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**WeChat: the impact  
of the super app on  
Chinese society**

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## 前言

1978 年，邓小平在十一届三中全会筹备月会议上发表讲话，标志着改革开放新时代的开始。作为第一个进行这种大胆改革的社会主义国家，中国发现自己与毛泽东主义的过去有了重大的决裂，并在邓小平的领导下开创了“改革开放”的政策。

改革开放被今天的中国人认为是文革之后中国的第二次伟大革命。在改革开放之初，邓小平不得不面对一个经济停滞的国家，这是过去几十年战争和国内革命的后果。邓小平的目标是保持中国的社会主义政治思想，但同时要从计划经济转向市场经济，面向全球市场。为了实现这一目标，中国必须采取资本主义的一些做法，邓小平把这种新的思维方式称为“有中国特色的社会主义”。

中国的经济开始了一个指数级增长的时期，在国有企业的同时出现了私有制和私营企业。自中华人民共和国诞生以来，政府首次允许外国在中国领域内的“经济特区”进行投资。在过去的 40 年里，中国在多个经济领域实现了最快的持续扩张，首先是互联网。

本论文的研究目的是揭示中国在发展互联网、社交网络和智能手机移动应用方面的路径，并解释微信应用成功背后的原因。

尽管微信在本土取得了巨大的成功，但在西方国家却相当陌生，人们常常将其与 WhatsApp 等其他即时通讯软体相比。不过，有机会使用过它的人都知道，微信不仅仅是一款消息应用。微信所拥有的功能非常多，而且涉及到很多领域：人际关系、电子商务、各类服务、信息渠道；从而让用户可以在微信上管理自己日常生活的很大一部分。

本论文第一章主要介绍了中国互联网发展的历史，以及第一批网络通讯工具的诞生及其对中国人的影响。为此，本章首先揭露了互联网发展的第一步，特别是以 1987 年第一封电子邮件的发送和中国互联网 ID 的建立为标志。本章继续讲述构成中国互联网骨干网的四个互连网络，以及旨在保护中国互联网和关闭来自中国以外的“非法”内容的防火长城。

本章的中心部分分析了网民在线互动的三种工具：BBS、博客和微博。每一段都旨在揭露这些工具的历史，然后介绍它们在中国的具体发展、功能以及对中国用户的影响。在这三个例子中，可以发现这些被定义为“新媒体”的工具为网络公民提供了一个表达意见的平台。在一个言论自由一直被政府和官方媒体控制的国家，这代表了一种创新。最后，本章透露了移动互联网的发展，这对微信的诞生至关重要。这个领域从 2010 年开始出现了指数级增长，并为

中国企业创造了很多机会，包括微信的母公司腾讯。腾讯把微信的数字生态系建立在其一款产品 QQ 基础上

在第二章中，重点转移到了微信，以及微信的诞生和发展史上。由于张小龙和他团队的头脑和工作，在 2010 年中国移动市场高速发展的时候，这个应用开始开发。最初的微信有三个基本功能：发送消息、照片和语音短讯。但多年来，该应用经历了 30 多次更新，在中国社会中引入了越来越先进综合的功能。如今，微信之所以能成为超级应用，是因为腾讯能够打造一个功能和服务的生态系，让人、服务、组织和电器之间实现互联互通。

利用 QQ 已有的数字生态系，腾讯围绕微信打造了一个类似的生态系，这个生态系由连接层和基础层两层组成。基础层输出工具和能力，即应用的主要功能；而连接层则通过微信的功能连接人、服务、组织和电器。本章旨在披露微信的每一个主要功能，使微信成为全球移动应用格局中的一个独立案例。

主要功能有即时通讯、朋友圈、公众号、微信支付、小程序和企业微信。每一项都造型和拓展了微信的生态系，也因为微信的无孔不入，改变了中国人之间的互动方法，也改变了中国经济的许多方面。

最后，第三章透露了微信给中国社会带来的变化，特别是其的好处和缺点。本章按照微信对其产生影响的方面进行划分。第一部门考虑的是微信用户之间的社会关系，特别是群聊内的动态和跨代关系。

之后，我分析了市民和农村移民对朋友圈的使用和发布内容的差异。这些差异主要是由这两个群体的社会经济条件决定的。最后，我分析数字版红包对人际关系的影响。

第二个方面是指微信在中国城市的影响力，是凭借用户可以通过微信的功能获得的所有服务。所有这些功能都与中国的所有关键行业深度融合，让市民可以获得许多付费服务，过着“智能生活”。因此，微信在中国城市中已经成为必不可少，现在的中国城市被认为是“智能”的，是以市民的需求为导向的。微信不仅改变了城市的面貌，还通过微乡村一体化平台改变了农村的面貌。通过它，农村已经能够部分地缩小与城市的数字鸿沟。现有的功能让农民更好地相互联系，更有效地接收来自村委会的信息，并通过平台销售自己的农产品。

最后分析的一部门是随着微信支付的使用而产生的无现金社会。微信支付使中国从现金经济转变为无现金经济。然后，本章最后介绍了无现金经济存在的问题和它给中国带来的积极方面。

综上所述，我的论文旨在揭露这个应用的所有特点，它的发展历史，它的更新以及它对中国社会的影响。研究微信很重要，因为人们可以了解一个移动应用如何对一个社会产生如此深

远的影响，无论是从负面还是从正面来看。如今，微信在移动应用领域是一个独特的案例，因此，了解微信的特点及其影响对用户和应用创建者本身都很重要。

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1978, during the month-preparatory conference for the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, Deng Xiaoping delivered a speech which marked the beginning of a new era of reforms and opening to the world. As the first socialist country to make such daring reforms, China found itself significantly breaking with its Maoist past and inaugurating the policy of "reform and openness" (改革开放 in Chinese), under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping.

The opening reform is considered nowadays by Chinese people as the second great revolution of China, after the Cultural Revolution. At the beginning of the opening reforms, Deng Xiaoping had to face a country with a stagnant economy, consequence of the past decades of war and internal revolutions. The aim of Deng Xiaoping was to maintain the socialist political ideology of China, but at the same time to move from a planned economy to a market economy, oriented towards the global market. In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary for China to adopt some practices of capitalism; Deng referred to this new way of thinking as "socialism with Chinese characteristics".

A period of exponential economic growth began for China, with the emergence of private ownerships and private businesses alongside the state-owned ones. For the first time since the birth of the People's Republic of China, the Government allowed foreign investments in the country in territory called "special economic zones". Over the past four decades, China has achieved the fastest sustained expansion in several fields of economy, first and foremost the Internet.

This thesis lends itself to expose the path of China in developing the Internet, social networks and mobile applications for smartphones, up to explain the success behind the super app WeChat.

WeChat, despite its huge success in the homeland, is quite unknown in Western countries, and it is often compared to other messaging apps such as WhatsApp. Those who have had the opportunity to use it, however, know that WeChat is more than just a messaging app. The features that WeChat has at its disposal are numerous and touch different fields: interpersonal relationships, e-commerce, various types of services, information channel; thus allowing users to manage a large part of their day and life on WeChat.

