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Red Bags and WeChat (Wēixìn): Online collectivism during massive Chinese cultural events

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Abstract

600 million mobile phone users in China daily use their mobile phones to engage with social media, whilst a similar number use the internet. In 2014 China is poised to become the world's largest economy, overtaking the United States of America. Understanding the Chinese culture within the modern context of social media for foreign businesses is increasingly important. With an internet penetration rate of only 46%, the growth potential for China's e-commerce markets is staggering.

By examining the use of the mobile phone application WeChat (Wēixìn) as a case study during the 2014 Chinese Lunar New Year festival, this paper explores how traditional collectivist values of Chinese society are emerging online. We argue that social media is supporting China's traditional values by virtually linking a vast collectivist society.

Introduction

The 2014 Chinese Lunar New Year festival (31st January-14th February) created the largest modern migration of humans with over 3.6 billion trips undertaken within China. The economic implications of the migration are experienced globally. Whilst Chairman Mao might have tried to radically change traditional Chinese values through the Cultural Revolution (Xing, 2004) this annual migration demonstrates that basic pillars of Chinese society like filial piety (孝, *xiao*) remain strong (Wang, Razzaque, Keng, 2007).

WeChat, a Chinese micro-messaging application available globally created a feature called Red Bags to accompany the festival period. The Red Bag digitally imitated the Chinese Lunar New Year tradition of '*hong bao*' (红包)where elders pass money to the young to encourage prosperity and provide good blessings. The red bags themselves imply a range of expectations that do not need to be made explicit. Unlike the tradition of adults giving *physical* Red Packets to children or colleagues, or married couples to unmarried people, the WeChat feature encouraged people to give 'lucky money' to *anyone*. Red Bags became an instant hit during the Chinese Lunar New Year festival. However, Deputy General Manager, Tenpay Group, of WeChat Yi Wu noted that the game brought out negative character attributes in Chinese users, referring to them as 'wolves' (狼性, *lang*

xing) greedily clicking incoming Red Bag messages (Han & Xu, 2014).

In this paper we use a traditional exploratory case study approach in order to profile WeChat. We suggest that the empirical situation shows that it would be a mistake to assume that in China the evolution of micro-messaging platforms is a trend towards Western-style democracy. The trend we argue is towards traditional Chinese values, which encompasses within it a democratic element in the way Chinese citizens communicate. Bourdieu and Wacquant (2005) point out that there is a dialectical conflict between heterodox (challengers) and orthodox (conservative and mainstream) actors when potential changes emerge in a culture and in cultural values. The 'challengers' in China, such as the emerging youth, even though they might want to redefine the 'orthodox', participate in the cultural values game. WeChat is a potential change to how Chinese values are modernized but also a potential vehicle for reinforcement of traditional Chinese collectivist culture.

In 2013, there were 1.2 billion mobile phone users within China. Half of the mobile phone users engage in social media on their mobile phones daily (WASG, 2014). Applications such as WeChat enable this modern social networking for domestic and international citizens. The success of WeChat's virtual Red Bags (红包; *hong bao*) during the 2014 Chinese Lunar New Year festival provides a case study for our argument. Created 20 days before the Lunar New Year festival, the Red Bags demonstrate the scalability of growth in China for online businesses and the entrepreneurial spirit active within Chinese digital markets. The paper concludes with a discussion on the growth of social media in China and considers implications for both government and business.

Depth of Chinese Culture

Chinese culture and society is built on a long appreciation of nature, astrology and myth (Gassmann, 2000). The development of Chinese culture was recorded through art, music and architecture, which shows a rich depth back to and beyond the Greeks and Romans (Laufer, 1914). Whilst the style of architecture may have changed, underlying philosophies and values such as the Chinese philosophy to health and medicine remain consistent despite the changing nature of western health care. The roots of Chinese culture encourage harmony within nature and society. At the root of this philosophy is the acceptance of individual fate and destiny as externally controlled phenomena (Qian et al., 2007; Rotter, 1996). This spiritual foundation (Triandis, McCusker & Hui, 1990) is referred to as Yuan (缘) and supports the base of Chinese society, the family structure (Filial Piety 孝道). Clan-like in nature (Qian et al., 2007) depth of family structure (not necessarily blood relations) is considered analogous to overlapping concentric circles (Bond & Hwang, 1986). Trust diminishes the further out from a perceived relationship. The natural tendency for Chinese to view their inner circle as central to all others establishes a strong basis for ethnocentrism (Shimp & Sharma, 1987). The expression of the phenomena is reflected as China itself. The characters for China (中国) pronounced Zhong (中, middle) Guo (国, country), literally mean 'center of the world'.

