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Representation and performativity of whiteness in China

The case of foreign digital entrepreneurs

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CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2:

‘I’M NOT AN ALIEN. I’M A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHER: DOING ONLINE RESEARCH WITH CHINA’S SOCIAL MEDIA⁸

Introduction: from In-Person Fieldwork to China’s Digital Space

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, I had planned to conduct ethnographic fieldwork on foreign entrepreneurs and businesses in Shanghai. After the pandemic began, China was the first country to close its borders to foreign nationals, so I was unwilling and unable to travel to my field site. Thanks to increasing global digitization, I could still conduct research from afar, so I reformulated my study – first, my methodology and, then, the content – using China’s communications and digital technologies. To understand this new digitized environment, I approached China’s social media as a mosaic of digital entanglements that inescapably relate to a specific locality and thus are interwoven with China’s sociopolitical and cultural structure. Taking an auto-ethnographic approach, I reflected on my experience as a foreign researcher to create a corpus of data for analysis, which enabled me to address two interrelated research questions: What difficulties does an ethnographer encounter when interacting with China’s digital space and networks from afar? And how is the formation of relationships with potential participants mediated by China’s social media platforms?

The COVID-19 pandemic has created profound challenges and altered how social science researchers can conduct research, prompting the use of new methodological tools for remote fieldwork. The emergence of ethnographic research via social media platforms has transformed ethnographers’ connection to the field, giving them the option to approach the lived experience

⁸ This chapter is adapted from this article: Kefala, C. (2023). ‘I’m Not an Alien. I’m a Digital Ethnographer’: Doing Online Research with China’s Social Media”. *Asiascape: Digital Asia*, 10 pp. 24-52.

in digital contexts (Horst 2015). Several social scientists have advocated ‘digital ethnography’ using online platforms as field sites (Boellstroff 2015; Hine 2015; Pink et al. 2016a). Recent research emphasizes the implications of the pandemic, detailing how qualitative research projects could be adapted to the COVID-19 context (Lupton 2021; Rahman et al. 2021; Tremblay et al. 2021). Application-based methods (Kaufmann & Peil 2020), re-enactment videos (Pink & Leder 2016b), and social media platforms (Madianou 2015; Postill & Pink 2012) are also considered topics of inquiry. Indeed, digital technologies have become an integral aspect of researchers’ engagement with potential research participants, prompting a reconsideration of what defines ‘the field’. Recognizing the degree to which media platforms and their services are becoming more commonplace and more complex, it is urgent to develop new theoretical and empirical approaches that explicitly encompass them. Further, it might be useful to reflect upon the role of the researcher in a specific digital society, such as China, to see how digital devices, online platforms, and internet access can mediate interactions between the researcher and the field of study.

Digital Presence in Chinese Social Media

China’s social media platforms are becoming power players in the global digital landscape (Keane et al. 2021). Chinese platforms connect Chinese culture and worldviews to communities all over the world, marking ‘a new dawn of enhanced connectivity, which we will call “digital China”’ (Keane and Chen 2017: 3). Chinese social media platforms have fuelled research opportunities, and scholars have focused on the internet’s political consequences in China (Stockmann 2015; Yang 2014), the relationship between the Chinese platform economy and society (de Kloet et al. 2019; Zhao 2019), and user practices in Chinese social media (Poell et al. 2014; Qiu 2016). By regarding China as a case study in method (Chen 2010), I aim to expand this literature by reflecting critically on my experience of conducting research *using* –

rather than *about* – Chinese social media platforms. In that way, I can create a corpus for analysis in which a researcher interprets the cultural representation of self through China’s digital environment.

