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The ties that bind

How the dominance of WeChat combines with *guanxi* to inhibit and constrain China's contentious politics

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Abstract

Despite the market dominance of WeChat in contemporary China, we currently know little about its significance for Chinese politics. WeChat enables strong tie communicative networks, which prior research indicates is consequential for contentious political engagement. Drawing on evidence from focus groups conducted with Chinese citizens in the UK, we reveal that although WeChat users are often connected through offline social and professional networks, contentious politics manifests on the app only under a narrow range of circumstances. Furthermore, political contention on WeChat is reported by our respondents to be largely confined to matters of 'interest-oriented' and/or 'safe' topics that do not challenge the wider political system. This trend is driven by a combination of political and cultural dynamics which we elaborate in a theoretically-informed thematic analysis, arguing that engaging with the concept of *guanxi* provides more insight into the political repercussions of WeChat in China than a focus on tie-strength.

Keywords

Digital Political Communication; Contentious Politics; Mobile Instant Messaging Applications; China; WeChat; Social Networks; Strong and Weak Ties; *Guanxi*.

Introduction

When we convened a series of focus groups with Chinese citizens temporarily residing in the UK to discuss a mobile phone application called ‘WeChat’, it was immediately apparent that the app plays a significant role in their lives:

[I use WeChat] uncountable times (Respondent #7 female 20-29)

[I use WeChat] Every minute (Respondent #10 male 20-29)

Checking updates on WeChat is the first thing I do in the morning and the last thing I do before going to bed in the evening (Respondent #17 female 30-39)

Such intense engagement with WeChat is not unusual among its users. Research published by WeChat’s parent company estimates that 61% of account holders open the app more than 10 times per day and that more than half spend over an hour a day using it (Tencent Penguin Intelligence and CAICT, 2016). This high frequency of usage is coupled with extensive penetration in contemporary China. By the end of 2016, approximately 80% of China’s 695 million mobile internet users were estimated to have a WeChat account (CNNIC, 2017) - making it by some distance China’s most popular mobile phone application. Over the course of 2017, just over 23% of Chinese netizens engaged with government WeChat official accounts (CNNIC, 2018).

As such, there is strong evidence for the contention that WeChat is both massively popular and increasingly integrated into civic life in today’s China. Harwit (2016) observes that WeChat’s growth has occurred at the expense of Social Networking Sites (SNSs) – indicating that an important shift has occurred in how Chinese citizens are experiencing the internet. And yet, while studies of WeChat are emerging (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2018; Chen, 2017; DeLuca et al., 2016; Harwit, 2016; Lien and Cao, 2016); scholarly investigations of its intersection with Chinese politics are strikingly absent. We begin to address this lacuna, focusing our attention on the question of how Chinese political contention is being enabled and shaped by WeChat.

In the following section, we present our theoretical framework. We begin by situating our research within literature that has identified the interplay between digital technologies and the communicative social networks that they enable as an influential factor in the study of contentious politics. We discuss widely established findings surrounding the implications of tie strength for participation in contentious politics and the shaping of contentious political movements. We outline research showing that digital platforms can affect the tie strength of communicative networks that engage in contentious politics. We then argue that the communicative networks enabled by WeChat are likely to be characterised by relatively stronger offline ties between users than conventional SNSs – which implies that the growing dominance of WeChat may have substantial implications for contentious politics in China. We conclude by discussing the concept of *guanxi* (literally ‘relationship’ or ‘personal connection’) which is the subject of well-developed China-focused sociological, cultural and business literatures (for an

overview, see: Barbalet, 2015) and is of emerging importance in the study of social movements in China (Qi, 2017). We argue that considering *guanxi* instead of tie strength leads to more equivocal expectations regarding the political ramifications of WeChat.

We then move to our empirical investigation, which involved a series of focus groups conducted with UK-resident Chinese citizens in the Spring of 2017, including two groups comprised of young people who expressed a strong interest in media and politics. We explain that our approach represents a ‘most likely’ critical case selection strategy which, while limited in terms of representativeness, maximizes the likelihood that we will observe contentious political usage of WeChat among Chinese citizens. Employing Braun and Clarke’s (2006) analytic process, we extract a series of themes from the transcripts of these focus groups. We overlay our prior theoretical discussion with these thematic insights; leading us to assert that politically contentious discussion or information sharing on WeChat arises only under a relatively narrow set of conditions and that forms of political contention that directly target central government or regime structures are particularly unlikely to emerge. This set of findings leads us to argue that *guanxi* proves a more penetrating analytical construct for understanding the relationship between WeChat and Chinese political contention than social tie strength. We conclude that WeChat’s dominance of the mobile app market in today’s China generates a system re-enforcing rather than a democratizing political dynamic.

Theorising the relationship between WeChat, social connections and China’s contentious politics

Contentious Politics, Social Networks and Digital Communication Technologies

There is a growing body of research that examines the role of digital communication technologies in contentious politics, often under the heading of ‘digital activism’ (for a recent overview, see the collection introduced by Kaun and Uldman, 2018). In this subsection, we begin by discussing research that establishes the centrality of social ties to contentious politics. We go on to outline the existence of research showing that popular digital communication technologies can enable certain types of communicative social networks which become consequential for contentious politics. We then elaborate research demonstrating that the nature of this process is not constant across all types of digital platforms – different platforms enable communicative social networks with varying levels of tie strength.