Fundamentally family provides an individual with their moral anchor. The clan-like networks that build the structure of Chinese families establish individuals' observance and adherence of social norms (Hwang, 1983) dependent on the families' moral perspective. The mass migration events such as Chinese Lunar New Year (see Figure 1) demonstrate the pervasive strength of filial piety in modern Chinese society.
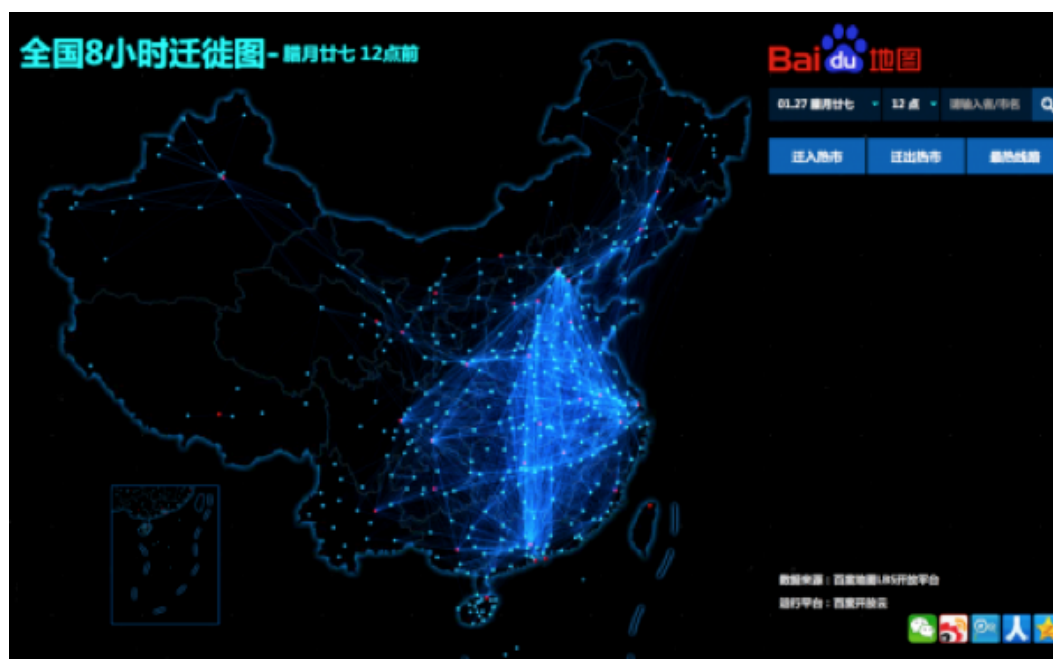
Figure 1. Tracking mobile phone movement across China during the 2014 Lunar New Year Festival (Source: *Baidu, used with permission*)

Traditional Chinese culture stresses loyalty to superiors and friends. However during the Cultural Revolution the practice of betraying superiors and friends was applauded as a 'true revolutionary act.' (Xing, 2004, p.194) The Chinese Lunar New Year festival of 2014 demonstrates that in modern China Filial Piety (孝道) is strongly respected. Figure 1 shows the scale of the interactions in this massive cultural event and the obvious economic and cultural benefits that such large social media activity implies.

An individual's observance of social norms and obligations is expressed through Renqing (人情). Renqing represents the accumulation of socially relevant emotional and affective responses that develop through reciprocation of favour (Wang *et al.,* 2005; Qian *et al.,* 2007; Hwang, 2001). An individual's Renqing grows with age and can be thought of as a contributing factor to maintaining family harmony (Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002). This occurs due to the strengthening effect of Renqing on filial piety as the value of social obligations increases within the family with age.

Social interactions within China are generally influenced by the context of interaction and the nature of the relationships in the situation. Anthropologist Edward T. Hall (1959; 1966; 1976; 1983; 1990) introduced the ideas of high and low context culture to explain the background and surrounding circumstances in which communication or an event takes place in different cultures. Hofstede (1980; 1981) attempted to map these types of differences in his work on differences in cultural expectations across cultures.

In high context cultures such as Chinese, far more is implicit in the physical context in communication. Words are not as important as context. As such, contexts need to be made very explicit, like legal contracts. In low context cultures the opposite is the case. Individuals have to explain their backgrounds, expectations, and their values to others. Crucial to determining contextual relevance in Chinese culture is the measure of Guanxi (关系) between an individual and another during a social interaction.

