An Interactional Space of Permanent Observability: WeChat and Reinforcing the Power Hierarchy in Chinese Workplaces

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Abstract:

Does digital media empower or disempower workers? In existing studies on how information and communication technologies influence work, researchers investigate work-life boundaries and how workers use digital media to obtain more control. This article focuses on how digital media influences daily interpersonal interactions in the workplace: how does social media use influence workplace hierarchies and power dynamics? Based on 56 in-depth interviews with WeChat users in Chinese workplaces, I find that lower-ranked individuals were compelled to constantly express loyalty and appreciation, and publicly submit to their superordinates by clicking "like" or commenting on their WeChat posts. They also had to provide immediate and polite responses to their superordinates in WeChat group chats after work hours or to non-work-related issues. The distinctive features of online interaction—lack of physical interaction spaces, recordability of past conversations, and *n*-adic nature of online disclosures—created an environment where past encounters were omnipresent and accessible, and placed workers under permanent observability. This social interaction environment leaves little room for forms of resistance and, in response, employees retreat into cynical performances of submission. This study finds that, under certain circumstances, WeChat use actually intensifies workplace hierarchies and power dynamics, thereby sharpening social inequality, rather than eliminating it.

Keywords: power dynamics, social media, online interaction, work, control, WeChat, China

Introduction

The emergence and popularization of the internet initially brought expectations of increased equality around the world (Benkler 2006; Yang 2009). However, troubling inequalities, such

as in gender and race, have been reproduced online (Daniels 2009; Postmes and Spears 2002). Recent research also showed that the internet intensifies existing inequalities in many social domains, such as between the haves and have-nots and gaps in socio-economic participation and production (Hargittai and Walejko 2008; Robinson 2009; Schradie 2011). Thus the questions: is the pre-existing power structure extended to online venues? And, under what conditions do digital media empower or disempower certain social groups, and why?

This research examines the impact of social media use in the workplace. The importance of work in social life has resulted in much research on how the use of technology, especially new information and communication technologies (ICTs), influence work culture and organizational structures. Studies on the role of technology in the workplace have focused on the costs and benefits of digitization towards individual efforts to control boundaries; that is, ICTs blur the boundaries of work and personal life, and thus work infiltrates personal space. New technologies also enable flatter organizations, help workers increase productivity and autonomy, and allow workers to manage the demands of work and personal life. While technology has intensified work, it has also empowered workers by facilitating more horizontal work processes and increased opportunities for work autonomy.

However, little research has been done on how using social media influences day-to-day interpersonal interaction in the workplace. At work, those in higher positions have power over those in lower positions. While this power hierarchy influences how people interact offline (Smith and Magee 2015), how does the wide use of social media affect it? This paper examines how workplace subordinates interact with superordinates on social media to

determine whether hierarchy and status inequality are reduced or reinforced when online interactions become an important part of work life.¹

As of 2018, WeChat continues to be the most popular instant messaging (IM) application in China with 1.08 billion monthly active users (CNNIC 2018). WeChat started as a personal communication app that connected private community networks and provided a space for self-presentation by combining the IM features of WhatsApp with personal data sharing features of Facebook. However, WeChat has since evolved into a workplace tool, as 57.22% of new contacts users add are work-related and over 80% of users show work-related content on their accounts (WeChat 2017). The most popular feature is individual or group chats, where users can send messages to other users. Another well-received feature is WeChat Moments, which is similar to Facebook status updates, and allows contacts to respond with “likes” or comments. This study focuses on how the prevalent use of WeChat and its online interaction features influence workplace power dynamics.

In-depth interviews with WeChat users in mainland China suggest that WeChat use has increased workplace controls over those in a hierarchically lower position, who are expected to be available at anytime wherever they are. They are compelled to constantly express their loyalty or appreciation and publicly submit to their superordinates by “liking” or commenting on their WeChat posts. Immediate and polite responses to superordinates after work hours or to non-work-related issues are also the norm. This increased affective labor is

¹ “Superordinate” is broadly defined here as an interactant with more seniority in the workplace hierarchy, such as director of a department or a supervisor.

facilitated by distinct features of WeChat interaction: an environment where workers are under permanent observability and past interactions can be accessed with little ambiguity.

Here, I will review the literature on how digital media has influenced workplace culture and organizational structures and then discuss the distinct features of online interaction and interpersonal culture of hierarchy and harmony in China. After detailing the data and methods, I will discuss how WeChat use compels workplace subordinates to continuously perform public submission and their response to the increasing expectations for compliance and affective labor. I will conclude with a discussion on why digital media leads to the disempowerment of workplace subordinates in China.

How does technology influence work?

Much research has examined the role of technology in the workplace and organizational culture, and found that white-collar workers were expected to be “always available” and “always on” as technology facilitated contact beyond regular work hours and spaces (Haeger and Lingham 2014; Park et al. 2011). Wireless devices are pervasive (Katz and Aakhus 2002; Koch et al. 2013) and potentially oppressive as they allow endless availability (Wajcman 2008). Thus, new ICTs increase and intensify work (Brody and Rubin 2011).