It is well-established that social tie dynamics can both drive people towards contentious politics and affect the nature of contentious political movements (Diani and McAdam, 2003; Granovetter, 1973; McAdam and Paulsen, 1993). Passy (2003) differentiates three functions of social ties in mobilisation around contentious politics: *the socialization function*; *the structural-connection function*, and *the decision-shaping function*. The socialization function enables individuals to construct their identity in a group and consolidate political consciousness regarding a given issue; the structural-

connection function allows individuals to access mobilization opportunities and convert political consciousness into action; and finally, through the decision-shaping function, social ties exert influence on perceptions of the costs and benefits of participation in political contention.

The concept of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ social ties, as articulated by Granovetter (1973), is vital to this discussion. The notion of social ties having varying degrees of ‘strength’ refers to the nature of relationships between a given individual and others within their social network. Weak(er) tie connections can be characterized as ‘acquaintance’ relationships, where there is relatively little direct contact, intimacy, or emotional intensity. Ties become progressively stronger as one moves towards close friends and family members. Social tie strength can be consequential for patterns of political contestation at both individual and group levels. While weak tie networks hold the potential for contentious political movements to spread beyond well-established groups and affect wider society (*ibid.*), strong tie networks have been found to encourage participation in contentious politics, particularly where this entails an element of personal risk (McAdam, 1986). Strong ties also provide a foundation for building the solidarity and reciprocity that is required to sustain contentious political movements (Granovetter, 1973).

There is evidence that digital communication technology can catalyse processes that connect individuals’ social networks to their propensity to participate in contentious social movements, as well as shaping the extent to which movements rely on individual leaders and centralised bureaucratic control structures. Liu (2014; 2015) argues that mobile telephone-connected communicative networks have initiated and sustained several instances of contentious politics in China. SNSs also represent a technology that can affect the politically contentious usage of an individual’s social ties (Baym, 2015). For instance, Tufekci and Wilson (2012: 266) argue that during the Arab Spring: ‘Facebook (...) provided a means for Egyptians to connect with their large social networks all at once. For the first time in modern Egyptian history, political activists and others could have pointed, broad, and semipublic political discussions across vast social networks.’ SNSs can also facilitate connections between individuals that may otherwise not have been made, captured by the concept of the activation of latent ties (Haythornthwaite, 2002). Furthermore, when digital communication technologies intersect with certain types of social and organisational networks, they can transform the character of a contentious political movement (Bennet and Segerberg, 2012).

However, not all digital technologies facilitate identical patterns of communicative network generation and connection to contentious politics. Liu (2014; 2015) emphasizes the importance of strong ties among individuals who shared each other’s mobile telephone numbers for effective political contention. Valenzuela et al. (2018) find that contentious political participation is facilitated differently depending on the SNS platform: via stronger-tie networks on Facebook and weaker-tie networks on Twitter. Thus, variation in the tie strength of communicative networks occurs across alternative digital communication platforms. Building on this insight, in the next section we explore how WeChat compares with conventional SNSs regarding the tie strength of the communicative networks that it enables.

Theorising how the networks that WeChat enables differ regarding tie strength when compared with SNSs

WeChat can be categorised as a Mobile Instant Messaging Application (Church and de Olivera, 2013: 352) or ‘chat app’ (Barot and Oren, 2015), that is, a mobile technology platform of which the primary function is to allow users to send real-time messages to individuals or groups of contacts at no cost via the internet. There are important differences between SNSs and chat apps when it comes to the nature of the network articulation that they facilitate and the capacity that they afford users to traverse connections made by others within the network. Network articulation as discussed by boyd and Ellison (2007: 111) in their definition of SNSs entails making one’s network visible to those with whom one shares a connection (and *vice versa*). Chat apps rarely provide this functionality. Instead, accessing other users’ profiles typically requires some form of prior direct connection, most commonly in the form of a mobile phone number. Mutual friends who share an individual’s contact details can also establish connections. Group chats are visible only to interlocutors who have either established or been invited to join a group. Finally, many chat apps apply limitations to the scale of any given group discussion – for instance, WeChat doesn’t facilitate chats among groups of more than 500 participants (Harwit, 2016). These features of chat apps combine to set the bar for connection higher than SNSs.

The clarity of this point is somewhat occluded by the fact that WeChat is layering on SNS-like functionality – as exemplified by its ‘Moments’ feature, introduced in 2012. This feature is described by Bhagat (2016: np) as ‘a mix of Facebook and Twitter’. Barot and Orwen argue that, as such hybrid developments continue to take place, the ‘point where a messaging app begins and ends will begin to blur’ (2015: 62). Nonetheless, there are reasons to suspect that an emphasis on connecting networks with relatively strong offline ties will persevere as WeChat continues to evolve. As Wu (2014) points out, the sequencing by which additional functionalities layer on to a chat app is important – the initial structure of the network may dilute but is unlikely to be fully eroded. Indeed, to the extent that WeChat waters down the strength of the connective ties among members of its networks, it risks losing its unique selling point.

Looking at the available evidence, we can see that a relatively higher threshold for connection (compared with other Chinese SNSs) has been observed in existing studies of WeChat networks. For instance, Harwit (2016: 2) notes the ‘limited group orientation’ that characterizes WeChat, while another WeChat user commented that, when introduced to a discussion group, ‘I literally needed someone to tell me the group existed, then to invite me into that group, to bring me into the circle of trust’ (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2016: 9). This invocation of a ‘circle of trust’ has clear implications for the nature of the ties that connect users within chat app networks, namely that they feature a higher portion of strong-tie connections than conventional SNSs. To the extent that this is true, the literature outlined in the previous section would lead us to anticipate that WeChat may serve as a vector for recruitment to contentious politics and holds the potential to shape contentious political movements.