The value of Guanxi (关系; literally meaning gate (关) and hurdle (系)) reflects the strength or closeness of particularistic ties and the reciprocal nature of the exchange in favours (Lee & Dawes, 2006; Qian et al., 2007; Luo 1977a). Traditional respect for authority and order, the notion of trust in human relations, and the indirect style of communication were all very much changed during the Cultural Revolution (Xing, 2004, p. 194). In Modern China Guanxi is well recognised as a factor in the success or failure of business in China (Haley, Haley & Tan, 2004). The strength of guanxi between individuals in a social situation results from the depth of shared associations. The networks that result from pluralistic, intricate and pervasive relationships are shared through blood, gradually built on or acquired (Li & Wright, 2000; Tsui & Farh, 1997; Chou *et al.,* 2006).

The values of Renqing and Guanxi are amalgamated in the value of Mianzi (面子) or 'face'. Mianzi represents the recognised structure of social interactions in which hierarchical order, deference, and position in society, determine social obligation and esteem protection (Hu, 1944; Ho, 1976). Traditional Chinese culture values the saving of face and upholding of human dignity; the humiliation experienced during the Cultural Revolution removed the dignity and sometimes even their basic right of Citizens to live (Xing, 2004).

Traditional Mianzi, or 'face', encourages the restraint of emotional reaction and care for in-group harmony (Oyserman, Coon and Kemmelmeier, 2002). 'Face' as a social concept, is not necessarily exclusive to China (Ho, 1976). The differences between the western concept of 'social capital' and Chinese Mianzi, result from the orientation of social values such as filial piety that are uniquely Chinese (Ho, 1976; Qian *et al.,* 2007; Wright et al*.,* 2008; Chen, 2014).

From a global perspective, the attributes of Chinese culture and society discussed are attributed to the construct of collectivism (Triandis, McCusker & Hui, 1990; Hofstede, 1981). Cultures are defined as collectivist if the society holds a consistent 'world view' (Triandis *et al*., 1990; Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002), where adherence is given to interpersonal relationships, reciprocity, and social norms (Hempet *et al*., 2009; Somech *et al*., 2008; Pheng & Leong, 2001; Wright *et al*., 2008; Oyserman *et al*., 2002).

Collectivism is associated with Asian societies (Triandis *et al*., 1990) where sensitivities are prevalent in an individual's consciousness of social context (Hofstede, 1992). Collectivist cultures have been observed to have a tendency toward social group inclusion and support (Triandis and Gelfand, 1998). Collectivism in Asian societies is maintained through a general value placed on social obligations and commitments (Noronha, 2002; Li & Wright, 2000; Wright et al., 2008) and familial ties (Pheng & Leong, 2001). The strength of collectivism in Asian societies is often displayed through an ethnocentric approach to business decisions (Chow, 2003; Li, 2008; Low *et al*., 2007) and product purchases (Shankarmahesh, 2006; Tong & Li, 2013).

The attributes of collectivism are as such pervasive throughout Asian business environments in particular China (Wright *et al*., 2008; Li & Wright, 2000; Somech *et al.,* 2008; Rousseau, 2004). Collectivism within the Chinese

business environment is often considered representative of the deeper cultural architecture of China (Noronha, 2002; Wright *et al.,* 2008; Hempel *et al.,* 2009). The use of social networking services was, from the beginning, intimately linked with the underlying traditional values of Chinese society – those of mutual support even if that support contradicted government rules.

For example, in the 2013 Lushan earthquake that claimed 196 lives, the grassroots character of Chinese collectivism was mobilized by access to social networking services. Citizens like Wang Xiaochang posted on blogs in Sina Weibo requests for people to join them in aiding the survivors. By the first evening, Wang had fielded 480 calls (Levin 2013).

Each volunteer brought something to the relief effort, even though the government had told citizens to stay away (Levin 2013). After seeing the posting by Wang soliciting help, individuals such as 24-year-old hairdresser Li Yong, used allotted vacation days to help deliver supplies. It was the least Li could do, he said, to repay those who saved him during an earlier earthquake, which killed nine of his relatives. 'I was too young then to make a difference.' he said. 'Now I can.'