However, digital media can also be used to express agency. Nippert-Eng (1996) found that some workers engaged in boundary work by demarking work from family while others integrate them. Golden and Geisler (2007) examined the influence of technology on work experience and found that digital technology was used to manage boundaries and assert

control. Further, although ICTs allow employers to contact employees after work, employees can also engage with personal spheres at work (Valcour and Hunter 2005; Leonardi 2018).

Technology also influences work by changing organizational structures and managerial styles. New technologies reduce workplace hierarchies and draconian managerial practices (Sheer and Rice 2017; Turco 2016). As the organization of work in the knowledge economy is shifting towards decentralized authority with work teams and individual workers gaining more autonomy and discretion (Benner 2002); technology has facilitated a shift in managerial practices from coercive, direct control over workplace behavior to value-oriented, normative controls over mindset and identity. Normative control instills work norms by shaping values, emotions, and identity (Fleming and Sturdy 2011; Kunda 2009). Turco (2016) found, for instance, that social media use at work encouraged a “conversational company” and promoted involvement in decision making, which led to normative control.

ICTs are therefore contradictory because they increase work autonomy and exacerbate work-to-life conflicts (Diaz et al. 2012; Golden and Geisler 2007). Although studies have shown how technology influences work-life boundaries, the ways technology influence workplace interactions and relationships are rarely examined. Thus, this study focuses on interaction: how workers interact with workplace superiors online and face-to-face (FTF).

Observability and Workplace Power Dynamics

Social control in formal organizations has long been discussed by sociologists. Merton (1959) distinguished “behavioral conformity” from “attitudinal conformity.”

Behavioral conformity means individuals comply in overt behavior but do not internalize norms. Attitudinal conformity is individuals accepting values and norms. Coser (1961) discussed the relationship between observability and conformity, arguing that when norms are not sufficiently internalized, close observability by a superior is required to ensure behavioral conformity. Warren (1968) brought in the dimension of forms of power. In the workplace, power is usually position- and role-designated and based on asymmetrical control over resources (Blau 1964, 1977), which means subordinates depend on their superordinates; yet, the latter are less dependent on the former (Emerson 1962). Warren (1968) distinguished five power bases (coercive, reward, expert, legitimate, and referent), and found strong correlations between behavioral conformity, high visibility and coercion. Coercive power was defined as influence based on “the expectation of punishment for failure to conform.” Conversely, reward power was where one conforms to gain acceptance. Warren (1968) found that in coercive and reward power contexts, high visibility was conducive to behavioral conformity.

Workplace hierarchy and “doing power” are universal. Not only is power enacted in day-to-day interpersonal interactions and embedded in manners of speech (Morand 1996), but the power hierarchy remains a key feature of modern work, even in advanced economies attempting to build post-hierarchy organizations (Harley 1999). Even when conspicuous hierarchy symbolism was deliberately shunned and egalitarianism emphasized, hierarchy prevails, albeit more subtly (Alvesson 1995). The enactment and reproduction of institutional power relationships, and sometimes resistance to them, are inevitable in everyday interactions

(Crawford 1995).

Workplace power is manifested in coercive and collaborative strategies that superiors use to “do power” and, in response, subordinates show deference (Goffman 1956a).²

Deference usually takes form in appreciation or sentiments of regard, and subordinates provide generally positive evaluations (Goffman 1956a:477-8). According to Holmes and Stubbe (2015), deference was in the interest of the subordinate because “[d]eference is the mirror image or underside of power” (p.7). But of course, not all workers defer to their superiors. Critical discourse analysts, for example, argue that some may challenge, undermine or even subvert power and authority (Holmes and Stubbe 2015). Instead of directly resisting or confronting power, they challenge authority in a socially acceptable or “polite” fashion through humor or sarcasm.

Distinctive features of online interaction

The wide use of digital media today means that power hierarchies must also be navigated in online interaction, and online interaction has features distinct from FTF interaction that can still create and perpetuate highly visible performances of power and compliance. These distinct features may change the ways subordinates challenge authority, and may limit which strategies of resistance are affordable to individuals of different social groups. The most salient difference between online and FTF interaction is the lack of

² Goffman (1956) considered deference to be rather limiting when defined as “a subordinate owing something to a superordinate” since deference could also exist between social equals (p. 479). Nevertheless, it is commonly expected that subordinates show deference to their superordinates.

physical co-presence (Campos-Castillo 2013). Since online interactions transcend time and place, digital media has fundamentally changed the spatial contexts and proximity of social interactions. Zhao and Elesh (2008) differentiated between co-location (that is, spatial relationships and physical proximity among people) and co-presence (the accessibility to and conditions around social relationships). Campos-Castillo and Hitlin (2013) redefined co-presence as “the perception of mutual entrainment between actors” (p. 169) despite the lack of shared physical space, and such entrainment is the “synchronization of mutual attention, emotions and behaviors” (p. 171). That is, social interactions can materialize through mutual engagement without physical proximity.