The first chapter of this thesis focuses on the history of Internet development in China and the birth of the first online communication tools and their influence on Chinese people. For this purpose, the chapter begins by exposing the first steps in the development of the Internet, marked in particular by the sending of the first email in 1987 and the creation of an internet ID for China. The chapter continues talking about the four interconnecting networks, which constitute the backbone of Chinese internet, as

well as the great firewall, whose purpose is protecting Chinese internet and close off “illegal” content from outside China.

The central part of the chapter focuses instead on the analysis of three tools for online interactions among cybercitizens: BBSes, blogs and microblogs. Each paragraph aims to expose the history of these tools and then their specific development in China, their functions, and the impact they had on Chinese users. In all three cases, it can be noted that these tools, defined as "new media", have provided to cybercitizens a platform to voice their opinions. This has represented an innovation in a country in which freedom of expression had always been controlled by the government and official media. Finally, the chapter uncovers the development of mobile internet, which is crucial for the birth of WeChat. This sector has seen an exponential growth from 2010 and has created wide opportunities for Chinese companies, including Tencent, the parent company of WeChat. Its first product QQ has laid the foundation for the creation of the digital ecosystem of WeChat.

In the second chapter the focus moves on WeChat and on the history of its birth and development. Thanks to the mind and work of Zhang Xiaolong and his team, the app project saw the light in 2010, when the mobile market in China was developing at a high speed. Initially WeChat, had three basic functions: sending messages, photos and voice clips. Over the years, however, the app has undergone more than 30 updates, which have introduced increasingly advanced and integrated features in Chinese society. Nowadays WeChat has become a super app because of the ability of Tencent to create an ecosystem of functions and services that allow the interconnection among people, services, organizations and devices.

By taking advantage of the already existing digital ecosystem of QQ, Tencent has created a similar ecosystem around WeChat which consists of two layers called connection layer and base layer. The base layer outputs tools and capabilities, namely the main features of the app; while the connection layer connects people, services, organizations and devices through the features of WeChat. This chapter aims at disclosing each of the main features that have made WeChat a separate case in the global mobile applications landscape.

The main features are text messages, moments, official accounts, WeChat Pay, mini programs and WeChat at work. Each one of them has shaped and expanded the ecosystem of WeChat and, because of their pervasive nature, they have transformed the dynamics of interaction among Chinese people, as well as many aspects of Chinese economy.

Lastly, the third chapter uncovers the changes brought by WeChat on Chinese society, focusing on both the advantages and disadvantages. The chapter is divided in relation to the sector on which WeChat has had an impact. The first sector takes into account the social relationships among WeChat

users, with particular reference to the dynamics within chat groups and transgenerational relationships. Afterwards, an analysis is carried out on the use of moments and the differences in the content posted by urban citizens and rural migrants. These differences are mainly dictated by the socio-economic conditions of these two groups. Finally, the analysis shifts to the impact of the digital version of red packets on interpersonal dynamics.

The second area refers to the impact of WeChat in Chinese cities by virtue of all the services that users can access through its features. All these features integrate deeply with all the key industries of China, by allowing citizens to access many paid services and lead a “smart life”. WeChat has therefore become essential in Chinese cities which are considered now "smart" and oriented towards the needs of the citizen. WeChat has not only changed the face of cities, but also the face of the countryside through the integrated WeCountry platform. By means of it, rural areas have been able to partly reduce the digital divide with cities. The available features have allowed rural dwellers to better connect to each other, to receive information from the village committee more efficiently and to sell their agricultural products through the platform.

Finally, the last analyzed sector is that of the cashless society arose with the use of WeChat Pay. WeChat Pay has transformed China from a cash-based economy to a cashless economy. The chapter then ends with a description of the problems of the cashless economy and the positive aspects brought by it to China.

To summarize I would say that my thesis aims to expose all the features of this app, the history of its development, its updates and its impact on Chinese society. The study of WeChat is important to understand how a mobile app can have such a profound impact on a society, both from a negative and a positive point of view. Nowadays WeChat represents a unique case in the mobile app landscape, thus understanding its features and their implications is important for both users and app creators themselves.

# Chapter 1: The Internet development in China

## 1.1 First steps in Internet Development

Nowadays the Internet plays a fundamental role in current society and China is not exempt from this assumption. In the last 30 years, China put tremendous effort into developing the Internet in order to catch up with the world.

China began the first attempts and experiments of Internet development rather later than other countries, nevertheless it was able to join the international arena thanks to a series of projects that saw the light in the second half of 1980s, almost ten years after the beginning of the Opening Reform led by Deng Xiaoping.

The first most symbolic event of the Internet development of China dates back on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1987, when the first email was sent from China to Karlsruhe Institute of Technology in Germany. The email, signed by Professor Qian Tianbai, Head of China's Academic Network, was written both in English and Chinese and stated “越过长城，走向世界” (Across the Great Wall, we can reach every corner of the world)<sup>1</sup>. This event marks the beginning of the exploration of the Internet in China.

With the transmission of the first email, Chinese scientists and the government as well realized that the Internet technology was gaining increasingly importance, thus a series of experiments of internet transmission took place from 1987 onwards.

In 1988, the Institute of High Energy Physics (IHEP) linked China with Europe and North America, thanks to the adoption of the X.25 Protocol, which is “a packet-switching protocol for wide area network (WAN) connectivity that uses a public data network (PDN) that parallels the voice network of the Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN)”<sup>2</sup>.

The Chinese government was now extremely focused in implementing experiments in this field, thus it launched a series of projects for the interconnection between different campus networks within the country. Among these projects, the most famous is the “National Computing and Networking Facility of China” approved in 1989 by the National Planning Committee which enabled the interconnection between three campus networks within Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), Tsinghua University and Peking University<sup>3</sup>. The NCFC network was completed in 1993.

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<sup>1</sup> Gianluigi NEGRO, *The Internet in China. From Infrastructure to a Nascent Civil Society*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2017, cap.3, pp.20.

<sup>2</sup> *X.25 Protocol*, in “Network Encyclopedia”, <<https://networkencyclopedia.com/x-25/>>, 17-10-2019.

<sup>3</sup> XIE Yungeng et al, *New Media and China's Social Development*, Berlin, Springer, 2017, cap.1, p.2.

It was only during 1990s that Chinese scientists started to establish a network ID for China: on 28<sup>th</sup> November 1990 Professor Qian Tianbai officially registered China's top-level domain name CN at the Stanford Research Institute's Network Information Center on behalf of China. According to Lu Liu and Yu Pan: "this secured a position for China in the Internet world and laid foundation for it to cut a brilliant figure in the international network arena later"<sup>4</sup>.