Guanxi as a conception of social connection and its implications for the role of WeChat in China's contentious politics

In this section, we introduce the concept of *guanxi*, which has a wider and deeper meaning than the term 'social ties' (Barbalet, 2015; Fei, 1992; Gold et al. 2002; King, 1991) and consequently leads to more equivocal expectations regarding how WeChat may affect political contestation in China. Qi (2017: 2) defines *guanxi* as: 'a form of long-term interpersonal relation formed and governed by implicit social norms, including *xinyong* (trustworthiness), *mianzi* (face), *renqing* (norms of interpersonal behavior), reciprocity in favour exchange, and obligation.' Barbalet argues that these diverse aspects of the concept are made coherent by *guanxi*'s 'reputational focus' and emphasis on repeated interaction where '*guanxi* exchanges never occur as isolated events, they are serially connected and configured in a network pattern' (2015: 1038; see also: Gold et al. 2002).

As such, *guanxi* acts as a reputational 'identity-marker' (Barbalet, 2015: 1039). However, *guanxi* also provides a means through which social relations are open to manipulation for instrumental ends. *Guanxi* is partly a form of social capital that 'is accumulated with the intention of converting it into economic, political, or symbolic capital' (Gold et al., 2002: 7). 'Modern' *guanxi* in urban settings tends to have a more instrumental construction and differs from the more traditional expressive aspects that obtain in a rural gift economy and based on feelings of warmth and reciprocity (Chen and Chen, 2004). In an instrumental context, *guanxi* must be produced, cultivated, and maintained consciously (Barbalet, 2015; Gold et al., 2002). When employing *guanxi* for mutual benefits is the key objective, risking *guanxi* could have negative consequences for one's political, economic and personal life. This notion of risk aversion is enhanced by the informational opacity and mutual monitoring that characterizes instrumental *guanxi* exchanges. Barbalet (2015) notes that the operation of instrumental *guanxi* conforms to a constraining logic of obligation, as opposed to the enabling logic of influence which is central to the instrumental use of social ties.

These insights lead us toward a conception of social connections which emphasizes their restraining qualities, as opposed to the enabling, or agency-enhancing aspects of social ties. This conclusion rests on an understanding of the interplay between culture and political/institutional context. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been notable for its capacity to leverage the surveillance potentialities of the internet to deepen its political hegemony (Freedom House, 2017; Kalathil and Boas, 2010). He and Su (2018) note that the Chinese state has been particularly successful in adapting to regime-threatening contention post-2010, through a combination of targeting and (publicly) punishing prominent political dissidents and nationally-coordinated repression campaigns directed against digitally-enabled regime-threatening contentious politics networks. Qi (2017) argues that *guanxi* is employed by the state to sustain the *status quo*, via strategies ranging from persuasion to coercion through the connections of law enforcement and secret police officials to their *guanxi* networks, concluding that *guanxi* is a key plank in suppressive strategies employed by the state.

As such, while the multidimensionality, ability to incorporate expressive use, depth and long time-horizon aspects of *guanxi* might offer important resources for actors employing social connections via WeChat to engage in contentious politics, the political context of contemporary China lessens the likelihood that these enabling qualities will prevail. Reputation-protection, risk aversion, informational opacity, and interpersonal monitoring are all aspects that both separate *guanxi* from social networks conceptually (Barbalet, 2015) and, in a context of intense monitoring and use of suppressive strategies by the Chinese state, point towards greater pessimism regarding the capacity of WeChat to spur engagement in Chinese contentious politics.

Empirical Analysis

Data and Methodology

This study draws on data gathered from three focus groups of active WeChat users conducted in the Spring of 2017. All participants were Chinese nationals on either student or visitor visas with the intention of returning to China after their time in the UK. Two focus groups involved students who combine high degrees of digital literacy with interest in digital media and politics. We denote these groups as ‘Student Group (SG) 1’ and ‘Student Group (SG) 2’ in subsequent discussion. A third group, labelled Non-Student Group (NSG), is comprised of professionals who work in either the public or private sectors in China and are staying on short term visas in the UK, this group was not filtered by level of interest in media and politics. SG1 consisted of four male and two female students; SG2 was made up of two male and four female students; while the NSG group was comprised of four female participants and one male. Among a total of 17 respondents, 10 were aged 20-29, and 7 were aged 30-39, capturing the age brackets within which the largest proportions of Chinese web users cluster (CNNIC, 2017: 49).