According to Ran Yunfei, a prominent democracy activist and blogger who describes online platforms such as a Weibo as a revolutionary tool for social change, 'Civil society is much more capable today compared to 2008.' As a result, 'It's far easier now for volunteers to share information on what kind of help is needed.' (Levin, 2013). The strength of collectivism demonstrated by Wang shows the depth of ancient traditions of culture as a courtesy. It expresses people's affection, friendship as a link, and blessings and thanksgiving. It is high context not low context communication.

Internet and social media usage in China

Studies have shown that online collectivist cultures develop close-knit trusted networks that provide enjoyment through engagement (Chu & Choi, 2011; Chung, 2008). The internet is often seen as the ultimate in low context communication where everything is made explicit by virtue of the medium itself and that this affects web and other aspects of design directly. Indeed, Usunier and Roulin (2010) advise that 'high-context communication style may be detrimental to the design of global Web sites, making them less readable, less effective in their use of colors and graphics, and less interactive for the globally dispersed users' (p. 190).

At first pass it might appear that the internet if adopted on scale in a high context culture would dramatically change its orientation. 'The internet' though is not two-dimensional. It is of course a *communication* medium. In 2012, one-quarter of global internet users were from China (Yoshida, 2012). By 2013, the internet penetration in China however was still only 45.84%, or 618 million users (CNNIC, 2014). This proportion is lower than Western countries, but this figure is deceptive because China's growth only really began on scale in 2008 and 2009. The social media user in China spends 47 minutes a day on sites, compared to the US and Japan that average 37 minutes and 7 minutes a day respectively (McKinsey, 2012). By 2025 80% penetration is predicted, with over 1 billion people in China using the internet (Kapadia, 2013). Table 1 provides insight into recent changes in usage patterns of Chinese internet users between 2012 and 2013.

	December 2012		June 2013		
Applications	Number of Internet Users (10,000)	Utilization Ratio	Number of Internet Users (10,000)	Utilization Ratio	Growth Rate
Instant Messaging	46775	82.90%	49706	84.20%	6.30%

Search Engine	45110	80%	47038	79.60%	4.30%
Online News	39232	73%	46092	78%	17.50%
Online Music	43586	77.30%	45614	77.20%	4.70%
Blog/Personal space	37299	66.10%	40138	68%	7.60%
Online Video	37183	65.90%	38861	65.80%	4.50%
Online Games	33569	59.50%	34533	58.50%	2.90%
Microblog	30861	54.7	33077	56%	7.20%
Social Networking Websites	27505	48.80%	28800	48.80%	4.70%
Online Shopping	24202	42.90%	27091	45.90%	11.90%
Online Literature	23344	41.40%	24837	42.10%	6.40%
E-mail	25080	44.50%	24665	41.80%	-1.70%
Online Payment	22065	39.10%	24438	41.40%	10.80%
Online Banking	22148	39.30%	24084	40.80%	8.70%

Forum/bbs	14925	26.50%	14098	23.90%	-5.50%
Travel Booking	11167	19.80%	13256	22.40%	18.70%
Group Buying	8327	14.80%	10091	17.10%	21.20%
Online Stock Trading	3423	6.10%	3256	5.50%	-4.90%

Table 1. Changes in Internet usage by Chinese netizens 2012 – 2013.

Source: Adapted from Chinese Internet Networking Information Centre (http://cnnic.cn/)

In conjunction with internet adoption, is perceived Chinese cultural limits on internet use. For example Chinese youth are perceived to exhibit worrying overuse of the internet (Hou, Zhang & Yang, 2013; Zhang, Huang, Luo & Liu, 2009; Zhang, Wang, Zhu & Tao, 2013; Huang, Zhang, Li, Wang, Zhang & Tao, 2010). A number of studies have linked these behaviors to parenting style (Lin, Lin & Wei, 2012; Huang *et al.,* 2013). As addiction is as much a cultural construct as it is a medically defined one, there are various estimates of 'addiction' (Moreno, Jelenchick, Cox, Young & Christakis, 2011). In Beijing 8% of high school students demonstrated addictive internet use (Hou *et al*., 2013). Amongst college students it is closer to 10% (Lin & Yang, 2009). This is potentially a concerning trend given the predicted growth in internet penetration in China of 80% by 2025.

However, it is the social networking side of Chinese use of the internet that has become very interesting. In 2013, 51% of China's 1.2 billion mobile phone users daily use social media applications (WASG, 2014). Chinese companies such as Tencent and Sina Corporation provide the main platforms for mobile social media (see Table 2 below.)

