privacy and the information privacy protection legislation in modern China*. Heidelberg: Springer.

Wang, X. (2016). *Social media in industrial China*. UK: UCL Press.

Wang, Y., & Balnaves, M. (2017). Intersubjective benevolence in youth online Chinese communities. In J. Fulton & P. McIntyre (Eds.), *Creating space in the fifth estate* (pp. 89–109). Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Wu, X., & Treiman, D. J. (2007). Inequality and equality under Chinese socialism: the *hukou* system and intergenerational occupational mobility. *American Journal of Sociology*, *113*(2), 415–445. doi:10.1086/518905

Xiang, X. (2014). *Weixin yu guangdiantong gongtui weixin guanggao, jinri zhengshi kaifang gongce* [WeChat and Tencent Social Ads launch WeChat Ads, officially open beta version for the public today]. Retrieved from http://tech.qq.com/a/20140707/049763.htm

Xiao, C. (2006, March 7). *Shehuixuejia zhiyi "nuxing shi xue liyi zhujue."* [Sociologist questioning "females are leading learners of rites"]. Xinhua Daily Telegraph. Retrieved from http://news.163.com/06/0307/15/2BKDQ2KD0001122B.html

Yanes, P. A., & Berger, P. D. (2017). How WeChat has changed the face of marketing in China. *British Journal of Marketing Studies*, *5*(3), 14–21.

Yang, S. (2016). Frogs and toads in Chinese myths, legends, and folklore. *Chinese America: History & Perspectives*, *84*, 77–82.

Yang, S., Chen, S., & Li, B. (2016). The role of business and friendships on WeChat business: An emerging business model in China. *Journal of Global Marketing*, *29*(4), 174–187. doi:10.1080/08911762.2016.1184363

Zhang, L. (2017). The rise of therapeutic governing in postsocialist China. *Medical Anthropology*, *36*(1), 6–18. doi:10.1080/01459740.2015.1117079

Zhang, N. (2014). Performing identities: Women in rural-urban migration in contemporary China. *Geoforum*, *54*, 17–27. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.03.006