Online interactions also differ from FTF because they are easily and quasi-automatically recorded. Many of these records are “searchable and accessible”—the so-called “social data” (Beer and Burrows 2013; Lupton, 2015). As Spärck Jones (2003) concluded: ICT perpetuates everyday life and this has fundamentally changed the relevance of past encounters and disclosures to current interactions (Tian 2017). This was not the case with FTF interaction in the past, unless video recording was carried out. Today, search engines and the social web (Web 2.0) facilitates ease of access to the online records of ordinary individuals (Beneito-Montagut 2017). Perhaps most relevant to social interactions are what Beer and Burrows (2013) called the “archives of the everyday” (e.g. status, photos, and videos) in social media, and “viewpoint or opinion archives” (e.g. discussion forum postings). As Belk (2013) stated, “search engines and social media also help us remember other people, emotions, and events of significance in our lives” (p. 488). This “archiving” of online

interactions has brought about “the end of forgetting” (Bossewitch and Sinnreich 2013).

Unlike FTF interactions, where the number of participants is known through their physical presence, netizens post without knowing their entire audience, and interlocutors are mutually invisible and thus somewhat anonymous (Zhao 2006). Their entry, exit and exact number is not known at any given moment, which results in a non-unified audience (Tian and Menchik 2016). For example, comments on social networking sites (SNS) can usually be viewed and interpreted by unintended recipients (Litt and Hargittai 2016). Tian and Menchik (2016) pointed out that online interaction, especially one-to-many interactions, is n -adic because the potential number of participants (n) is uncertain as the audience is diverse and invisible. “Others” also have access to conversations long after their posting, which means the number of interactants at any given time cannot be determined or their responses gauged.

These distinctive features of online interaction influence both online and offline interactions (Menchik and Tian 2008; Tian and Menchik 2016; Tian 2018). Because of the lack of visual cues in many forms of online interaction, the easy accessibility and recordability of past interactions, and the ambiguity of audience design, interactions between users, such as writers and readers, customers and sales persons, have changed. Consequently, the internet has reshaped the power dynamics of social groups instead of eliminating status barriers (Tian and Adorjan 2016; Tian 2018). Then the question is, how has the use of digital media like WeChat influenced day-to-day interaction at workplaces?

Hierarchy and power relations in middle-class workplaces in China

While sociological studies of work in China have focused on manufacturing work (see Lee 1998; Tian and Deng 2017), relatively little attention has been paid to labor processes in Chinese middle-class work. Existing studies have pointed out that the appropriate strategies for substantiating or challenging power relations were bound by dominant workplace cultures and instilled values (Raz 2002) because workplace interactions were embedded in the business contexts of workgroups and organizations, and in the wider social and cultural context. Namely, the Chinese followed a strict hierarchy of status distinctions (Blau et al. 1991) with Confucian emphases on social status and social harmony (Zhang et al. 2005). Interactions, therefore, observed different degrees of intimacy (Fei 1948; Hwang 2000) and power hierarchies were more explicit in Chinese workplaces (Wei et al. 2010) where strategic flattery of superiors was common (Yang 2014).

While this link between interpersonal ties and career success was not unique to China (Breland et al. 2007), large power differentials often found in Chinese workplaces meant that relationships with supervisors were esteemed. Wei et al. (2010) showed how the modern supervisor–subordinate relationship parallels the traditional feudal Chinese ruler–subject relationship, such that supervisors often greatly affect the career of a subordinate (p. 438). Affection, trust, and loyalty took precedence over work performance (Law et al. 2000), which enabled access to resources as rewards and forgiveness of mishaps (Kiong and Kee 1998).

The nature of work-life boundaries in Chinese workplaces also differed from the West, where colleagues respected boundaries and largely restricted supervisor–subordinate relationships to the workplace. In China, these boundaries were blurred to build relationships

and maintain workplace harmony (Law et al. 2000). This was particularly evidenced in pre-reform socialist work units as co-workers were regarded as family. This has persisted in post-reform China despite market contractual relations (Yan 2019). Professional boundaries continue to be blurred, especially when workers use social media like WeChat, because such sites provide easy access to and engagement with supervisors outside of the workplace.

Data and Method

Data were collected from three large cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The initial field sites were three public universities in the three cities as the original research goal was to see how WeChat use among educated urban youths in China maintained relationships and how the youths presented themselves online. I interviewed both students and non-academic staff members, and those initial interviews presented an unexpected finding: respondents, even the younger generation, carefully thought through their online activities by considering their position and that of others in their social hierarchy. Status differences in the offline world were a major concern; thus, I turned to recruiting respondents working in organizations since hierarchy was more explicit in the workplace.