While we acknowledge that our ability to paint a representative picture of the Chinese population is circumscribed by this methodological approach, we argue that these groups, particularly SG1 and SG2, represent ‘most likely’ (Flyvberg, 2006: 14) critical cases for the contention that WeChat represents a communication technology that can both facilitate and shape contentious politics in contemporary China. The logic of this approach to case selection has been memorably characterised by Levy as ‘the inverse Sinatra inference—if I cannot make it there, I cannot make it anywhere’ (2002: 442). Our strategy for contending that these groups represent ‘most likely’ critical cases operates at three levels. Firstly, SG1 and SG2 are composed of individuals who have expressed interest in media and politics, marking them out as more likely than a typical citizen to engage in political contestation using digital tools. Secondly, a key benefit of talking to Chinese citizens in the UK is the relatively greater openness to discussing contentious political matters that characterises the UK cultural, legal and political environment relative to China. While we cannot eliminate the possibility that participants will avoid ‘on the record’ discussion of their engagement with political contention due to fear of persecution, the UK context lessens this risk. Thirdly, focus groups’ principal advantage for our purposes is that they can encourage participants to share ideas that may be sensitive and thus difficult to elicit (Vaughn et al., 1996) and our ethical protocol, which

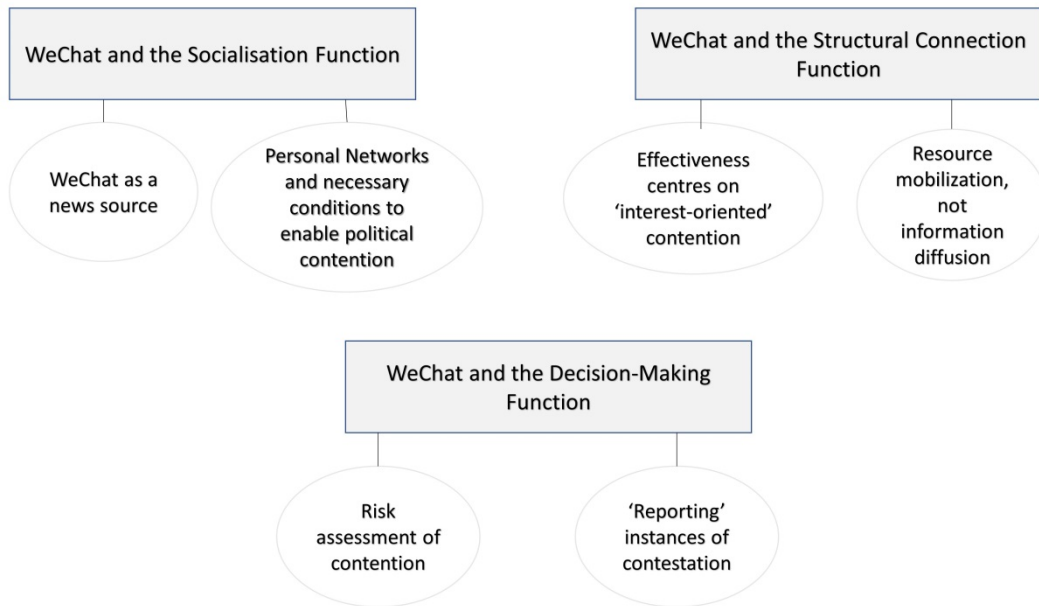
was shared with respondents to obtain informed consent, specified that respondents would be anonymized. As such, the composition of our focus groups, the context of the fieldwork, and the research technique employed cohere to generate a ‘most likely’ scenario for the observation of politically contentious politics being enabled and shaped by WeChat among Chinese citizens.

Our conceptualisation of ‘contentious politics’ chimes with our ‘most likely’ critical case selection approach in covering the widest possible ambit of contentious politics to maximise our likelihood of observing the occurrence of such politics on WeChat. Our approach mirrors that of Tilly and Tarrow (2007: 4), who situate contentious politics at the intersection of three concepts: contention, collective action and politics. In conducting our focus groups, we understood all three of these concepts in their broadest sense. Our conceptualisation of contention ranges from challenging political authority structures to questioning dominant societal norms. Similarly, collective action is understood to range from participation in protest activities to the act of engaging in a contentious political discussion. Finally, politics is defined as incorporating the many levels at which political power is exercised: from the international to the national to the local and the personal.

We followed conventional guidelines in conducting our focus groups (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009), using a topic guide to shape the discussion, which was led by a moderator. The focus group interviews were conducted in Chinese and each discussion lasted between 70 and 90 minutes. In the design of the focus groups, we adopted an open strategy – inviting participants to talk about how they use WeChat for engaging in contentious political discussion as well as real or hypothetical contentious political activities.

Our analytical approach is a theoretically-informed thematic analysis. We followed a methodology for the thematic analysis of focus group data established by Braun and Clark (2006). We began by creating a set of translated transcripts derived from digital audio recordings of the focus groups. We grouped points, perceptions and stories according to Passy’s (2003) framework as bearing on socialization functions, structural connection functions or decision-making functions of social ties in activating participation in contentious politics. We then examined each set of texts to ascertain whether and how WeChat influences the relationship between social connections and engagement with contentious politics – extracting key insights and themes. An overview of the major themes extracted is provided in Figure 1, and each theme is explored in greater detail in the discussion that follows.

FIGURE 1



Findings: WeChat and the socialization function

The role of digital technologies in the political socialisation process centres on their functions regarding the provision of information and engagement of users in discussion. We found two consistent themes that emerged under this heading across our focus groups. Firstly, WeChat is often used as an alternative news source for those who seek interpretative information about current affairs. This interpretation comes both in the conventional sense of discovering opinions about news items and in a more technologically-specific sense of using one's network to gauge the significance of news items. The second recurrent theme that emerged under this heading related to how social connections embodied via chat apps can either inhibit or liberate political discussion – depending on a combination of the offline patterns of levels of trust existing between group members, the levels of offline political discussion that characterise a given chat group, and the presence or absence of professional connections among group members.