Although these relevant achievements, the country was not fully connected to the international network yet and this was reflected on the efforts of the country to join the rest of the world in this field. At that time the world was indeed waiting for China to join the Internet arena as attested by three meetings held in 1990s. During the INET'92 and INET'93 meetings promoted by the Internet Society<sup>5</sup>, experts and scholars discussed the access of China to the international Internet which was supported by all participants. These two meetings were followed by the CCIRN (Coordinating Committee for Intercontinental Research Networking) meeting in the U.S, which saw the involvement of Qian Hualin, a researcher from the China Academy of Sciences<sup>6</sup>. These three meetings are considered a milestone for the Internet development of China, considering that they led to the full-function Internet connection on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1994, when China was finally connected to the Internet world through a 64 kilobytes international line, as a result of the collaboration with the U.S Sprint Corporation<sup>7</sup>.

After the first period of the Internet development in China, which according to Wei and Lu spanned from 1987 to 1993, Chinese Internet developed at rapid speed and the Government carried out many regulations which shaped the Internet structure; among these, Order 195 is worth mentioning because it divides the internet networks of China into two categories: Interconnecting networks (INs) and Access networks (ANs).

While the first ones are strictly regulated by the Government, the regulations for the Access networks are less prohibitive, and they act as European or American Internet service providers. Nevertheless, they cannot set up direct links to the global Internet<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> XIE Yungeng et al, *New Media and China's...*, cap.1, p.3.

<sup>5</sup> The Internet Society is an international organization founded in 1992 in America, whose purpose is ensuring Internet access and transparency. Currently the ISOC includes a total of 62,397 members coming from 125 countries of the world. For further information: <<https://www.internetsociety.org/about-internet-society/>>.

<sup>6</sup> China Academy of Sciences is a research institute with thirteen branches spread all over the country.

<sup>7</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.3, pp.30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

### 1.1.1 Interconnecting networks: the backbone networks of China

According to Gianluigi Negro: “Interconnecting networks (*fulian*) refer to computer networks directly linked to the global Internet through international leased lines”<sup>9</sup>.

It is possible to affirm that the construction of these type of networks dates back to 1994: Wei, Lu et al. call this period the second and current phase of Chinese Internet, while the first one corresponds to the development between 1987 and 1993. Throughout the second phase, China developed TCP/IP connections and started the offer of Internet services to the public<sup>10</sup>.

The pioneer in the construction of the backbone networks of China was CERNET, followed by CSTNET, CHINANET and CHINAGBN. Thanks to the establishment of these networks, Chinese people were able to transmit information in a faster and more convenient way.

In July 1994, CERNET (China Education and Research Network) was constructed by six colleges and universities: the purpose of this network was the connection of all college computers and the distribution of resources through the international gateway of NCFC. The core of this network was located in Tsinghua University and there were also regional centers located in Shanghai, Beijing, Nanjing, Xi’an, which provided connection for the local campus centers<sup>11</sup>.

CSTNET (China Science and Technology Network) was set up in 1994 by CAS and it was based on the NCFC network; the project aimed at connecting over 30 CAS institutes in Beijing with cities across the country. Its purpose was to realize full connection of the teaching institutions of China and because of this, the project was then expanded also to Institutes outside CAS.

The last two networks are CHINANET and CHINAGBN, which were the first two public networks of China: the construction of CHINANET began in 1994 and was put into operation in January 1995, subsequent to the agreement between the General Administration of Telecommunications of the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications and the Commerce Department of the United States. As already mentioned above, this network was the first to offer Internet services to the public via a 64K line with the assistance of the U.S firm Sprint Corporation<sup>12</sup>. CHINANET was the first commercial network in China and its consumers were usually state corporations, private companies and wealthy people who could afford the high-priced connection fees.

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<sup>9</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.3, pp.29.

<sup>10</sup> WEI Lu et al., *Internet Development in China*, Journal of Information Sciences, vol.28, n.3, 2002, pp.207.

<sup>11</sup> *Ivi*, pp.208.

<sup>12</sup> NEGRO, *op.cit.*, pp.29.

The last backbone network is CHINAGBN (China Golden Bridge), which was established in 1996 after the issue of “The Relevant Decisions on Administering the International Connection of Computer Information Networks” by the Electronic Industry Administration<sup>13</sup>.

It is important to highlight that these four agencies can administrate interconnecting network without the approval of the State Council. The State Council’s Steering Committee of National Information Infrastructure (also known as NII) was created in 1990s in order to mediate between the Premier of the State Council, the ministries and agencies and rule on information industry and the Internet. The State Council’s Steering Committee of NII provided the main regulations for the Internet as well as domain name registration<sup>14</sup>.

These four agencies still constitute the Internet backbone networks of China and, as mentioned by Gianluigi Negro, they are the sole trusted agencies by the Government for Internet management.

### **1.1.2 The largest Intranet of the world: the Great Firewall of China**

In developing the Internet, China has made great strides over the last decades, but its development goes together with a strict control over the content of websites, the data from foreign countries and the mainland. The idea of a “golden shield” can be traced to the ideological and political background of Deng Xiaoping. Its famous quote: “if you open the window for fresh air, you have to expect some flies to blow in” sums up the core of this project<sup>15</sup>.

On 12<sup>th</sup> March 1993, Vice Premier Zhu Rongji proposed the implementation of the Golden Bridge Project, whose purpose was the construction and establishment of a national information network capable of connecting 30 Provinces and the major cities of the country<sup>16</sup>. The other two involved projects were the Golden Card Project, aimed at promoting credit cards and electronic banking, and the Golden Customs Project, direct towards the construction of a network to support foreign trade. In June 1994 the three projects were merged under the collective name “Three Golden Projects”<sup>17</sup>.

The attempt of China at that time was to promote national interest and benefit a lot of sectors in Chinese economy, thus a series of different “Golden Projects” followed the first ones, including projects about

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<sup>13</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.3, pp.29.

<sup>14</sup> *Ivi*, pp.24-25.

<sup>15</sup> Simone CEDROLA, *Il “Great Firewall”: la censura cinese 2.0*, in “Ius in itinere”, 2017, <<https://www.iusinitinere.it/great-firewall-la-censura-cinese-2-0-2101>>, 28-10-2019.

<sup>16</sup> *The Internet timeline of China 1986-2003*, in “China Internet Network Information Center”, 2012, <[https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/hlwfzdsj/201306/t20130628\\_40563.htm](https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/hlwfzdsj/201306/t20130628_40563.htm)>, 17-10-2019.

<sup>17</sup> NEGRO, *op.cit.*, pp.46-47.

finance, agriculture, and trade. These projects also aimed at preserving the privileges of China and avoiding interferences from foreign countries.

When it comes to the Internet development in China, the Golden Shield Project, also known as “The Great Firewall of China” is the one worth mentioning: the project was approved only in 1998 by the Ministry of Public Security and became fully operative in 2003<sup>18</sup>.

