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Tom McDonald, *Social Media in Rural China*. Wang Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*,  
Londres, UCL Press, 2016.

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- 1 These two books resulted from a comparative research project on the use of social networks entitled *Why We Post*, which in 2016 led to a series of 11 monographs by country (India, Turkey, Italy, etc.). Two of them dealt with China: one by Wang Xinyuan looks at the use of social media in industrial China, and the other by Tom McDonald focuses on rural China.



- 2 This is a rare initiative backed by European funding for carrying out long-term ethnographic investigations (15 months' field research), structured according to comparable research questions. The two books contain participant observations, more or less formal interviews with residents in selected localities, and the collection of materials from social networks, especially made accessible through developing personal relationships with those surveyed. McDonald chose a town in Shandong Province called Anshan (6,000 residents, or 31,000 with neighbouring villages included). Wang picked Goodpath, an industrial town in Zhejiang Province, two-thirds of whose 62,000 residents were migrant workers. Rather than industrial China, the book in fact focuses on the experience of migration from rural areas to the cities.
- 3 Collective coordination led to a similar structure in the two works: following a methodological introduction and an overview of the main online services used by those surveyed (QQ, Wechat, Renren, microblogs, and Momo at Anshan; QQ, Wechat, and

Weibo at Goodpath), the authors describe the types of visuals frequently shared; the way in which social relations are maintained and developed through the networks; how social norms are practised and tested through these diverse forms of socialisation; and finally, how the uses of social media reflect the place of individuals in society in relation to the state or to other institutions such as religion. This reviewer cannot but underline the complementarity of these two books, albeit a decade later, with her own, which largely dealt with these aspects through in-depth interviews conducted in 2006 among Internet users in the urban setting of Beijing.<sup>1</sup>

- 4 However, these two books are based on a much vaster ethnographic terrain. Especially praise-worthy is the depth of observation made possible through field work lasting 15 months, which helped document digital practices in their local context and gained the confidence of those surveyed. Thus, rather than statements about cash transactions, it is the uses of social networks that were observed and documented during the study. The long duration also helped in observing the evolution of practices over time, even as those surveyed gradually went through different stages of their lives and were led to re-evaluate their rapports with dominant social norms. The authors thus show that the relationship of intimacy or visibility is renegotiated at the time of marriage (McDonald), or that migrants reconfigure their friendship networks alongside the migration process (Wang), playing on the different functionalities and groups the platforms put at their disposal.
- 5 Observations regarding gender relationships constitute one of the most interesting aspects of these studies. In fact, statistics have long shown a highly differentiated utilisation of social networks by men and women in China. By showing how women are pushed to shoulder a “guardian of morality” role that obliges them, for instance, to drastically reduce their use of social media following marriage, McDonald offers a persuasive explanation.
- 6 Developments regarding the rapport of those surveyed with participation in political life are equally interesting, despite not constituting the heart of the investigation. Wang shows how corruption, which pervades daily life especially in labour recruitment, helps in defusing potential demands at local levels and how Wechat, by facilitating transfers of small sums, contributes to this process. She thus stresses that when politics surfaces, as for instance through injustices suffered at workplaces, recourse to social networks is often the last resort, and could be in vain, given the lack of capacity to draw the attention of the greater public. McDonald, for his part, shows that social networks are rarely deemed appropriate venues for voicing criticisms. Thus, “controls over acceptable content often become codified into cultural norms” (p. 148). That was also the approach this reviewer fielded in her study of how netizens expressed themselves in the urban milieu, with the hypothesis of a “normative framework” that incorporated some of the Party’s requirements, such as conducting oneself in a “civilised” and “reasonable” manner, part of a slew of norms relating to an idealised image of modernity.<sup>2</sup>
- 7 The issue of connection to modernity promised by urban lifestyles is central to Wang’s work. She shows that migration to the industrial city is largely motivated by aspiration to a “modern” lifestyle, which nevertheless remains out of reach for a section of this population, given the conditions of work and accommodation. Social media then become a kind of escape mechanism, allowing indirect access to goods and services making up the idealised modernity through the exchange of content and the purchase

of virtual privileges (such as VIP status). This goes along with a rupture in people's socialisation brought on by migration. Thus, physical and moral distancing vis-à-vis the native village but also the preservation of family links takes the form of management of friend lists and of online visibility as well as in practices such as the sharing of religious images (the Guanyin figure, for instance) or of messages of wisdom meant to be read by those near and dear. Meanwhile, it is regrettable that this trajectory is presented as a sign of social determinism, migration being conceptualised as a journey towards modernity (even though the author is careful to reject any technological determinism, insisting that social media are not the cause of these changes). A greater contextualisation of the place of discourse on modernity in China, especially in the Party's propaganda and advertising and their appropriation by different categories of the population, would have helped in more critically clarifying these dimensions.

- 8 McDonald has perhaps been better able to articulate his work around a guiding principle, choosing the notion of visibility. With this flexible concept he is able to show not only how practices are largely determined by social norms, but also how individuals seek to regain elbow room by playing on the varying degrees of visibility of platforms. He more critically highlights the performative and at times ambivalent dimension of publication on social networks, demonstrating, for instance, the accumulation of emotional debt represented by photo albums for a baby's 100<sup>th</sup> day. He also draws attention to the selective re-appropriation of icons and symbols linked to traditional values such as filial piety or patriarchy that renders them adaptable and in a sense more compatible with the younger generations' values, without ostensibly breaking with their obligations.
- 9 At a time when much work on China's Internet is focused on urban areas, and on more recently established networks such as Weibo or Wechat (Weixin), these ethnographic studies are useful in showing that the instant messaging service QQ and the Qzone personal page remain essential platforms among social media in China, especially in the rural milieu and among migrants, even though the latter have recourse to a much larger panel of services. The studies thus add significantly to a very limited number on these subjects.
- 10 The two freely accessible books are conceived as introductions for the public at large, theoretical references being deliberately kept limited and relegated to the last parts. They offer the generalist reader very vivid and contextualised descriptions of social media usages in two very different milieus in China, but perhaps leave the more specialist readers craving more in terms of theoretical discussions and overviews of existing literature. They nevertheless represent an invitation to read the works of synthesis stemming from this collective research project, which ought to meet the demand for more theoretical generalisations.<sup>3</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Séverine Arsène, *Internet et politique en Chine* (Internet and politics in China), Paris, Karthala, 2011.
  2. Séverine Arsène, "De l'autocensure aux mobilisations" (From self-censorship to social protest), *Revue française de science politique* (French journal of political science), Vol. 61, No. 5, 2011, pp. 893-915.
  3. Daniel Miller et al., *How the World Changed Social Media*, Why We Post, London, UCL Press, 2017, <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/how-world-changed-social-media> (accessed 11 April 2017).
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