We begin by examining ideas that centre on WeChat as an alternative news source, focusing on its SNS-like communicative affordances. WeChat has features that combine attributes of both Twitter and Facebook. It enables users to access information from both *gongzhonghao* ('official accounts' in WeChat English version) which are Twitter-like news feed accounts run by organizations or individuals, and *pengyouquan* ('moments' in WeChat's English version), similar to Facebook's 'news feed'. Users receive 'pushed' information from both types of network. 11 of our 17 respondents listed 'obtaining information about current affairs' as one of their key motivations for using WeChat. According to our respondents, political information received on WeChat public

accounts is not expected to be broad, objective or impartial. Instead, users expect customised background information and opinion about current affairs:

WeChat could be called an information source [or] an important node in the web of online information... I don't use WeChat for breaking news. I use Weibo instead. Weibo has a broad range of news sources [...] I use WeChat for in-depth reporting and opinion pieces. Official accounts on WeChat are not bound by the limits of length etc. and often provide insights into current events that I'm interested in (Respondent #7 female 20-29)

We also noted that news feeds from friends are used to gauge the prominence of certain issues:

I follow the current affairs news shared by my friends via their *pengyouquan*. Maybe it is not always the hottest topic because one of my friends shared it, but it must be a hot topic if everyone's sharing it on *pengyouquan*. (Respondent #8 female 20-29)

However, the ability to curate and share news via *pengyouquan* does not guarantee the unbridled expression of individual opinion – instead, it emerged that the nature of the relationships which users enjoy with their contacts offline act as a crucial determinant of whether contentious political communication takes place on WeChat. A first consideration is the extent of trust among members of a given group. Participants reported a strategy of limiting contentious political discussion to small networks characterised by high levels of inter-personal trust.

I comment on current affairs within my classmate's group because we have known each other for a very long time and known each other well. Even my opinion is wrong; they wouldn't mind. On *pengyouquan* or in other groups, I rarely make any comments at all. (Respondent #17 female 30-39)

This notion that trust is a vital pre-requisite to engaging in contentious political discussion appears to be driven by the lack of anonymity that characterises WeChat. For instance, Respondent #7 (female 20-29) adaptively comments on current affairs on the more public platform Weibo under her *Xiaohao* (literal meaning: little account) pseudonym, while avoiding similar discussions on WeChat:

I don't dare to comment on news or current affairs [on WeChat] because it contains too much personal information. Other people can easily recognize me. I use my anonymous *Xiaohao* [on Weibo] in commenting, especially when the comments are criticism. ... I have one *Xiaohao* which contains zero personal information, and I never use it to post or repost news. I use this account to solely speak my mind on issues relevant to women's rights. Those who endorse patriarchal viewpoints [...] often attack me.

Respondent #8 (female, 20-29) shared similar thoughts:

Weibo is a very public space for me, and it makes me feel relaxed, I can express myself freely. ... but on WeChat, I'm very careful, and I care about my image in the eyes of family and friends.

Data from SG1 and SG2 shows that a second pre-requisite for political conversation to be initiated on WeChat is that political discussions are mirrored offline and considered acceptable within a group.

I only discuss current affairs with close male friends, sometimes on a one-to-one basis, just like we meet in real life, face-to-face. I wouldn't want to discuss current affairs or comment on news in public on WeChat. (Respondent #10 male 20-29).

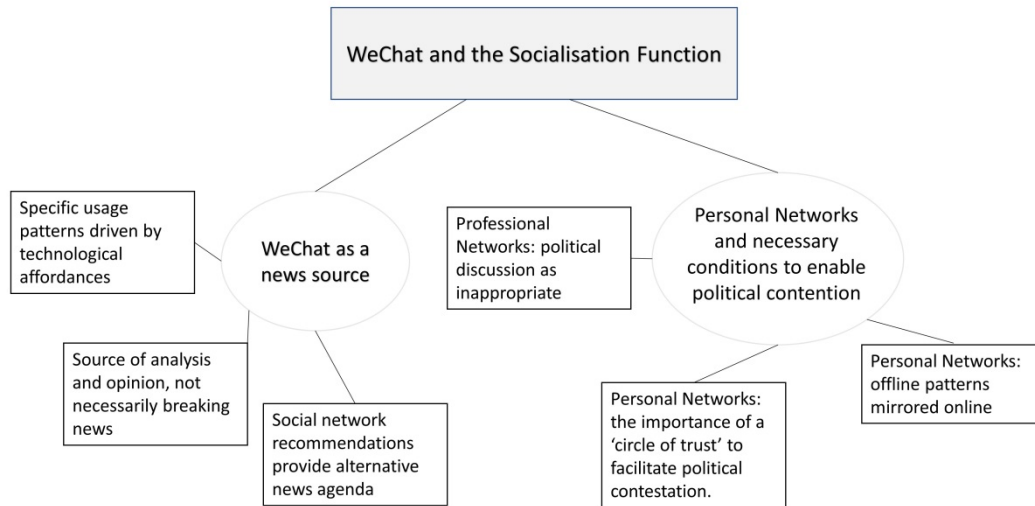
You have your teachers, classmates, families, relatives, colleagues connected on WeChat. These are not the kind of people with whom you would like to share your views on current affairs. (Respondent #6 male 20-29)

There was discussion among the NSG of how offline ties could inhibit political discussion within the context of work-related communication. This group generally regarded contentious political discussion on WeChat as 'annoying' or 'inappropriate' behaviour. One participant shared an anecdote about her colleague who was warned by his line manager to stop discussing current affairs within WeChat social groups:

It is not appropriate for him to expose his political views among colleagues, is it? (...) We are not interested in knowing what he thinks of North Korea (Respondent #16 female 30-39).