The respondents were then publicly recruited (hard copy flyers and online posts) and through snowballing (referral of others interested in participating but working elsewhere). The respondents were employed by a variety of employers, such as universities, public schools, international hotels, government, and large corporations. Their workplaces ranged from “less hierarchical,” such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), to “more

hierarchical,” such as government and large corporations. Respondents also held a range of positions in the workplace hierarchy, from team leaders/supervisors, branch managers, to directors. The non-random sampling was driven by theoretical assumptions that the structure and position in the organizational hierarchy influenced social interaction. The sample represented a wide variety of organizational settings and focus was placed on structural positions in the organization hierarchy.

Six focus group discussions were then carried out with two sessions in each city, and two to four participants in each session with no overlap in workplaces. Focus group discussions provided insights and ideas to develop in-depth interview guidelines that became this paper’s main data source. I conducted 56 interviews (see Appendix 1 for demographics) focusing on how WeChat was used to interact with peers, superiors, or subordinates.

Respondents ranged between 21 to 48 years old, with a majority between 25 and 35. The majority are female (32). Monthly income ranged from RMB4,000 to RMB30,000. Most were university educated; some had postgraduate degrees (20). Two older managers had Associate Degrees. Forty-two interviewees were lower ranked employees and the other 14 were in management, with a large corporation’s marketing manager being the most highly ranked.

Attention was given to how respondents explained their WeChat behaviors and habits. They were asked to elaborate on occasions when they felt compelled to post information and why they continued to post or comment afterwards. They were also encouraged to elaborate on specific statements or comments in their WeChat Moments and their thoughts when

posting, such as who they had in mind. These interactional details allowed for a general analysis of the relationship between their perception of the audience, consideration of status and relationships, and appropriate disclosure of information.

I used thematic analysis (Guest et al. 2012) to capture the main characteristics of work-related WeChat interactions (such as liking the post of a superordinate/subordinate and whether the online interaction took place at work). I asked for information on specific organizational expectations or workplace norms for social media use at work and for work. Despite demographic differences, almost every respondent described how they felt coerced to defer to their superordinates, although they varied in their levels of compliance. This finding encouraged the use of analytical induction to further examine the underlying reasons. That is, the initial cases informed provisional explanations and preliminary hypotheses, and new cases were then examined to continuously revise the hypotheses until no negative cases were found (Katz 2001). Finally, the interactional environment of permanent observability was identified as an explanatory factor for public displays of subordination.

No escape in time or space on WeChat

Originally an application for personal communication, WeChat has now become an essential workplace communication and interaction tool. Respondents stated that it was customary to add colleagues, including supervisors, to their WeChat contact lists. Furthermore, supervisors usually establish one or more work group chats and relevant

members are invited to join them. The user can then send and read messages to and from other group members. They can also access group profiles and membership information.³

Nevertheless, the frequent use of WeChat does not replace other forms of workplace communication, such as FTF meetings, emails, or even QQ, a communication software used in many workplaces before the introduction of WeChat. WeChat is mainly used to maintain or build interpersonal relationships, rather than facilitate work tasks or increase work efficiency (respondents shared QQ was still used for its convenient file transfer features).

One of the most popular functions of WeChat is “Moments.” Similar to Facebook newsfeed, Moments allows users to share posts with their contacts and facilitates users to respond to each other’s posts in the form of “likes” or comments. Since colleagues are on the WeChat contact list, they have access to each other’s Moments posts even if those posts are unrelated to work, and thus users must consider their colleagues’ presence when posting. Respondents also feel compelled to comment and/or “like” posts by their superiors in order to show deference, as this female white-collar interviewee shared,

Usually managers will get more “likes” and comments than junior colleagues, even if their posts are more or less the same. I’ve made it a habit to automatically “like” my superiors’ posts... It tells them I’m paying attention and following their updates.

³ In comparison to popular apps in the U.S. such as Gchat and Slack (a work-oriented IM app), WeChat is considered a super app that combines both personal and professional aspects of life. Not only are text, voice messaging, voice and video calls, and sharing posts on Moments (sharing and posting content with contacts) free, but WeChat has now evolved to become an all-in-one app with multiple functions, including messaging, payment, wallet, e-commerce, media, as well as mini-programs (such as WeRun and WeChat Reading) that allow third-parties to provide online-to-offline services to customers.

(Interview 6, female, 32, white-collar worker, RMB12,000/month)

As this interviewee notes, subordinates click “like” on superiors’ posts as a display of submission and to show their acceptance of the power hierarchy of the workplace online.

Similar acts of showing deference are also common during work group chats on WeChat, where senior members not only receive more responses showing support and involvement from their subordinates, but their comments or responses often explicitly use language that defers to the hierarchy and constitutes a form of submission:

When I send a message to my supervisor, I choose my words very carefully... When I address a senior, I always add “manager” (*zong*) after the surname and never just call them by name. Like “Xiang *Zong*” [Manager Xiang]. Also, I tailor my message to acknowledge their leadership, such as, “May I ask if my understanding of your instruction is correct?” An exclamation mark after thanks is important because it shows I’m very enthusiastic. I respond quickly to my superior’s messages. Finally, my words also [show] our relationship [and that I am lower ranking]. (Interview 23, female, 27, automobile company clerk, RMB4,000/month)

WeChat messages to superiors are crafted with deliberation and care. It is common for subordinates to feel compelled to use polite language to deliver positive, timely and enthusiastic yet respectful responses (Morand 2010). But on WeChat, every subordinate has to say the same polite words to demonstrate submission and constantly acknowledge their inferior position in a WeChat group conversation. Although demeaning, they nevertheless conform:

If a superior says something to the group, everyone else has to respond with “Good!”

or “Great!” (Interview 15, female, 40, primary school teacher, RMB5,000/month)

Compliance or non-compliance to a superior is more visible online than offline. Interviewees indicated that all ranks in the organization, even mid-level managers, needed to show similar deference to their superiors.