Several scholars have discussed their engagement with Chinese digital technologies when they interact with informants (e.g., Qiu 2009; Wallis 2013; Wang 2013). However, these studies primarily explore China’s digital domain in different segments of society, leaving unexamined the authors’ critical reflection on their own positionality and the multiple forces that shape their presence there. Alternatively, scholars have focused their research exclusively on their own involvement in Chinese social media platforms and their impact on their research methods. Svensson (2017) examines her socialization and experience with Chinese social media, WeChat, and Sina Weibo, emphasizing that the ‘digital leap’ has been an equal or a more transformative experience for her than classic ethnographic research. She states that one of the advantages of a researcher using Chinese social media is that ‘it allows you to gain a better understanding of how Chinese citizens integrate social media into their daily lives, resulting in a “thicker” understanding and more “embodied” experience of what it means to live in the Chinese (digital) society’ (Svensson 2017: 99). Following her call for more systemic discussion of the opportunities and challenges of digital ethnography and digital methodologies in general, and social media in particular, in the context of China, this short article advances current literature on Chinese social media by describing the performative dimensions of conducting research there.

Studies on performative practices in our everyday lives have significantly increased in recent years. As a starting point, Goffman’s (1959) well-known classic text *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* employs a ‘dramaturgical approach’ to analyzing social interactions and performance in daily life. Turning the gaze to the presentation of self in social media, Hogan

(2010: 377) argues that ‘self-presentation can be split into performances, which take place in synchronous “situations,” and artefacts, which take place in asynchronous “exhibitions”’. This distinction between a synchronous and an asynchronous online environment can be coordinated across various digital platforms, on which users digitally perform a spatial self. Drawing on Goffman’s and Butler’s (1988) theoretical frameworks, Schwartz and Halegoua (2015: 1648) state that the spatial self can be understood as a practice of identity performance discreetly formed over time through ‘a stylized repetition of acts’ (Butler 1988: 519). Moreover, Leeker (2017: 21) describes her research on the interaction of users with digital technologies and concludes that ‘the human reacts to the agency the technologies suggest and vice versa’. Thus, ‘performativity’ refers not only to a form of action but also to a complex amalgam in which users and digital technologies are intertwined. Understanding how users maintain and structure their presence across digital platforms enables conceptualization of the notion of digital intimacy.

Method: Autoethnography

Although the line between autoethnography and ethnography is not clear, Ellis (2004: 31–32) suggests that autoethnography, ‘as a form of ethnography’, is ‘part auto or self and part ethno or culture’ and ‘something different from both of them, greater than its parts’. As a research method, autoethnography emphasizes the researcher’s subjectivity, thereby embracing the autoethnographer’s experience as the primary subject of the study (Chang 2008). Moreover, autoethnography sheds light on researchers’ total interaction with the field as they document their personal thoughts and feelings to understand the social environment they are investigating. For Ellingson and Ellis (2008), autoethnography is a socially constructed effort that overcomes the polarities of the researcher and the researched, objectivity and subjectivity, process and product, self and others, art and science, and personal and political.

However, critics of autoethnography argue that evaluating their own experience causes researchers to become overly immersed in and partial about their research (Mitra 2010). There is also the risk that ethnographic studies will become subjective, based on the researcher's intimacy with the research (ibid.). This might be evident in the analysis of this article, reflecting my experience of being involved with social media away from my home region and normal daily use. As de Seta (2020) notes, based on his reflexive experience of researching digital media in China, as a research method, digital ethnography confronts several methodological illusions and tensions. He states that the notion of 'being there' in a field site is a misconception in digital ethnography as the researcher attempts to deal with the internet's messiness. Moreover, a researcher's reflective engagement with social media can shed light on knowledge production, raising essential questions about the effects of a research practice and a globalized notion of a specific field. Therefore, China's digital dynamics are worthy of investigation from an auto-ethnographic perspective.