Thus, it seems that WeChat serves to initiate and sustain contentious political socialisation only in a rather narrow range of circumstances. Very high levels of interpersonal trust, prior offline patterns of political discussion, and non-work contexts all appear to be necessary pre-requisites for sharing one's political opinion with a given group of contacts. These findings appear to chime more closely with the constraining elements of *guanxi* than with the enabling dynamic implied by a focus on tie strength. It appears that risk aversion and reputation management operate to induce silence toward political issues on WeChat as a rule of thumb, with a quite specific set of circumstances having to come together for this rule to be discarded.

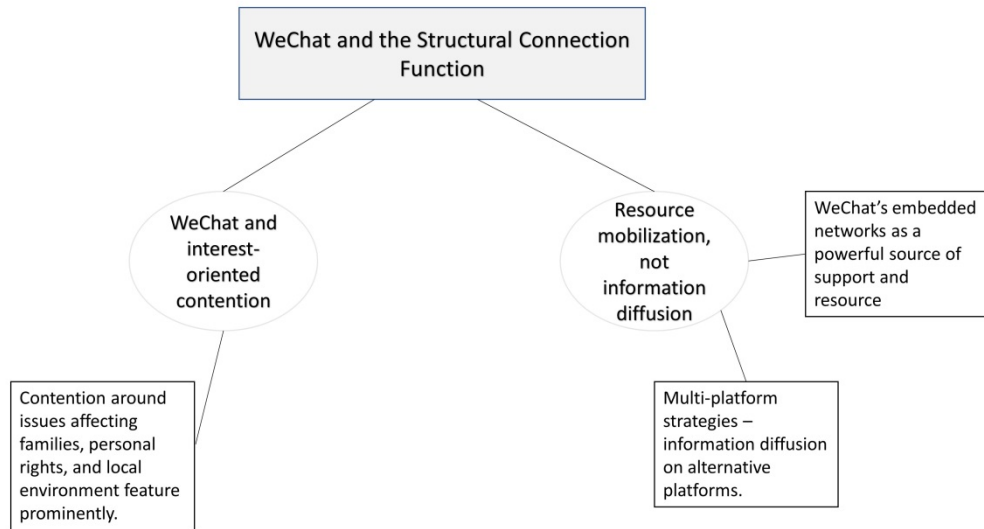
FIGURE 2



Findings: WeChat and structural-connection function

The structural-connection function of social networks within contentious politics captures their ability to facilitate mobilisation and collective political action (Passy, 2003). In our analysis of the focus group transcripts under this heading, two key sub-themes emerged. Firstly, a consistent notion was that WeChat is well-suited to organise a protest on matters of material self-interest to groups or individuals. Secondly, most of the WeChat use described under this heading centred on resource generation (regarding practical and material support), rather than information diffusion, which appears to be more easily achieved via more ‘public’ applications such as micro-blogging platform Weibo. These themes and the sub-themes to which they give rise are represented in Figure 3.

FIGURE 3



We begin with a discussion of the theme of the nature of the contention facilitated by WeChat. He and Su (2018: 402) contend that most public acts of contention in contemporary China are ‘interest-oriented’, focusing on the material well-being of participants and targeting geographically-localized antagonists - thus posing little substantive or ideological threat to the broader political system. They contrast this with rarer ‘value-oriented’ acts of political contention where participants ‘do not have direct material interests in movement claims’. According to He and Su, value-oriented contentions are far more likely than interest-oriented contentions to become ‘anti-system’ because of the broad nature of the demands that they generate and their statewide scope. As we can see in the following comment of a respondent in SG1, the ‘interest-oriented’ characterization appears to offer the best fit to WeChat-enabled contention:

To the best of my knowledge, much so-called civic activism centres around the well-being of those participants’ children. I know one case involving a food poisoning incident in a primary school. When children were given poisoned food by the school by accident, the school managers tried very hard to hide the truth from the public. They claimed that those children were suffering from a contagious disease. Suspicious parents then shared information among themselves in WeChat groups about symptoms of their children and comparing medical notes. They eventually found out the truth by exchanging information among themselves (Respondent #1 female 20-29)

As Fei argues, ‘social relationships in China possess a self-centred quality’ (1992:65) and the egocentric nature of *guanxi* facilitates ‘elastic networks’ which can strengthen (or weaken) existing ties based on individuals’ conscious decisions. Social connections among WeChat users appear particularly powerful in connecting individuals

affected by interest-oriented issues. For instance, one of our focus group participants shared this experience:

Grassroots protest can be easily organised online. In my hometown, when the municipal government decided to give the green light to the proposal of building a chemical factory in the city centre, people organised a 'stroll' [euphemism for protest] by connecting on WeChat. When there is a sufficient number of people, civic action is possible. In Southeast China those economically well-off regions, urban dwellers are very much against chemical factories or other heavy pollutants. Such activities are very common (Respondent #3 male 20-29).