Since physical co-presence is no longer necessary for supervisors to contact workers, many respondents shared that the workplace hierarchy has extended to the private domain as colleagues, especially superiors, are WeChat contacts. Responding to supervisors after work hours, during holidays, at home, or on vacation is unavoidable. Therefore, WeChat has invaded offline life by taking time and space from employees through online interactions. A good example of this is the virtual red packets sent during Chinese New Year. Here, superordinates send online monetary gifts to group members in the form of a game. The subordinates have to identify and tap on the red packets to receive a token amount of money, usually less than USD1. However, this seemingly fun gesture can evolve into a means of control. There is pressure to constantly check for red packets and, after receiving one, send appreciative messages or cute emojis to superordinates:

If a senior sends out virtual red packets and they're not accepted, eventually the money would be returned to them and *they would be really upset because they lost face in front of everyone* (author's emphasis). If everyone else accepted one and you didn't, it could mean you're not a team player... *That's how supervisors show control over the team even during Chinese New Year when it's our private time* (author's

emphasis). (Interview 22, female, 30, white-collar worker, RMB8,000/month)

Therefore, failing to participate in a game could mean the loss of face of a superior because the game demonstrates a superior's ability to control their team to real or imagined observers.

Note that the behavioral demands of immediate and positive responses were not related to work efficiency but to power maintenance. Many WeChat group messages are not related to the work of any specific employee. For example, a large corporation in this study had various managers consolidate the progress of their work into graphics that were then posted to a group. The contents are usually irrelevant to subordinates; however, superiors still expect them to respond with "Received." This echoes the intent of the virtual red packets, which are unrelated to work but demand a response to acknowledge the power structure.

With the pervasiveness of WeChat, employees not only need to manage their work responsibilities but also constantly engage in affective labor through public displays of submission to their superordinates. In doing so, they enhance the face of their superiors (Yang 2014). Certainly, doing affective labor in public is not unique, however the pervasiveness and relentlessness of its online form—the need to perform even during private time as a constant reminder of one's lower rank—is novel.

Working in a space with permanent observability

WeChat encourages submissive performances because past conversations are recorded and can be accessed after the actual interaction is done. Such permanency is impossible in conventional FTF interactions but it is made possible by digital media. For example, when asked how interaction on WeChat is different from FTF, a few respondents pointed out that in

a FTF meeting, if one person does not say anything, the superordinate might not notice.

However, on WeChat, it is very easy to check who was silent. As such, the superordinate could note who failed to respond and may even “remind” them or the group to do so:

One time my supervisor said something in a group chat. Many people replied, “Got it!” I thought it would be redundant... So I didn’t say anything. Later that day, [the supervisor] sent me a private message saying that I have to acknowledge her when she says something... Now I respond to her immediately. (Interview 13, male, 25, white-collar worker, RMB8,000/month)

The supervisor above happens to be a woman, but there are no obvious gender differences in demands for subordinates to show deference on WeChat. Therefore, even those who are reluctant to publicly defer to their supervisors still relent or risk being labeled as “incapable and unreliable” (Interview 52, male, mid-level manager, 44).

WeChat facilitates the control of interactions more readily, while offline interactions are more difficult to manipulate. People may speak at the same time in FTF interactions, so a superior could find it difficult to control their responses to each person. However, this becomes easier on WeChat. A supervisor asks for something and subordinates must follow through because the supervisor can refer to a past conversation or a request with accuracy and certainty. Because of these surveillance capabilities in WeChat, the need to comply is ever present and the level of respect shown has to be even higher.

In this sense, the recordability and traceability of past WeChat conversations have transformed the workplace into a Foucauldian panoptic environment: actual, continual

surveillance of everyone is not necessary for eliciting self-disciplining action (Foucault 1995). Digital media is panoptic not because every supervisor keeps track of the “likes” from their employees but because every supervisor *could* do so. There is the potential of being monitored, so each employee constantly obliges as though their supervisor were watching. WeChat has therefore transformed work into an environment of permanent observability because superordinates could track how many employees “liked” their posts, and every employee is aware of this monitoring, even if they never fully know the degree of scrutiny.