The name of the Great Firewall of China is inspired by the Great Wall of China and its role as a network firewall, whose purpose is protecting Chinese Internet and close off the diffusion of “illegal” content from outside China. The main activity of the project is to block web pages which are considered a threat by the Chinese government, but its function goes far beyond with a series of actions such as the denial of the access to some IP addresses, the filtering of URLs, connection interruption, packet filtering and Domain Name System filtering<sup>19</sup>.

As showed by the above-mentioned list of functions, China has isolated itself from the rest of the world, so much that some scholars such as Yurcik and Tan refer to Chinese Internet as “the world’s largest intranet”<sup>20</sup>.

## 1.2 The rise of BBSes, Blogs and microblogs in China

Although China has isolated itself from the rest of the world, this does not imply a stagnation in the research and development of Internet Technology; in contrast China has followed with great curiosity and attention the progresses coming from abroad.

In order to understand the development of the Internet in China and in the whole world, it is essential to highlight the shift from Web 1.0 toward Web 2.0. When talking about Web 1.0 we refer to the first step in Internet development, thus the creation of communication networks for the interconnection of users. Throughout this phase, the development of websites, portals and web service platforms is characterized by a low-level of interaction between users and internet content creators<sup>21</sup>. The main characteristic of this phase was the creation of contents by professional websites or specific elite groups of people; the public discourse was limited and monopolized by media and knowledge elites and

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<sup>18</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.3, pp.46-47.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> William YURCIK, Zixiang TAN, *The Great (Fire) Wall of China: Internet Security and Information Policy Issues*. In “Proceedings of the 24th Telecommunications Policy Research Conference”, 1996.

<sup>21</sup> Federica BRANCALE, *Web 1.0, Web 2.0 e Web 3.0: spiegazioni e differenze*, in “Marketing freaks”, 2014, <<http://www.themarketingfreaks.com/2014/02/web-1-0-web-2-0-e-web-3-0/>>, 23-10-2019.

common people had not space to share their opinions and idea on the web<sup>22</sup>. In a word, Web 1.0 refers to the first stage in internet development mentioned in previous pages.

With the advent of Web 2.0, the level of interaction between the websites and users increases and cybercitizens are now able to express their opinions through different tools such as blogs, social networks and podcasts. As a result of the implementation of these tools, the relationship between network users deepened and a flow of participatory communication arose. In the era of Web 2.0, people are keener to share their opinions on participatory platforms and the content created becomes more and more reliable, since it is the results of the participation of all cybercitizens<sup>23</sup>.

In this section of the chapter, we will analyze three types of tools for the online interaction among users: from BBSes in 1990s, to blogs that appeared in 2002 and to microblogs that caught the attention in 2010. These tools for sharing online discussion between user and website and among users have brought an astounding impact on the development of new media in China. They have become a pivotal mediator in online information, and they have also extended their influence in many other fields, such as politics, marketing and the social life of people. BBSes, blogs and microblogs belong to the so-called “fourth media”, which is none other than the Internet. New media as new transmission models have threatened traditional media with their numerous advantages; nonetheless traditional media were able to adjust their development and merge with them<sup>24</sup>.

Moreover, thanks to the progress in the field of mobile telephony and mobile Internet, it has been possible in recent years to incorporate these network media in mobile phones and smartphones. In this way the tools for sharing and disseminating information that previously were only accessible on PCs have become increasingly integrated into the lives of people due to the portability of smartphones. The mobile internet sector is a further step in the Internet development and it will allow us to deeply analyze the success and the influence of the multi-purpose messaging app WeChat in China.

### **1.2.1 BBS or Bulletin Board System**

Bulletin Board System can be also referred as network forums or network communities, as their purpose is to transplant the real-life community to the online space to form a discussion among cybercitizens. Nevertheless, they serve also other functions, such as email and document transmission,

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<sup>22</sup> KUANG Wenbo, *Social Media in China*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, cap.5, pp.103-104.

<sup>23</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China*, cap.5, pp.103-104.

<sup>24</sup> XIE Yungeng et al, *New Media and China's...*, cap.3, p.25.

online talking, online bulletin and Internet access service. In other words, a BBS includes many functions of the Internet. The first BBS appeared in Chicago in 1978 and it was merely used to transmit and store messages; thus it did not have all the functions that network forums have today. The first ordinary PC-based BBS system did not appear until 1983: the RBBS-PC is as a matter of fact considered as the “BBS originator” since it could support most of the functions of current BBS systems<sup>25</sup>.

With regards of their introduction in China, the first BBS station was Shuguang BBS station which was opened in May 1994 by the State Smart Computers Research and Development Center, today known as High Performance Computer Research Center. The mission of this center is the research and development of high-performance computing systems with autonomous intellectual property rights, and the promotion of the use of high-performance computers as well as the development of the high-performance computing industry in China<sup>26</sup>. Anyway, this BBS lasted for a while and its influence was very limited.

As far as concerns the history of network forums in China, a crucial occurrence was the emergence of bbs.people.com, a forum opened after the protests against NATO. For this reason, the BBS was formerly known as “BBS in Strong Protest against NATO’s Savage Act”.

The popularity gained by network forums in 1990s is certainly due to all the advantages they had: first of all the decentralization, which means that now the content on the websites is no longer generated by professionals, but all people can join and participate in information production.

The collective participation of all cybercitizens created a new environment for the establishment and expansion of interpersonal relationships: if before the advent of the Internet, people interaction took place only offline, in the “real world”, with BBSes it is possible to establish new bonds with people. These bonds with strangers are indeed weak, but with time they can develop into stronger relationships: this is not possible with traditional media<sup>27</sup>. With regards of the interactions among users, in network forums they are considered indirect, because the computer is the medium which allows interaction among cybercitizens: this is what Spanish network sociologist Manuel Castells called “computer mediated communication” or CMC:

CMC is an umbrella term which refers to human communication via computers. Temporally, a distinction can be made between synchronous CMC, where interaction takes place in real time, and asynchronous CMC, where participants are not necessarily online simultaneously. Synchronous CMC includes various types of text-based

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<sup>25</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.5, pp.102.

<sup>26</sup> *High Performance Computers Research Center*, in “Institute of computing technology, China Academy of Sciences”, <[http://english.ict.cas.cn/rh/rd/200908/t20090820\\_33351.html](http://english.ict.cas.cn/rh/rd/200908/t20090820_33351.html)>, 28-10-2019.

<sup>27</sup> KUANG, *op.cit.*, pp.103-105.

online chat, computer, audio, and video conferencing; asynchronous CMC encompasses email, discussion forums, and mailing lists. [...]”<sup>28</sup>

It is possible to emphasize how CMC helped the expansion of new media, by allowing people to get really immersed in an active way in this new environment. The starting point which really set apart new media from traditional ones is the user-generated content (UGC), which means that in forums most posts are written by cybercitizens. Of course, there is always some content generated by forum administrators, but the communication structure becomes more and more flat and far from being a top-down one-way communication.

