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Digital ethnographer as a (perhaps) forgotten guest: the case of a teacher-student chat during Covid-19 lockdown in China

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Social media have been described as a space of possible democratization where the absence of vertical power distribution systems allows the sharing of information and knowledge (re)making (Bruns 2015). This perspective may appear rather utopian when contextualized in the digital ecology of Chinese social space, which is characterized by an intrusion of the party-state in terms of technology, legislation, and media production to achieve internet sovereignty on national branding as a geopolitical leverage (Budnitsky and Jia 2018). Therefore, any attempt at digital ethnography should consider that the Chinese digital setting is a space of compromise, resistance, censorship, and consequent self-censorship. Drawing from this premise, this case study investigates a teacher-student university chat in the WeChat domain, first classified as a learning space and gradually transformed into a normative space of control and distribution of best practices and rules during the pandemic wave that hit China in 2022.

As a geographer located in the Global North, I try to challenge my positionality while assembling the pieces of what resembled the emergence of a new normative space amidst the implementation of lockdown practices in China, affecting both the higher education system and the material mobile daily performances of students, professors, administrative staff and service workers within campuses. Part of me feels the urgent need to disclose the data by evaluating the benefits and potential risks for the informants (cf., Grant 2017). On the other hand, being an empathetic researcher requires asking “whether I am willing to put myself in the other’s place” (Xiang and Wu 2023, 116). There follows a discursive, not so much imaginative ethnography where names, nicknames, age, gender, academic roles, calligraphy, bodies, and technologies such as smartphones, pictures, and antigenic tests are the actors of a new narrative that is exposed through a WeChat room using a forgotten account. I legitimately occupy the space as a previous content creator and later as an observer; I am also reminded that Tencent, Inc.

prohibits users from unauthorized disclosure of other people's data (Weixin, n.d.). By visualizing and collecting screenshots of volatile data in an autocratic regime, I embody the epistemological bias in considering localized data as different from those circulating (or not) in the Global North (Akbari 2020). At the same time, the data appear on my screen as the result of a distraction, an impasse in the technocratic system of online censorship, of which, of course, I wish no one would be blamed. The teacher-student chat room was perceived as a private digital space, intrinsically structured on an emotional idea of trust and security in sharing content. Students should be invited by the professor or an administrator in the figure of the *banzhang* (班长 "class leader") to become part of the chat. Therefore, there is a selective process that indicates the creation of a privileged community. This characteristic of the chat room allowed the material shift in content production from the academic to the medical subject, being WeChat users already informed of the transformative potential of the chat room space to share sensitive topics (e.g., Grant 2017) and health awareness (e.g., Zhang *et al.* 2017; Wang 2023).

The "elephant in the room" witnessed the rising of new power dynamics between peers as well as the psychological frustration of young people left alone morally and physically by those who were supposed to be their mentors but were indeed scared of the invisible virus circulating within the university infrastructures, being all located in an ambiance where tools were scarce, and creativity was demanded. It also took part in (dis-)organized training offered by local medical staff to educate about the correct procedure to have trustworthy results doing the weekly mandatory tests that all the campus dwellers were supposed to take by themselves. One student (the so-called *banzhang*) typically recorded informative videos and uploaded them to the chat room (e.g., the one circulating in WeChat on how to wash your hands properly). The "anti-extractivist elephant" empathized with the students' fear and disappointment in uploading and displaying a picture of the positive Covid test, which could only signify more days spent in quarantine, isolated in the dormitory, unable to perform the daily routine of walking the few meters separating them from the canteen. Lunchtime turned into a very alienating moment: Lists were compiled to assign a defined timeslot in which a certain number of students could step outside on alternate days. Pictures were meticulously classified by showing the mechanics of a PCR test, followed by personal data such as the enrolment year, room number, date, and the student's signature. The class leader and the student party representatives would then collect the data, which were systematized and later shared with local authorities. Students were held accountable for sharing trustworthy data without mediation or help from the adults co-producing the digital space of the chat room. In fact, looking at the chat room through the lens of Lefebvre's idea of space as a relational power performance (Lefebvre 1991), the pre-pandemic chat room was conceived as a space where professors could share political and organizing directives, but also extra homework, lectures, information on inter-university competitions, and student jobs related to the field of study, helping grow the department's reputation. During a "normal" semester, the chat could have been mainly populated by content produced by the institute's director and their staff and passively received by the students: Exercises, suggestions on how to achieve better grades, or even provoking sentences asking the students to show up on time and be more active during the online teaching class held via VooV.^[1] Therefore, most of the conversation was unidirectionally producing a top-down derivative knowledge, shaping the chat room as an official normative space using digital tools. Navigating the lockdown crisis, the chat room became the performative space for a shift of power/responsibility, which was reallocated to the student representative groups. These were called to explore the possibility of a soft but undeniable form of governmentality, establishing