Yet WeChat’s intrusion is even more dire than the Foucauldian panopticon as the environment for social interactions now also have a permanent memory, so incidents can be recalled with accuracy and past mistakes cannot be erased. Real-world events are captured and eternally retrievable. It is a space with a permanent memory so even small acts of disobedience or resistance result in costly repercussions. Consider this interviewee’s point:

I think the worst thing about WeChat is that there is a record of past dialogues and bosses can always refer back to it. For example, if my boss asked me something and I replied [in FTF], I can later deny how I responded to it, or my boss may not remember exactly what I said. But now it’s so easy to check what you said and when you said it... (Interview 16, male, 37, manager, RMB20,000/month)

When asked about how their interactions with supervisors on WeChat are different, many respondents automatically illustrated by comparing WeChat interactions with FTF interactions, and many referred to the accuracy of referring to past interactions as a key difference. They are aware that when they post something in a group chat or on their

Moments, it becomes “permanent” and cannot be deleted as others can always take a screenshot. Many shared this as the key reason they are more careful with their language and response times on WeChat.

***N*-adic interaction and observability by non-participating spectators**

Another kind of observability that was previously not possible during FTF interaction is the ability of a particular interaction to be observed by non-participating others. Unlike FTF work interactions where there are physical boundaries that make clear who are present in an interaction, WeChat posts are *n*-adic. That is, at any given time, the exact number of participants in a conversation is unknown. In online interactions, others could observe or participate in a conversation at a much later time (Tian and Menchik 2016). For example, when a supervisor posts on WeChat Moments, they might be watching to see who responds, or they might opt to view the responses at some point in the future. Even supervisors are more careful than in offline situations because this *n*-adic nature means more senior supervisors could be observing their WeChat interactions. As a result, supervisors care about who responds and when because they are also under surveillance and subject to evaluation based on their ability to obtain deference and demonstrate a good collective. One supervisor who was recently hired to lead a team of five shares that,

I cannot stand it if I send a message to the group but some of my team members do not acknowledge the message... We're a team. They all need to show that they're loyal and responsible by paying attention and following the team leader... [otherwise] they're

incapable of being a good employee. (Interview 35, female, 27, team supervisor, RMB7,000/month)

Her feelings and rationale were echoed by 11 of the 14 managers interviewed. They demanded the deference of their subordinates as flattery implies respect. Some even considered the lack of flattery as inappropriate. If a subordinate failed to respond to a group message, other subordinates would see the absence of a response and the supervisor would have lost authority. Superordinates also demand affective labor because they too are wary of potential observers in their online conversations and conscious of the hierarchical relationships. For example, a more senior supervisor could witness this lack of authority and perceive their inability to manage the team as evidence of incompetence. Thus, those who do not conform are considered troublemakers.

The n -adic nature of online disclosures also means that users are under extended observability, which further requires them to observe social distance on WeChat due to the potential but undetectable audiences of their posts or interactions. For example, junior staff avoid posting anything that could be interpreted as a challenge to the workplace status quo, such as content that might make them appear more intelligent than their supervisors. Some might exclude particular audiences in higher positions in certain posts, usually by using the “grouping” function, which allows a user to share a post with only selected contacts. However, the n -adic nature of online disclosure means that maintaining social distance online is more important than offline because of the possible infinite observers now and in future:

I have a friend who is a researcher and also good friends with my supervisor. We're almost the same age, worked together, co-authored papers, and shared the same friends... I often "like" her WeChat posts. One day, I realized that she never "liked" or commented on my posts. I asked her why. She said she feels that she is the same rank as my supervisor and sees me as junior to her, so it's not appropriate for her to comment on my posts as a friend. (Interview 40, female, 29, Ph.D. student)

Here, offline friendships have to be handled with more caution on WeChat because the interactions are visible to a wider audience and could be seen as a hierarchical breach.

This also explains why subordinates who understand the importance of flattery for their superiors are also not as enthusiastic in approaching more senior members, as their immediate supervisors might feel that they are bypassing the chain of command:

If someone very senior posts on WeChat Moments, I will usually "like" the post but not comment. It's better to show I'm paying attention and want to build a good relationship but not act too intimately. Generally speaking, if a top staff member posts something and the deputy leader responds, we also follow by responding... It's like lining up in the canteen... You don't stand in front of your superior, you stand behind them. (Interview 9, male, 41, manager, RMB12,000/month)

Many respondents also used this "lining up" metaphor, which provides insight into the perceptions of hierarchy: queuing, which is presumably an egalitarian system (whoever arrives first, goes first), is denatured by the pre-existing social hierarchy ("You would never get into the elevator before your boss does"). Subordinates cannot skip the chain of command

without fear of offending their immediate supervisors, who ultimately act as conduits of organizational resources and determine salary increases and bonuses (Wayne et al. 1997).

The cynical performance of obedience

The increased pressure to obey superiors under permanent and extended observability on WeChat has led to varied coping strategies depending on context. A majority of respondents (31) were reluctant to obey, but confessed they still complied. Goffman (1956b:10) stated that performers can either be sincere or cynical, but the show tended to go on regardless of the inner thoughts and feelings of the performers. While sincere performers are those “convinced that the impression of reality which he stages is the real reality” (p.10), cynical performers “may be moved to guide the conviction of this audience only as a means to other ends, having no ultimate concern in the conception that they have of him or of the situation.” They engage in cynical performances to advance their “self-interest” or for “private gain” (1956b:11).