The social connections that are embedded in WeChat are regarded as a key support-building resource for instances of interest-oriented contention. When asked what digital tools they would choose if they were to recruit supporters around a hypothetical campaign of political contestation, respondents' first choice was unanimously WeChat:

I would start from people that I know well as they are the ones can be convinced. That means WeChat [would be the chosen digital tool]. I'll contact individuals separately. One-to-one. (Respondent #9 female 20-29)

WeChat, as it influences people's hearts and feelings. (Respondent #8 female 20-29)

WeChat, as I've known every friend on WeChat. (Respondent #10 male 20-29)

WeChat. I could try to convince others and also influence them with my behaviour and activity. I used to volunteer to teach in the rural area in China for a year. My activity influenced friends [on WeChat] and some of them, about 20 to 30 people, supported me by donation of money and books. (Respondent #11 female 20-29)

While WeChat thus has an important role to play in initiating contentious political activism; more 'public' SNSs such as Weibo can magnify the impact of local issues by inserting them into the national public agenda, as narrated by one respondent about the school food poisoning incident discussed above:

After a lengthy discussion among themselves within a WeChat group, these parents published their story on Weibo. Once it is posted on Weibo, it turned from a local issue into a national issue and gained support from people across the country. It is a popular solution now in China: if the local government does not attend the issue, the solution is to 'put this issue on [Weibo] hot search' [*re sou*]. (Respondent #1 female 20-29)

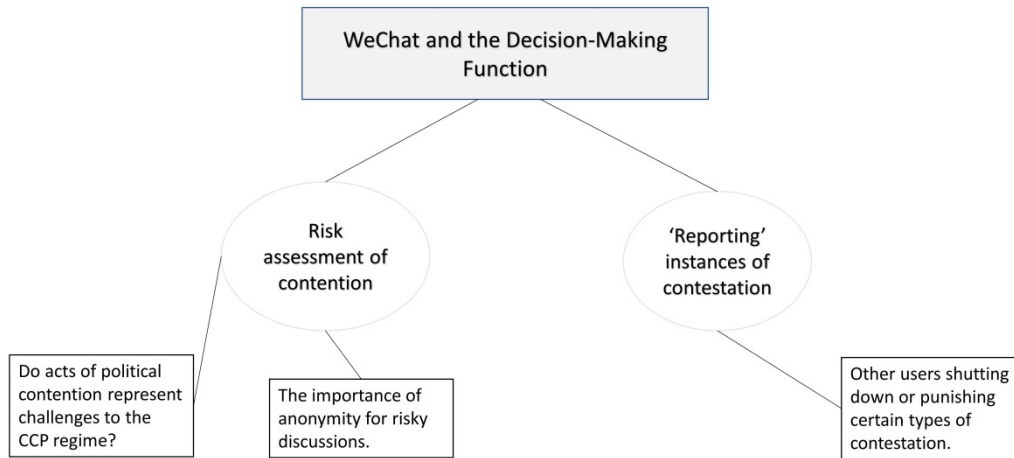
This finding echoes our earlier discussion of the respective roles of strong and weak ties in initiating/sustaining versus disseminating contentious political movements, indicating that WeChat-enabled strong-tie communicative social networks have considerable potential when it comes to initiating and sustaining contentious political

engagement, while conventional SNSs have the edge in information diffusion. However, the efficacy of WeChat is limited to connecting individuals around interest-oriented contentions –echoing the caution-inducing effects of *guanxi* in a politically repressive context, as well as its emphasis on obligation over influence. We find a similar pattern of circumscribed contestation when it comes to the decision-making function.

Findings: WeChat and the decision-making function

The decision-making function in Passy’s (2003) framework refers to the role of social networks in enabling and motivating individuals to decide to participate in contentious political activities. Two themes emerged from our transcript under this heading: the notion of a ‘risk assessment’ of potentially contentious activities; and the role of monitoring and reporting of content. These ideas and their sub-themes are visualized in Figure 4 below.

FIGURE 4



WeChat users in our focus groups were very much aware of the potential danger associated with online posting and information exchange in China, leading them to develop strategies for assessing and minimising risk. In a context where even acts of interest-oriented political contention can escalate unexpectedly and result in punishment for those involved (He and Su, 2018), it is unsurprising that caution and self-censorship are widely reported:

I received a friend’s invitation to vote via WeChat for her father for his participation in a calligraphy competition. For such activities, of course, I cast my vote. If the invitation is about policy or politics, I won’t take part. I do tend to protect myself. (Respondent #8 female 20-29)

I try to leave no traces at all online... I'm even regretting having a WeChat account now. I used to make sarcastic comments on current affairs online and later found my account blocked. (Respondent #12 male 20-29)

Freedom of speech is not quite a reality in China. [...] Say, even if you post comments on WeChat, you could face no response at all. (Respondent #14 female 30-39)

However, it would be overly simplistic to dismiss the role of WeChat in any form of political contention on the basis of the above comments. For instance, respondent #7 discussed the following practice:

I am still posting on messages against gender discrimination in employment on both Weibo and WeChat. I might have convinced some people. Any social reform starts from someone till everybody gains awareness. When I spend some time every day on such 'trivial' issues, I persuade someone, that's my efforts made in making social progress. (Respondent #7 female 20-29)

Gender equality has been a political issue of which discussion tolerated, if it is not endorsed, by the central government in China since the late 1970s (Wang, 2008). Therefore, while gender equality may qualify as a 'value-oriented' area of contention, it arguably fails to meet the threshold of 'anti-system' political contention – thus presenting a tolerable risk profile for individuals sufficiently motivated to air their thoughts on the topic.