To this end, for more than two years I maintained an account on several Chinese social media platforms – including WeChat, Sina Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu – creating a profile and connecting to informants through my personal network in Shanghai. More specifically, members of my personal network added me to certain WeChat groups consisting of entrepreneurs, and then I followed a snowball method to identify potential research participants. This research experience enabled me not only to share my sentiments with my informants, as I was also a co-producer of China's expansive internet network, but to deterritorialize myself as a researcher who performs a particular digital self. Thus, I dislocated myself, performing my role as an ethnographer in several places in the field and, most important, 'in China'. As Papacharissi (2011: 307) notes, through social media, an individual 'gains access to a variety of multimedia tools that enable the possibility for more controlled and more imaginative performances of identity online'. With this understanding of my

performative experience through Chinese social media, I consider myself a ‘networked, digital, and spatial self’, basing my research on my online identity performance.

The Visual beyond Social Media

Before my involvement with Chinese social media, my first impulse was to send messages to my former colleagues and friends in Shanghai through WeChat, a multipurpose mobile application (or superapp) in China. In order to gather information and find potential research participants during the pandemic, I opened accounts on several different Chinese social media platforms in the hope of connecting with and expanding my network. First, I added a profile picture in which I am wearing casual clothes and yellow sunglasses, standing on a sunny beach in California, in an attempt to create a hipster-ish and attractive appearance. I also used my real name and not a pseudonym, which I saw as employing transparency as a foreign woman who uses those media. Soon, I was fascinated by participating in social media that I had never used before, and I began to incorporate my use of them into daily life.

My main challenge a few days later, after I had started to connect with Chinese interlocutors, was getting them to reply to my messages. Although my introductory message to them had stated the purpose of my interest in conducting online interviews, I received either negative replies or no responses. In the message I posted on WeChat, I said that the focus of my research was foreign entrepreneurs and businesses. More specifically, I explained that I was studying the reconfiguration of whiteness in China through investigating foreign migrant entrepreneurs, the core idea in my PhD studies. In addition, I asked potential interlocutors to share their perceptions of foreign businesses in China and the struggles or benefits that foreigners might encounter in China’s business environment, explaining that I would have other research questions, following a grounded theory method, to analyze the racialization of whiteness in China.

After a few weeks, I received a notification that one of the people whom I had contacted before had sent me a message, in English, on WeChat: an alien face emoji. The subsequent discussion went as follows:

Me: Hello! Btw nice to meet you! What do you mean by this emoji? Sender: Oh, I thought it was a trap! Nice to meet you! Never thought you would reply to me back!

Me: I'm not an alien; I am a digital ethnographer! Why does my message make you think I'm a scam, trap, or alien?

Sender: Primarily because of your profile picture! You are a random foreign woman looking for Chinese you've never met before. You are wearing glasses; I couldn't see your face! What can I think?

Me: Any idea to gain your trust or other people's trust?

Sender: Change your photo, make it more professional, write your messages in Chinese and, most importantly, don't discuss sensitive issues here!

I reviewed my initial message to him to ensure that I had not reference any topics that are politically or socially sensitive in China, only writing that I was trying to study foreign migrants and businesses in China. I received several similar responses in the first months of my outreach, and many simply assumed that I was perpetrating some kind of scam. For example, among the most common replies I received were: 'very suspicious research!', 'pls don't contact me', or 'It's a scam!'

To avoid this, I strategically performed another version of myself, a digital self within Chinese digital space. Svensson (2017: 99) writes: 'In the case of an authoritarian society such as China, the possibility of surveillance on social media platforms, even when you do not engage in sensitive research, is a risk you need to be aware of and try to minimize'. To this I would add that researchers must reflectively curate their own position, image, and statement of their

research agenda, especially if they are foreigners and have never used these social media platforms before.

I replaced the profile picture that had created confusion for my potential participants with my passport picture, which clearly shows my facial characteristics. In doing so, I relied on my own interpretation of other users and their communications. Furthermore, the absence of paralinguistic cues, gestures, and body language makes the presentation of self and interactions challenging on social media, which largely depend on text and pictures (Menchik & Tian 2008). I also began to translate my messages into Chinese. As a result, I reflected on the role of my performativity in this process of digitization and the significance of blurring the boundaries between the digital and the non-digital, divorced from and tied to the physical world, respectively, to achieve digital intimacy. Moreover, I removed a statement about my research focus from my notes, which was hypothetical and a sensitive topic for some potential research participants.