Taking into consideration both the willingness to comply, and whether the actor complies behaviorally, there are four types of actors in this study, as listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Types of Actors

	Cynical Performer	Sincere Performer
Comply	Type 1: Do not believe they are inferior, reluctant to comply, but comply anyway (majority, 31)	Type 3: Believe they are inferior, willing to comply, and comply (4)
Do not comply	Type 2: Believe they are inferior, willing to comply, but do not comply (none)	Type 4: Do not believe they are inferior, unwilling to comply and do not comply (7 in the beginning, 4 changed position later)

Hypothetically, there could be four types of actors. For example, there might be Type 2 individuals who believe that they are indeed inferior to their supervisors and should comply, but refuse to comply for specific self-interested reasons, but this study found no such individuals. There were, however, three interviewees who did not believe they were inferior, were unwilling to comply, and thus refused WeChat interaction, focusing on their jobs instead (Type 4). One Type 4 interviewee quit her job after she found out that she did not receive a bonus in her year-end review, but weaker performers received higher evaluations and bonuses. She attributed that to her lack of participation in the subordination game. There were also others (4) who initially professed to be sincere performers of non-compliance, but later recognized the damage to their careers and so became cynical performers of compliance.

Some believed that they were inferior to their supervisors who were more “experienced,” “competent” or “knowledgeable” which made them Type 3 actors. They accepted their temporary submissive role and were willing to behaviorally comply. Some of these respondents deferred because they wanted to become a superior someday. In non-Chinese contexts, subordinates striving to become superiors behave more dominantly during interactions (Mast 2010); by contrast, accepting the power hierarchy in the Chinese context and showing more deference were more helpful in striving for management positions.

However, it is clear from the interviews that the majority of subordinates (31) were cynical performers of compliance: they do not believe they are inferior to their superiors and many immediately denied this categorization during interviews, but confessed they would

comply nonetheless. Perhaps the submission was demeaning, but they did so anyway despite their disdain since they could not afford its consequences:

A lot of people are reluctant [to openly show deference to superiors on WeChat], but they have to... After all, your superior controls your career... WeChat shows how amicable you can be... It's also possible their impression of you will change for the better. So, even if what they post is wrong or meaningless, we'll still "like" their post.

(Interview 12, female, 28, salesperson in a real estate company, RMB7,000/month)

This pervasive and increasingly intentional organizational control is neither unprecedented to pre-social-media work environments nor does it increase employee commitment, involvement or loyalty. On the contrary, it could lead to cynicism, dissent or resistance (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Subordinates in this study may harbor resentment and have thoughts of resistance towards these enhanced demands for submission. However, individual acts of resistance are fruitless since subordinates quickly learn to give in and engage in deferential behavior for their own good as online performance has real-life consequences:

We have to "like" our supervisor's posts... They control our careers... (Interview 43, male, 35, mid-level sales manager, RMB20,000/month)

Many respondents echoed that response: showing conformity to avoid punishment or gain acceptance. This shows that in those Chinese workplaces, coercive power and reward power dominate. Therefore, it can be argued that increased observability from WeChat usage leads to greater behavioral conformity. The Chinese middle-class is not the first to be subjected to constant surveillance or have to bring their work home. French middle-class workers also

experienced a similar lifestyle, but recently won the right to not have to check their work emails from home (Rodionova 2016). This has yet to happen in China. In fact, interviewees felt powerless to resist such demands for excessive submission.

Some workers became active cynical participants by participating and demonstrating obedience to their superiors on WeChat Moments, while others took initiative to flatter superiors in exchange for benefits. There are many examples of deference being proactively delivered by subordinates. A branch supervisor recalled her experience with subordinates:

If you shared a book on a WeChat Moment-like content-sharing platform called “WeChat Read” everyone will have a chance to read the book. I found a book to be nice and shared it, but then I found it was actually pornographic material. I didn’t have a chance to delete my post before several subordinates messaged me, telling me they saw my post and wanted to join... I didn’t message them; I just posted it on Moments. (Interview 41, female, branch supervisor, RMB9,000/month)

“Likes” on WeRun⁴ is another typical example of actively showing deference: subordinates give credit to superordinates; credit they sometimes do not deserve (Goffman 1956a:479):

[On WeRun] you can view how many steps a person has walked in a day. Whoever has the most “likes” is in the highest position, which means that they might not have walked the most but only had the most “likes.” If you’re the boss, someone would deliberately go to your WeRun page just to “like” your steps. (Interview 42, male, 37,

⁴ Both WeChat Read and WeRun are different apps run by the larger WeChat company. However, once they are installed and activated, they automatically link to the WeChat account and are shared on WeChat Moments.

white-collar clerk, RMB12,000/month)

The newest/lowest-ranking workers are more likely to actively engage in deferential activities because they have higher walk-away costs. A walk-away cost is one of most important bases of power (Emery 2011). The newer or lower ranking workers have a higher walk-away cost because a bad relationship with their superior could lead to difficulties in promotion and inhibit avenues of career development, and if they are fired or quit, they have to bear the cost for switching jobs.