Formerly, traditional media were the only ones which could manage public opinion: every news or every event was selected and filtered by media professionals, meaning that the identity of the author was usually hidden. This filtering phenomenon led authors to provide biased opinions in order to meet the needs of traditional media. The situation changed with the emergence of Web 2.0 and network forums: now Internet users can express themselves freely, without worrying about their thoughts, opinions and ideas being filtered or altered<sup>29</sup>.

It can however be affirmed that the filtering of public opinion carried out by traditional media kept a lid to emotional public opinion, in such a way they expressed rational public opinion by selecting only rational feedbacks. But as it appears, network forums and their anonymity characteristics allow cybercitizens to express themselves freely, leading to the creation of irrational opinions guided by emotions.

When the opinions of people gather, the phenomenon of group polarization appears: this concept was first proposed by the American philosopher and professor of the University of Chicago Law School, Cass R. Sunstein in his book *Republic.com*. According to his view, group polarization is a phenomenon through which individuals in a group are influenced by it and they will be more inclined to make risky decisions<sup>30</sup>. This phenomenon is very popular on the Internet, especially in BBSes, blogs and microblogs, in which different views of different cybercitizens converge and major social events are discussed. Generally, emotional public opinion tends to arise in the early stage of a public opinion event, when both traditional and new media have not adequate information and the public leaves too much to the imagination.

As mentioned previously, one of the main characteristics of a BBS is the anonymity: the more people can hide their identities, the more they will be inclined to sound off emotional statements. To put it in other words, the authenticity of users is bolstered by the possibility of anonymity that network forums

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<sup>28</sup> James SIMPSON, *Computer mediated communication*, in “ELT Journal”, vol.56, 4, 2002, pp.414-415.

<sup>29</sup> XIE Yungeng et al, *New Media and China's...*, cap.3, p.26.

<sup>30</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.5, pp.107-108.

offer, because people tend to toss aside the constraints of their offline role. Because of this, plural speeches emerge in network forums and they are frequently not consistent with those people have in real life.

To sum up, anonymity and emotional opinion together with group polarization and decentralization are the main characteristics of BBS forums, which influence the development of online public opinion. With regard to these characteristics, it is possible to analyze the Chinese phenomenon of the network water army.

### 1.2.1.1 Network Water Army: the cyberbullies of the Chinese Internet

The phenomenon of network water army (网络水军 *wangluo shuijun*) appeared in China at the beginning of 2010s, and its activities focused on online platforms, such as BBSes and blogs.

A water army is a group of people hired and paid by network PR companies, who usually open a post on a certain topic on a BBS or blog and make lots of meaningless replies to it in order to attract as many people as possible<sup>31</sup>.

Generally, this is a marketing strategy implemented by companies to center the attention of users on a product or event: by giving visibility to a post, the object or event concerned will become known by the Internet public. As the country with the biggest internet population, China has focused a lot on online marketing, which means not only advertise a product, but also hide any negative feedbacks about it<sup>32</sup>. Besides this arguable marketing strategy, some water armies can become quite aggressive by spreading false rumors and by creating pseudo-events to confuse the public.

A network water army can have great power online and its influence on cybercitizens should not be underestimated. By being uncontrollable, unidentifiable and flexible, a water army is able to conduct network cultural penetration, thus shaping the opinions of people. It is exactly for this reason that the characteristics of BBSes mentioned in the previous paragraph offer a rich environment for water army to thrive.

To explain further how anonymity, emotional opinion, and group polarization help a water army in conducting its tasks, it is worth mentioning some related online events occurred in China.

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<sup>31</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.5, pp.115-116.

<sup>32</sup> DUAN Yan, *The invisible hands behind web postings*, in "China Daily", 2010, <[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/17/content\\_9981056.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-06/17/content_9981056.htm)>, 30-10-2019.

In 2008, Jiaduobao, the producer of Wanglaoji herbal tea, donated a hundred million yuan after the Wenchuan earthquake. After few days, many websites and BBS forums reported posts with the title “Let Wanglaoji disappear from the shelves in China! Force it out!” Such a phrase caught the attention of the public, by bringing a huge increase in the sales of Wanglaoji herbal tea<sup>33</sup>. By exposing this event, it is possible to demonstrate that emotional opinion was the starting point to increase the importance of the event: the aforementioned quote is clearly ambiguous, and it can be interpreted either with a positive meaning or with a negative meaning. The ambiguity triggered the opinion of cybercitizens, who begun to post replies, leading to group polarization. As mentioned before, people in a group are keener to take risky decisions or voice more drastic opinions than when they are alone; therefore in the beginning cybercitizens posted negative feedbacks about Wanglaoji and then they discovered that the author of the original post meant “Buy Wanglaoji out from the supermarket! Drink only Wanglaoji in the future”; therefore the intentions of the author were positive.

The Wanglaoji event was therefore a well-studied marketing strategy, which in the end caused enthusiasm in buying the product from Jiaduobao. Emotional opinion and group polarization are clearly embedded in this event and they attest the power held by BBSes in spreading and shaping online public opinion.

This is also correlated to the phenomenon of online voting, which is a way for cybercitizens to engage in public participation and express their real thoughts online. However, network water armies have also infiltrated this activity, thanks to the extensiveness of the network. “Network fighters” are people in charge of posting slanders, radical and confusing texts about a topic upon receiving instructions.

They have become more and more professionals as many PR companies hire them, create QQ groups and guide their actions. In addition to the defamation of competitors, websites hire network fighters in order to increase their network traffic: network fighters are asked to leave aggressive messages, open new topics continuously and replying to them. Their online actions are magnified by the lack of restrictions of time and space; therefore they can extend without limitations and the benefit of anonymity protects them from the law<sup>34</sup>. Network water armies jeopardize society; hence they affect online public opinion by relying on the emotions of cybercitizens and on the dissemination characteristics of BBS forums. It can be argued that people and PR companies behind network water army are conducting barely legal activities, thus the People’s Republic of China has issued laws in order to stand out against their behaviors.

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<sup>33</sup> KUANG, *op.cit.*, pp.118-119.

<sup>34</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.5, pp.120-121.

Despite the problems discussed above, it is necessary to state that BBSes had at once a considerable success in China, much more than in Western countries. They were among the first internet services arrived in China and immediately met the needs of Chinese cybertizens, as happened with emails. Firstly, they provided a community environment in which Chinese people could express themselves freely, given their tendency to suppress their opinions in real communication contexts.

Moreover, information in BBSes is considered by Chinese users more reliable, because it is first-hand and updated frequently, thus they represent a valuable information source<sup>35</sup>.

Consequently, BBSes were able to maintain their position in the online environment for quite a long time, until the first appearance of social networking websites such as Kaixin001 and Renren. Additionally, they have coexisted with blogs, which have played an important role in the Chinese social media network.