peer-to-peer autocracy and corporeal control while being at the same time trapped in the discursive mechanism of party legitimation. Fear and frustration transpired from these constantly observed twenty-year-old persons. Hence, the repeated sending of the same message to the audience, paraphrasing the content using different characters and syntactic to clarify the message: "Sign in to the Corona Tracking App, hurry up! [The virus] may spread soon in our institute... Is the ID necessary to sign in? Yes, it is [...] At 6:15 am, meet outside the sports center; absolutely wear a mask, and bring your ID and your phone (缺一不可 *queyibuke*)." Some days later, the same message reminded the students to wear warm clothes (多穿点衣服 *duo chuan dian yifu*): "Form groups according to your class year and wait in line [for test inspection]." And also: "I am forwarding a message from our director that all classes are canceled. Do not be anxious and wait for more info." A message to all the class leaders reads: "Attention to all *banzhang*, please reach out to the students, inform them about the canteen timesheets and procedure, [...] if they need to pick up the food, [inform them that] meal box is for free." When more restrictions were implemented, the student party representative could inform the class leaders that "[...] the night before they have to write down a list of all students needing a meal box, no one can go out freely, not even the students delivering the food. The food will be delivered at 5:00 pm in front of the dormitory main door; please, everyone, order as much food as possible [laughing crying emoji with a hand covering the face as a sign of disbelief]" The students in charge of picking up the food (in general, one in any building) were informed through a message posted in the chat room. Breakfast was also uniformly delivered (milk, eggs, and bread). Addressing the student participants by name was instead a way to force their presence in the chat room, asking them to abide by the self-monitoring rules advocating a sense of individual shame within a collective organization. People not delivering PCR tests on time early in the morning were primarily targeted. Occasionally, instructors could share some homework or try and cheer up the students, for instance, by sharing the People Daily's post circulating online (14 March 2022), which said: "[...] Human beings cannot choose their hardship and pain, but these may strengthen them to become invincible (无坚不摧, 战无不胜 *wujian bucu, zhanwubusheng*)."

To conclude, I justified my early Covid-situated silent presence in the chat room as a non-participant ethnographic observation. However, questioning my privileged positionality as a forgotten actor outside the digital control regime turned the chat room into an uncomfortable space due to empathy and scrutiny. As a result, the writing became a narrative autoethnographic exercise of care, trying to balance data protection and the urge to let the chat room speak as an agentive digital space where, in the temporal conjuncture of pandemic China, political representative roles were reversed, and monolithic, top-down academic power structures became irrelevant to navigate the crisis. It raises questions about intergenerational empathy (cf. Qin *et al.* 2022) and individual and collective responsibility within pre-established digital communities. Additionally, it sheds light on possibly perverse mechanisms of young people's empowerment, with trauma consequences that will necessitate further studies. As a method, WeChat demonstrates its flaws and peculiarities by acting as a subproduct of the Chinese party-state national branding interest, with highly normative purposes and ramified roots in the materiality of everyday living performances beyond the digital. For this reason, purely ethnographic research via this media may leave out too much of the contextual knowledge necessary to render a multiplicity of voices and actors' embodied negotiation and resistance.

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[1] VooV Meeting is a cloud-based conferencing product developed by Tencent, Inc. Although other online platforms were accessible to local users, Chinese academic institutions relied more on domestic products during the pandemic, especially fearing the online architecture overloading and, thus, interruption in data transmission and the problem of data storage.

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