Conclusion

Most studies on digital technologies in the workplace and organizational culture are based on Western contexts and focus on how technology blurs work and personal boundaries. This study of WeChat use in the Chinese middle-class workplace shows that most workers engage in cynical performances of compliance to constantly demonstrate their deference to superiors. This is because digital media creates an environment for social interaction where workers are under permanent and extended observability. The recordability of online interactions has reduced ambiguity and increased the relevance of past interactions, which consequently leads to the disempowerment of subordinate groups during interpersonal interaction as they have to be constantly mindful of their words and performances. The use of WeChat at work has compelled those who are hierarchically lower to openly and consistently show deference to their superordinates. While most subordinates consider this deference as demeaning, some retreat into cynical submission in exchange for favorable treatment. In the

end, power hierarchies were reified on WeChat. Although some subordinates might be reluctant to comply, they soon realized that individual acts of rebellion, such as delaying responses to superiors, were fruitless. Despite their emotional resentment and resistance, they understood that cynical deferential submission was more self-serving. Nevertheless, this cynical performance of obedience reinforced the workplace hierarchy and power inequality.

This paper contributes to studies on ICTs and work in two ways. First, the use of social media platforms was shown to extend workplace control of behaviour to new heights. Employees were monitored to provide more affective labor than they would have without WeChat, and such labor can be demanded beyond the workplace—anytime and anywhere. Second, the study showed how actions used by subordinates to manage demands for obedience and affective labor were facilitated by an organizational structure in which the walk-away cost is high for subordinates and by Chinese culture's emphasis on hierarchy. Consequently, the majority have become cynical performers of compliance.

There are two conditions under which Chinese middle-class workers resort to behavioral conformity under permanent and extended observability. First, power bases at Chinese workplaces are dominated by coercive and reward power. Workers conform to avoid punishment or gain acceptance from superiors. In an organizational context with a different power base, such as expert power, workers might respond differently. Second, the Chinese culture of hierarchy legitimizes demands for absolute conformity from subordinates. Culture shapes the expectations and consequently the walk-away costs, thus employees comply because the cultural emphasis on hierarchy normalizes compliance. This normalization then

negates options, such as changing jobs, because this cultural emphasis is pervasive. Power in Western contexts is also often subtly exercised (Fairclough 1995; Pateman 1980). Even though power may legitimize overt displays of coercion, there is still mutual respect and concern for the feelings or face of others, most likely because both superiors and subordinates want to be seen as “polite” (Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987). Thus, superiors demonstrate their power implicitly; however, this is not the case in the Chinese context. No powerful counter-discourse is available to interpret these practices as intrusive or excessive, so in China there is increased instrumental compliance and serial identification with the corporate culture (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). Therefore, many are resigned to comply.

In this sense, WeChat makes cultural expectations more tangible and reinforces specific relationship structures because digital media has transformed the workplace into an environment with a permanent memory and workers are aware of this ability to retrieve information. Zuboff (1989) used the metaphor of the panopticon to demonstrate how information technology, such as computer systems, can make work content more visible. Back then, surveillance was still restricted to work records, but new digital media such as WeChat add unique unprecedented features. Now, the prevalent use of social media in the workplace means that supervisors can track performances of deference with accuracy and certainty uninhibited by time and space.

Interactions on WeChat also enhance sensitivity to the power hierarchy due to the *n*-adic nature of online interactions: both subordinates and superordinates know that countless others might be watching or reading their posts at some point in time. Therefore, if

subordinates do not show absolute compliance, supervisors risk loss of face in front of their own supervisors. So even if flattery is despicable, hierarchal expectations and ensuing consequences make it necessary. Far from the expectations of the internet being an egalitarian platform delivering freedom and self-expression, subordinates are pressured to constantly use submissive language on WeChat that acknowledges their positional inferiority and their superior's authority. There is little space for free speech—even the right to silence is lost.

Nevertheless, some subordinates also take advantage of the ease of showing deference on WeChat for their own gains. This could be considered agency but in a demeaning and oppressive way because integrity is surrendered to obtain patronage. WeChat as a communication tool thus becomes a vehicle for realizing social expectations and consequently leads to intensifying and extending workplace hierarchies. Yet because this type of workplace culture is pervasive, there are few options for workers to resist, and with the reification of the power hierarchy made possible by online communication applications—such as WeChat—there could be even fewer options in the future. Indeed, much like how consciousness of labor exploitation was managed through the creation and rise of the middle-class (Wright 1984), so it is that, in this analysis, consciousness is managed by the promise that these subordinates may someday too become a superordinate and reap the same benefits from position and status. As a result, workers opt not to resist and instead reinforce the workplace hierarchy and increasing inequality.

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