### 1.2.2 Blogs

Since 1990s, blogs represented a tool to expose and spread current event happening in society and, as BBSes, they exhibit the characteristics of group and mass dissemination. The blend word blog means web log and was first used in 1997 by Jorn Barger, when writing about his hobby on his personal webpage *RobotWisdom*; while the contracted term blog is attributed to Peter Merholz, who first made use of the word also as a verb<sup>36</sup>. However, blogs began to enjoy a period of success and fortune after 1998, when the American blogger Drudge was the first to expose the “Clinton-Lewinsky scandal”, becoming the first website run by an individual able to overshadow mainstream media with a hot social topic. From that moment on, blogs became the favored tool for online communication, particularly praised for their ability to offer to the public the realest and most accurate descriptions of events, as occurred for “9/11 event” in 2001 or the Iraqi war<sup>37</sup>.

A blog is considered as such if it presents three aspects: frequent updates, conciseness and personalization. Additionally, the contents need to be aligned in the order of time, from the latest to the oldest at the bottom. One might therefore think that blogs and BBSes are similar in terms of characteristics, as they are tools to explore topics and discover new contents and to build a sense of

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<sup>35</sup> *Old School BBS: the Chinese Social Networking phenomenon*, in “readwrite”, 2008, <[https://readwrite.com/2008/01/16/bbs\\_china\\_social\\_networking/](https://readwrite.com/2008/01/16/bbs_china_social_networking/)>, 4-11-2019.

<sup>36</sup> *Che cosa significa «blog»?*, in “Linkiesta”, 2012, <<https://www.linkiesta.it/it/article/2012/01/06/che-cosa-significa-blog/2803/>>, 5-11-2019.

<sup>37</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.123-124.

community, but they have actually some differences. A BBS is also frequently updated as blogs, but not in chronological order, but by topics and there is a less distinction between users and administrators, while on blogs the number of content creators is limited. Compared to their limited number however, content creators of blogs have more freedom in managing their communication space as they can control the experience, templates, moderation, and discussed topics as well as personalize the latter with different looks, layouts and styles<sup>38</sup>. Blogs are created, managed and written by one or more individuals and they are considered a more open space than a BBS, because when entering a blog it is possible to read articles and comment them without a registration; while network forums have a more structured publishing and there are often restrictions to publish on them, or even read their articles. In spite of its characteristic of openness and its capability of being an effective tool to get in touch with a new audience, the primary purpose of a blog is to expose facts, inform and persuade the public, while the posts on BBS forums usually offer a stated opinion which can be questioned by participants. In summary, blogs are much closer to a newspaper or television news, while BBSes are places conceived to request solutions to real problems and to spread knowledge.

One of the main reasons why blogs have reached their popularity can be traced in their ability to meet the “four zero” conditions: zero technology, zero costs, zero editing and zero form. These four conditions are therefore favorable for ordinary people, who do not need specific technical skills or technology to open a blog, making it a personal tool for self-entertainment<sup>39</sup>. People usually start writing on blogs to express their opinions or sensibility to topics that can range from hobbies to social and political event and, by doing this they arouse the will of cybercitizens in taking an active part in online discussions.

Together with BBSes, blogs have revolutionized the way information is released and simultaneously subverted news communication, leading to the development of the term “citizen journalism”, which indicates news that is collected, written and edited by “the readers”, without the assistance of professional journalists. The development of “citizen journalism” was possible because of the limitation of “gatekeepers” in blogs, a concept that was first advanced by the American social psychologist Kurt Lewin. His theory of “gatekeepers” can be traced in the article *Channels of Group Life*, published on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1947 in *Human Relations* journal. He described a gatekeeper as “an individual or a group [...] in power for making the decision between in or out”<sup>40</sup>. The concept of

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<sup>38</sup> Marian DOUCETTE, *Blogs vs Bulletin Boards (Forums)*, in “McMaster University”, 2005, <[http://fhs.mcmaster.ca/OHPToolkit/Content/TK\\_BlogsVsBulletinBoards.pdf](http://fhs.mcmaster.ca/OHPToolkit/Content/TK_BlogsVsBulletinBoards.pdf)>, 25-10-2019.

<sup>39</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.126-127.

<sup>40</sup> Kurt LEWIN, *Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research*, in “Human Relations”, 2, 1, 1947, pp.143-153.

gatekeepers can be applied in many fields but, with regards of communication it may be an individual journalist or editor, or a media organization.

The role of gatekeepers is essential in mass communication, as they act as a filter between the audience and the disseminators, and their behavior may be dredging or silencing. With respect to the aforementioned “four zero” conditions, the low technical threshold of blogs allows every cybercitizen to take part in the online discussion, and the limitation or absence of “gatekeepers” has brought popularity to many grassroots blogs. This is “citizen journalism”, whose flat structure permits that all cybercitizens are given the opportunity to speak and join the public debate.

Although blogs have brought openness and freedom with regards to the dissemination of news, if improper used, they present significant problems. Firstly, the purpose of blogs should be to spread knowledge to users, with reference to inherent values and ethics of bloggers and cybercitizens; but from time to time the importance of ethics in blogs is put aside or ignored, causing social problems<sup>41</sup>. This is the main reason why blogs cannot replace or outclass mainstream media: news reported on blogs is incomplete and needs to be verified and bloggers are just occasional reporters, and not real and accredited journalists, hence they could be overwhelmed by emotional opinion and provide biased and irrational information. Therefore, a blog is a powerful instrument capable of shaping and influence the online environment; but its impact is not limited to the virtual community since it extends to the offline world, intersecting with society and mainstream media.

### **1.2.2.1 The concept of blog in China**

By referring to the abovementioned characteristics, it is clear how blogs may have also attracted Chinese people: first of all, for their user-friendliness which allows even people who do not have an in-depth technical know-how to create web logs; secondly because as communication tools, they gave the opportunity to express opinions and ideas freely in a country in which people had never been eager to state their thoughts in social contexts, nor they had ever been persuaded to.

The pioneer of blogs in China was Fang Xingdong who established the first large-scale professional blog in China, “blogchina.com” in 2002, later rebranded Bokee.com. It is interesting to remark how the emergence of Blogchina was correlated to the need of greater freedom of expression from its founder. In 2002, Fang Xingdong had to go through censorship from Microsoft because of the publication of his two articles about the American company on eight websites. After this event, Fang

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<sup>41</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.128-129.

Xingdong pointed out how important the freedom of speech was to him, then he decided to take action and open Blogchina. On the first day of opening, he even wrote an article titled “The origin of Blogchina: thanks to Microsoft” to celebrate its new blog<sup>42</sup>.

Besides, he also came up with the transliteration of the word blog from English to Chinese. As mentioned above, the concept of blog comes from the Western world, thus at first there was no translation of it in Mandarin. The initial proposed translations included *wangzhi* 网址 (online diary), *buluo* 部落 (networked tribe), while others suggested to maintain the original English term. Finally, Fang Xingdong proposed the term *bokē* 博客, composed of the two ideograms *bo* 博 and *ke* 客; the first meaning “erudite person”, while the latter meaning “guest”<sup>43</sup>. Nowadays, the translation of the term blog in China stands either for a person who writes on a blog, or to designate the service that provides Weblog<sup>44</sup>.