Program	Owner	Active users (millions)	Platforms available on
QQ	Tencent Holdings	800	Desktop, Mobile
Qzone	Tencent Holdings	600	Desktop, Mobile
Weixin (WeChat)	Tencent Holdings	355	Mobile only
Sina Weibo	Sina Corporation	536	Mobile, Desktop

Tencent Weibo	Tencent Holdings	250	Mobile, Desktop
RenRen	China InterActive Corp	100	Mobile, Desktop
Douban	Yang Bo	100	Mobile, Desktop

Table 2. Main platforms for Social Media in China

Source: Adapted from Chinese Internet Networking Information Centre (http://cnnic.cn/)

Though far from household names in the West, companies such as Tencent and Sina Corporation are among the largest companies in the world. In 2014, Tencent is expected to have a market value of over USD$70 billion with revenue in excess of USD$25 billion (Kapadia, 2013). Through the instant-messaging service QQ alone, Tencent has approximately 800 million users, the vast majority within China. About 50% of Tencent's revenue comes from games, both online and increasingly mobile (Kapadia, 2013). Analysts estimate that web gamers in China range in age from 18 to 60, significantly broader then the 18 to 24 year old cohort usually associated with gaming (Kapadia, 2013).

WeChat in particular, developed in 2011 by Tencent, has become a popular platform. In 2013 WeChat had over 355 million subscribers. QQ was Tencent's early version of micro-blogging, with WeChat closer to Facebook as an aesthetic and in terms of functionality.

Making credit more accessible using online means is now standard. In late 2013, WeChat was coupled with Tencent's e-commerce platform TenPay (*Cai Fu Tong*), a direct rival to the US e-commerce company PayPal and Chinese company Alipay. In PayPal buyers can pay merchants or other registered individuals without sharing sensitive financial information. PayPal gave online businesses an alternative way to receive payments from consumers and other businesses and developed its revenue model to make money through transaction fees. Banks would not have taken the risk PayPal did in setting up its business. In 2004, PayPal bought eBay. eBay has as its ethos the linking of peer-to-peer buyers and sellers, with minimal intrusion and the underlying model was not lost on the finance industry. The interest of PayPal with peer-to-peer communication was never esoteric. PayPal's success had always been closely associated with eBay. For example, more than 70% of PayPal's 2005 revenue came from eBay. When eBay purchased Skype in 2005, 88% of Skype's 54 million registered were users listed outside the US. 'Speaking directly with sellers could help eBay buyers gain the confidence to purchase products with complex attributes.' (Eisenmann & Barley, 2006, p.10). Ma Huateng, CEO for Tencent, clearly understands the value in this business model (Kapadia, 2013). The Chinese e-commerce market is estimated to be worth over USD$870 billion (CIW, 2014). TenPay's share of China's e-commerce market is 19.4%, second to Alipay with a marketshare of 48.76% (CIW, 2014, Tencent, 2014).

During the 2014 Lunar New Year festival (31st January-14th February), Chinese collectivist culture emerged through WeChat in an extraordinary way. The Red Bags created by WeChat 20 days before the Lunar New Year festival had little marketing (Han and Xu, 2014). Starting originally as a game, Red Bag allowed users two ways to give money (see Figure 2); directly to WeChat contacts, or allocating a number of people within a contact list to receive a diminishing amount. In this instance, if you were the 21st person to open a 20-person Red Bag message you received nothing, therefore creating 'lucky money'. Within the first afternoon of release however the application emerged across nearly all provinces within China greatly exceeding the growth forecasts and hardware capabilities of WeChat (Han & Xu, 2014). After nine days of the Lunar New Year festival, users of WeChat's Red Bag application grew to beyond 8 million with over 400 million yuan (USD$85 million) exchanged via 40 million messages. As a result TenPay experienced a massive spike in subscriptions thanks to WeChat users (Han & Xu, 2014; Yuan, 2014).

Figure 2. The two different ways of sending Red Bags through WeChat

User experience of WeChat Red Bags however varied. For some, the Red Bags enhanced the festival season. For example Zhang Shanshan, an accountant for a Nanjing based accounting firm, spent all of Lunar New Year's Eve playing the Red Bags game, enhancing the festive atmosphere (Hu & Chen, 2014). For others, the linking of their bankcard to WeChat reduced the physical distance with family and allowed families to share the experience of Red Bags virtually (Yangtze Evening Post, 2014).