A second key theme arises from the fact that WeChat users in China face uncertainty regarding whether or when their chats are monitored for political content. In recent years, closure of the internet as a space for political resistance was exacerbated by a growing insistence on 'real name registration' for web services (Freedom House, 2017). This phenomenon co-exists with a regulatory environment which places substantial responsibility on service providers to monitor and report politically subversive content as well as facilitating reporting by individual users of politically contentious content posted by other users. One respondent from the NSG discussion explained that he reported several WeChat messages for a range of reasons:

I came across many pornographic, violent, rumour-filled, or politically offensive messages. I reported those posts to the administrator. It's easy to do – you only need to click the 'report' button at the bottom of the post. I'm not working for the government or anything; I just don't like the fact that some people are being irresponsible with their online comments. There are a lot of posts about social injustice from my hometown; I don't like to read them. A, I don't know how truthful those messages are; B, I can't do anything about it. (Respondent #13 male 30-39)

Here, as with our earlier analysis of discussion behaviours, trust and strong offline connections appear to be an important part of the equation in deciding to undertake or organise politically contentious activities via WeChat:

If you are not familiar with everyone in the group, it's best not to [approach other people for civic activities]. If other people don't share your view, they could be offended and even report you. If you are reported, whatever activities you are planning will be killed in their cradle. (Respondent #1 female 20-29)

Conclusions

At the heart of our initial motivation for this research project was an intuition that the strong tie communicative networks that WeChat enables might catalyse the generation and shaping of a new era of Chinese contentious politics. Authors such as Gladwell (2010) have argued that the paucity of strong tie connections on SNSs was precisely what undermined claims that they could initiate and sustain revolutionary contentious political movements in authoritarian regimes. The importance of strong ties for initiating and sustaining contentious political action in challenging contexts is well-established, going back to the foundational work of Granovetter (1973). China's domestic political regime certainly provides a challenging context for the development of contentious politics (Freedom House, 2017) and WeChat's limited network articulation and traversing mechanisms set a high bar for connection – enabling strong tie communicative networks.

However, we found that the narrowness of the circumstances in which contentious politics emerges as a topic for discussion on WeChat (limited to high trust connections which mirror a prior pattern of offline political discussion and do not overlap with professional networks) was striking. The limited range of interest-oriented and 'safe' topics on which WeChat-enabled contentious discussions and mobilisations centre was also a predominant theme. Taken in combination, these findings lead us to conclude that WeChat provides barren soil for contentious politics generally and is particularly inimical to generating ideas, connections or activities that may undermine the CCP regime. These conclusions should be set against our methodological approach, which was designed to provide research conditions that maximised our likelihood of observing of WeChat-enabled political contention. While we cannot characterise the overall distribution of such activities across China's WeChat users on the basis of our research, it seems to us implausible that less politically-interested users operating within China would be *more* likely to engage in political contention via WeChat than our respondents. We would encourage future researchers to build on the evidence base created for this paper by engaging with larger numbers of research subjects from a broader array of socio-demographic groups in order to better grasp the scale and nuances of WeChat's role in China's contentious politics.

Our findings can be at least partly explained by a combination of the suppressive strategies developed by the CCP and the advance of instrumental *guanxi* in contemporary Chinese society. Given the reputation management, risk aversion, the sense of constraint that characterises *guanxi* exchanges (Barbalet, 2015) and the punishments that anti-system political contention entail (Freedom House, 2017; He and Su, 2018), it seems safer to say nothing about politics at all, rather than risk or strain one's *guanxi* network.

To the extent that WeChat facilitates political mobilisation through strong-tie networks, the increasingly instrumental nature of *guanxi* means that such facilitation is focused almost exclusively on the ends pursued by individuals and small groups in day-to-day life – resulting in limited, interest-oriented contention. Finally, the fact that the state uses *guanxi* networks as part of a repressive political strategy (Qi, 2017) means that each additional connection in a chat group represents an increased level of personal risk, rather than a mobilisation opportunity – meaning that only ‘safe’ or state-approved topics become a focus of politically contentious behaviours. Taken in the round, these considerations point to *guanxi* as a more penetrating conceptualisation of social connections than social ties for understanding how WeChat bears upon contemporary patterns of political contestation in China.

Substantively, our analysis implies that WeChat’s dominance of the mobile phone application market acts as a stabilising force for the CCP regime. MacKinnon’s (2011: 33) influential characterisation of China as a regime of ‘networked authoritarianism’ captures a situation where ‘while one party remains in control, a wide range of conversations about the country’s problems nonetheless rage on websites and social networking services.’ This idea is bolstered by the extensive analysis of Chinese social media censorship on SNSs conducted by King, Pan and Roberts (2013), which shows that critical commentary about the state, its leaders and policies often go uncensored although attempts to spur mobilisation around such criticism are rapidly shut down. Rauchfleisch and Schäfer (2015) observe numerous instances where the rapidity of digital reaction on SNSs to certain stories has meant that the state was unable to effectively exercise censorship. However, in the light of our findings, the growth of WeChat’s popularity at the expense of SNSs (Harwit, 2016) and the increasing incorporation of WeChat into the e-government infrastructure of China (CNNIC 2017; 2018) combine to indicate that even such limited assessments of the democratising potential of the internet in China may prove to be overly optimistic.

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