It is possible to consider blogs as the Internet phenomenon of the noughties, a period in which the Chinese internet environment overflowed with a plurality of voices from cybercitizens and the year 2005 as the “year of the blog in China”. According to CNNIC, in 2005 there were 10 million bloggers in the country with an outstanding growing rate of a new blogger every five seconds<sup>45</sup>. Throughout this period, many companies started to realize that BBSes would not have lasted longer, hence large companies such as Sina.com and Sohu.com invested money in order to implement their own blog platforms.

There are mainly two reasons behind the success of blogs in China: firstly, the lacking participation of foreign competitors, and secondly the growing ability of blogs to become viable alternatives to the mainstream media. As far as concerns the first reason, there was only Myspace, the Microsoft blog platform, while the remainder of the market share was dominated by Chinese blogs: Blogchina, Sina.com, Sohu.com, qq.com, just to mention the most profitable and with the highest number of users<sup>46</sup>. Furthermore, foreign competitors entered the Chinese market far more later than domestic ones, thus it is explained why their market share was low and the Chinese presence solid.

Another reason that testifies the success of blogs is in their ability to gain the trust of internet users: blogs were in fact mainly managed by university students and professionals, who used blogs mainly as a personal diary in which expressing their feelings. It was probably this personal aspect that attracted

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<sup>42</sup> “Lishi youlai” 历史由来 (Origini storiche), *Boke Zhongguo* 博客中国, <<http://tujian.blogchina.com/footr/lsyl>>, 6-11-2019.

<sup>43</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.5, pp.145.

<sup>44</sup> KUANG Wenbo, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.124.

<sup>45</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.5, pp.145

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

Chinese internet users to blogs: their ability to effectively convey facts and events, while remaining attached to the emotions in which people were able to identify themselves. By taking into account that blogs were considered more reliable than mainstream media, Chinese government started using blogs to increase its level of transparency, hence it gave to Chinese citizens the opportunity to dialogue with their representatives. This can be considered a step forward: with the opening of a blog platform on the *People's Daily* website, the government has in a sense legitimized blogs, giving citizens the chance to comment on official government decisions. For this reason, it was more fundamental than ever to establish an ethical code for Chinese bloggers, in order not to run into problems with the central government.

With his position as pioneer of Chinese blogosphere, Fang Xingdong wrote two manifestos: the “bloggers’ declaration” and the “bloggers’ code of conduct”. Thanks to these two manifestos, Chinese bloggers received guidelines to maintain an appropriate behavior online and to avoid arguing with the government on sensitive issues. However, it must be pointed out how Chinese internet management has always implemented self-censorship, through filters that forbid the publication of sensitive or illegal contents.

Chinese bloggers are aware of government supervision and even when it comes to the most provocative ones, they are still very conscious of boundaries they have to maintain to avoid censorship or their blogs to be shut down. This explains why Chinese bloggers usually make use of jokes and puns, which the majority of Chinese cybercitizens struggles to understand.

But there is one Chinese blogger who made his strengths out of his caustic irony and foul language: Wang Xiaofeng in his blog *Bu xu lianxiang* (Making associations of ideas is not allowed), through which he managed to secure the respect of the Chinese blogosphere. As Lev Grossman affirmed: “Serious critiques of social problems or political leaders can still be dangerous in China, but serious isn't Wang's style. He might be the most respected blogger in China, precisely because he respects almost nothing”<sup>47</sup>.

Firstly, he often makes fun of the "Chineseness" and the difficulties of the government in establishing a harmonious society. For Wang, China will never reach harmony unless it is able to solve four issues: Taiwan, the Nobel Prize, the Oscar and Japan <sup>48</sup>. In relation to Chinese people, Wang also criticizes the Chinese tendency to gossip: he affirms that gossip is a peculiarity of Chinese people and this presents a benefit to the government.

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<sup>47</sup> Lev GROSSMAN, *Power To The People*, in “Time”, 2006, <<http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1570816-7,00.html>>, 8-11-2019.

<sup>48</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.5, pp.152.

By promoting reality shows like *Supergirls*, through which Chinese citizens dig into the lives of the protagonists, at the same time the government keeps them away from thorny and delicate issues<sup>49</sup>.

In his blog, Wang writes about everyday life and comments on events in the world of internet, politics, and culture, both Chinese and International. The common thread of his posts is desecrating parody and irony, along with bad language, typical of Northern China, where Wang was born. Even though the choice of using obscene language has been criticized by other bloggers and the public, he explained that it is the only language that can be understood by the majority of shabi 傻逼, or the people who surf the net. With respect to the language of Chinese bloggers, the blog of Wang Xiaofeng is made up of persuasive references and surreal parables and, as soon as the tension rises in a discussion, he closes the speech leaving the reader perplexed and full of doubts<sup>50</sup>. By being able to keep the blog open proves the ability of Wang to use the language properly. In fact, he manages to tackle hot topics without provoking cybercitizens or the government; said otherwise, he is able to maintain the right balance between freedom of expression and self-censorship.

His experience is therefore different from that of the famous female blogger Mu Zimei. She was the first Chinese blogger to write regularly on topics related to the sexual sphere and many of her posts drew inspiration from her personal life. In addition, Mu Zimei was able to leverage the Chinese passion for gossip by posting about the love lives of Chinese celebrities. Her blog was named by the portal Sina.com as the most popular internet site in 2003 and she was even asked to write a book containing her most controversial posts: the book was never published and in a wave of criticism coming from Sohu.com, Mu Zimei decided to shut down her blog<sup>51</sup>.

The experience of these two bloggers and many others shows how blogs had a huge impact on Chinese society, especially with regards to freedom of expression. Blogs have become powerful tools of communication, which have given the opportunity to avoid the censorship that is usually applied to traditional media. The posts on the blogs of Mu Zimei and Wang Xiaofeng were therefore able to target the government and their readers, always using indirect and elusive language. Despite the monitoring of the government, these blogs have not been censored or closed so far and, in the case of Mu Zimei, it was her own decision to shut down her own blog. This indicates how the Chinese government accepts a plurality of voices capable of expressing opinions on public issues, but these voices must not threaten the harmony of Chinese society. When discussing about the Chinese

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<sup>49</sup> Silvia POZZI, "Wang Xiaofeng, il blogger eroe simbolo del 2006", in *Mondo Cinese*, 131, 2, 2007.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.5, pp.153.

blogosphere, it is necessary to refer to the dichotomy between weblogs, represented as “safety valves” or “pressure cookers”.

In the first case, blogs are safety valves when the discussion is focused on topics already set by traditional media in their agenda. Therefore, the government allows citizens the opportunity to express their dissent against the CPC, but mainly because these issues are under the direct control of the government. Blogs act instead as pressure cookers when they get ahead of the official agenda or enter sensitive areas of discussion, such as religion, rural problems or arts. In this case, blogs can exacerbate these issues and create tensions both online and offline<sup>52</sup>.