Deputy General Manager of WeChat, Yi Wu, though saw the game encouraging negative behaviors with users acting as 'wolves' (狼性, *lang xing*) (Han & Xu, 2014). For example, one user, imitating the famous entrepreneur Chen Guangbiao, encouraged users to add him to their list as he intended to give out 20 million yuan through the Red Bags (Zhang, 2014). However, instead the imitator took from others rather then sharing Red Bags amongst his own network (Zhang, 2014). Other users instead neglected their families preferring to play the Red Bag game instead of being socially active (Wu, 2014). For example, entertainment reporter Miss Wang spent the entire Lunar New Year Festival with no family or friends, but rather with her mobile phone, charger and wi-fi (Zhang, 2014).

Conclusion

The Red Bags phenomenon is more important than it seems at first glance. It is a dramatic example of what is possible in China now compared with 10 years ago. People can exchange ideas, exchange money and demonstrate traditional Chinese values without government interference. It is true that China limits freedom of expression if it sees that expression as affecting 'social order', but these massive online cultural events are an extraordinary phenomenon.

A growing audience in modern terms is a valuable market. From a business point of view, the Red Bags further built Tencent's WeChat platform, much in the same way that Farmville was tied to Facebook and further built its audience. At its peak, 20 million people used the Red Bag application during the 15 day 2014 Lunar New Year festival (Wu, 2014) greatly increasing subscription to Tencent's TenPay. The uptake in use was nearly as large as the Australian population, yet represents less than 8% of WeChat's 355 million predominately Chinese subscribers (CNNIC, 2014). WeChat is of course also international and in English. The growth potential of Chinese online media is not lost on the international market, a point articulated by investors during an April 2014 initial public offering by Sina Weibo on the US Nasdaq stock exchange (ABC, 2014).

It is perhaps not surprising that Chinese government officials hold concerns that the enhanced capacity to

celebrate traditional Chinese values has a twin side involving negative attributes such as activism, corruption, and health issues. Social media has been acknowledged as supporting dissident voices within China (Chung, 2008). Similarly, Xu Chuanzhi, director of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection in China, expressed concern at the new possibilities for 'hidden' corruption emerging through Red Bags as people present gifts to superiors or those in positions of power and influence (Zou, 2014). The Red Bags, Xu argued, encouraged private corruption (Zou, 2014). The online 'wolves' created by Red Bags (Han & Xu., 2014) are the same wolves who would exist in traditional society – those who abuse reciprocation. We have argued in this paper, however, that the majority of activity in the massive online cultural events relate to communal reciprocation or entertainment rather than activist activity (Wan & Gut, 2008; Leibold, 2011). For example, on 31st March, 2014, actor Wen Zhang released a public apology to his partner Ma Yili on Sina Weibo. The apology, related to a matter of infidelity, was viewed more then 180 million times and attracted over 7 million comments during the first 24 hours (Xinhua, 2014). This is reciprocation to community, an apology, part of traditional Chinese values.

As we said at the beginning of this paper, it would be a mistake to assume that the evolution of micro-messaging platforms in China is a trend towards Western-style democracy. The trend we argue is towards traditional Chinese values, which encompasses within it a democratic element in the way Chinese citizens communicate. Similarly, it would be a mistake for businesses to confuse the use of the internet for community purposes, even against the Chinese government wishes, as an expression of Western concepts of civil society. Rather, Chinese internet social media activity is collectivist in nature and use. In China the government is recognised as an active agent within the social media and e-commerce markets. Sina Weibo, a micro-blogging site with over 536 million users in 2014 (CNNIC, 2014) was required by the government in 2012 to implement a three-day comment ban (Yoshida, 2012). Such examples demonstrate the government view on the role that new media companies have to play in maintaining and supporting social order.

The Red Bags phenomenon, finally, demonstrates that the internet is not individualistic, low context, or merely technological by nature. Chinese Mianzi (面子) or 'face' can be expressed online. Face though is not simply about an individual being embarrassed because an incident happened that embarrassed them in front of others online or an individual being supported online by others. Mianzi is a complex interplay of relationships and expectations that do not need to be written or said directly thanks to a shared world-view (Triandis, McCusker & Hui, 1990; Oyserman, Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Red Bags for example is played online, is direct, but at the same time is linked to things that do not have to be said. Likewise, the use of social media to get volunteers together to help others, against government requirements not to do so, is also a classic example of Renqing (人情), where social obligation and reciprocation is key. Volunteer organisation to help earthquake victims demonstrates the strength of the traditional expectation of reciprocation to the community, a value that has always been fundamental to Chinese society.

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