A few months after adjusting my digital presence, I engaged in conversations with several people, some of whom later became vital research participants. Whereas before, I received many negative replies, now I had positive answers such as: ‘yes, I’m interested in talking to you’, or ‘we can set up a meeting soon’. However, I could not overcome the hesitation about my research topic, which many WeChat users still viewed with suspicion. Several people advised me that it was not the right time to discuss foreigners in China online, especially during the pandemic. More specifically, my study, conducted from January 2020 to January 2022, took place during a turbulent period in Chinese society, when xenophobic sentiments started to be expressed against foreigners (Wang & Qin 2020) and foreign businesses. As a result, my messages also highlighted my willingness to study China as a launchpad for foreign business migrants, the country’s economic rise, and thus the participation of foreign investment. In that

way, I had hoped to arouse the curiosity of Chinese people and diminish any xenophobia. Thus, by paying attention to my ethical deliberations when describing my research, I adapted my project and gave it another dimension that I had not considered before. At the same time, intimacy became a theme that enabled me to be more digitally present with my interlocutors.

Hence, I approached Chinese social media platforms as digital constructs of Chinese authorities, in which users must perform a particular self that fits into government discourses. As Schneider (2018: 225) writes, in digital China, authorities have adopted ‘a model that restricts direct control over meanings to sensitive political issues and otherwise promotes collaboration and participation in processes of meaning-making’. In this model, he continues, ‘party and state agents limit themselves to the role of public opinion “guides”, setting the parameters of discourse but allowing diverse actors to negotiate the exact meanings’ (ibid.). In line with these statements and my autoethnographic experience, my interactions with potential research participants on Chinese social media confirm that the authorities are setting discursive parameters, often in collaboration with corporations and users. These limits, however, generate further interventions. In my case study, I collaborated with my research participants, who were concerned about my positionality as a foreign researcher, and with the state’s digital framework for online political communication. My need to respond to both of them shaped my performativity and positionality within China’s digital infrastructure.

Furthermore, confronted with a bewildering variety of methodological nuances, for a new generation of ethnographers like me, familiarity with social media does not necessarily guarantee a flawless experience in the digital environment. As Abidin and de Seta (2020: 3) argue, with ‘interactional proficiency and insider positioning, digital ethnographers can encounter deadlocks, rejections, and failure’. Yet the effectiveness of my proposed

methodology accords with the ethnographer's performativity in a particular digital space, in this case, China, highlighting uncertainty and tentativeness.

Conclusion

The questions raised here were formulated during my introduction to Chinese social media platforms. The evolution of my research and my presence on social media offer a glimpse of how an ethnographic study can be embedded in digital China. The complexity of establishing a terminological and theoretical turn through my ethnographic immersion with those media led me to pursue critically engaged autoethnographic research. Following van Dijk et al. (2018: 4), I now approach Chinese digital platform society as a 'contested concept'. In this case, my research is increasingly channelled not only by my presence and interaction with other users but overwhelmingly by China's authoritarian system and thus constructed as an assemblage in a network governed by Chinese mechanisms.

In my experience as a foreign researcher, I gradually adapted my study to Chinese social media, which led me to assimilate a certain performativity, which differed from my typical daily interaction with social media. Understandings of performativity and performative practices need to be re-examined according to the field of study and the particular context of that study. In my case, conducting research on foreigners at a time when the threat of COVID-19 increased xenophobia in China, made it extraordinarily difficult to carry out my original fieldwork plan. It also caused me to rethink how I should present myself and my research to potential participants.

Conducting research using Chinese social media is not a unidirectional process. Rather, it is composed of social, cultural, and political dynamics that constantly change, and we need to be

aware of and attuned to them. I hope that my insights will raise further questions about digital ethnography and cross-disciplinary approaches.