On a final note, blogs may have brought difficulties to Chinese government in monitoring the opinions of Chinese people, but it cannot be denied that they represented an outstanding phenomenon in the context of Chinese media. Thanks to their many positive aspects, such as the ease of use, the four zero conditions, the high degree of personalization and the absence of gatekeepers; blogs offered an online space for sharing and exchanging ideas in a personal and interactive way. In a society that is not used to openly expressing its thoughts, blogs as new communication tools had a much deeper impact than in Western society. By having profoundly contributed to the development of a more efficient and faster way of communication, blogs are considered the internet phenomenon of the noughties. All their positive characteristics will be subsequently enhanced by microblogs and mobile communication, which have undergone enormous development during the twenty-tens decade.

### 1.2.3 Microblogs

A microblog is a user relationship-based information sharing, dissemination and access platform, through which users update and share information with short entries of less than 140 Chinese characters. As far as concerns the history of microblogging, the first and most famous is Twitter (*Tuite 推特* in Chinese) established in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams and Biz Stone.

It is interesting to note that the word Twitter was not the first choice when the founders were deciding how to name the platform: they first proposed “Status” and “Twitch”, but according to Jack Dorsey, these names did not bring the right imagery. By considering that the early idea was to get a small number of people to communicate via text messages, Jack Dorsey wanted the name to match the vibration of a phone when a message is received.

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<sup>52</sup> Johnathan HASSID, “Safety Valve or Pressure Cooker? Blogs in Chinese Political Life”, *Journal of Communication*, 62, 2, 2012, pp.212-230.

Eventually, after several research, the group came across the word twitter, which happened to have two meanings in English: first “simple, little sudden information”; second, “the chirping sound made by certain birds”. The second meaning especially explains the characteristic of Twitter:

The whole bird thing: bird chirps sound meaningless to us, but meaning is applied by other birds. The same is true of Twitter: a lot of messages can be seen as completely useless and meaningless, but it’s entirely dependent on the recipient. [...] We can use it as a verb, as a noun, it fits with so many other words. If you get too many messages, you’re “twitterpated” -- the name was just perfect.<sup>53</sup>

The success of Twitter is mainly due to its open application programming interfaces (APIs), which allow third-party developers to develop apps on the platform and therefore expand its functions.

Microblogging has revolutionized the way information is exchanged between users and, for this reason, it has several advantages that are worth mentioning: since there is a maximum number of characters per entries, microblogs appear simple in terms of content and consequently have a low technical threshold for users. This has undoubtedly revolutionized the way information is handled: if a microblog has a low technical threshold, it means that anyone can post on it. To clarify, the number of users not only increases exponentially relative to blogs, but the posts and information exchanged between users also increases. As a result, the resonance of a microblog is wider than that of a blog.

Another aspect of microblogs is the level of initiative users have: one of the main characteristics of microblogs are the “following” and “follow” features; the first one stands for the accounts a user decides to follow based on his or her own interests, while the second one stands for the group of people who follow the updates of a user. In this case the relationship between “following” and “follower” is not binding, as it happens on social network system like Facebook or its Chinese copycat Renren, in which once a user is granted friendship, the other one is allowed to see his or her updates. On microblogs, if a user decides to follow another person, the person in question is not obliged to follow him in turn. This feature of microblogs shows a high degree of initiative from users because if they decide to follow another account and receive updates, it means that they are genuinely interested in the content posted on that profile<sup>54</sup>.

The last advantages of microblogs are related with the world of mobile phones, which will be described in detail in the following sections. Particularly, microblogs possess an instant communication function, which is magnify by the development of mobile phones. If there are not PCs around, a mobile phone can help update the profile of a user in real time. This means that information is transmitted any time anywhere and this is precisely the revolution brought by microblogs combined with mobile internet.

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<sup>53</sup> David SARNO, *Twitter creator Jack Dorsey illuminates the site’s founding document. Part 1*, in “Los Angeles Times”, 2009, <<https://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/02/twitter-creator.html>>, 12-11-2019.

<sup>54</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.134

Therefore, it is evident that microblogs had a deep impact on the news industry, the public sphere and the way information is transmitted. In summary, microblogs have shaped Chinese public opinion more than any other internet phenomenon; especially in China, where people should keep their opinions to themselves or share them with close friends or relatives, at the most.

In a world in which news are spread also on the web, microblogs amplified the phenomenon, by becoming important sources of information. People can now spread news first-hand, at a speed never seen before and with ease, so it can be said that microblogs can be considered full-fledged channels of information dissemination. Nowadays even traditional media must rely on microblogs for the dissemination of information; because by not doing so they would lose an important source, and this would make them less competitive in the journalism field. It is not unusual for traditional media to show videos and images from the main microblogs and social networks during a social event: this is a revolution because the audience can see first-hand what happened, as well as the emotions and thoughts of people. Thus, journalism has become less impersonal. However, microblogs in this sense are a double-edged sword.

If on blogs the role of gatekeepers was very limited, on microblogs it is almost completely eliminated: the possibility for anyone to express their opinion leads to the circulation of news that is not verified and that consequently is arbitrary and not always truthful. Microblogs have accelerated the spread of information by ordinary citizens, but this information is often fragmented and can lead to social instability. As already mentioned in the section about BBSes and blogs, the lack of gatekeepers causes a wave of emotional opinion, and the same happens on microblogs: information is released in an arbitrary environment and is neither controlled nor restricted; this generates the spread of amplified and magnified news, as well as the spread of rumors. This affects the role of microblogs as unbiased and reliable sources: the information transmitted is fragmented, biased, and often causes panic not only in the online community, but also offline.

The role that emotional opinion plays on microblogs is linked to the dichotomy between rationality and irrationality. Kuang Wenbo in his book *Social Media in China* explains: “in philosophy, rationality refers to man’s ability to apply wisdom. [...] it usually refers to such a way of thinking that man derives a conclusion by reasoning after prudent thinking”<sup>55</sup>. However, people are a mix of rationality and irrationality and, in real life, as well as on network platforms, the irrational side often prevails. As for public opinion on microblogs, irrationality leads users to disclose emotional opinion and therefore their entries are emotional, highly destructive and distorted. The loss of rationality guides users to harmful

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<sup>55</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.156.

and uncivilized behavior on the web, as well as to the dissemination of incomplete or even false information. It is above all the latter that creates problems of social instability.

Some microblogs users purposely create false news to attract cybercitizens participation and, the characteristics of microblogs of fast-dissemination and anonymity are a fertile ground for the proliferation of false news and illegal content. Furthermore, it must be considered that, while on one hand microblogs offer the chance to anyone to have a voice, on the other hand, many cybercitizens are not able to analyze critically the information received, contributing to the dissemination of rumors.

As previously mentioned, when people express their opinion online, the phenomenon of group polarization appears. In the case of microblogs, the fact that they are used by grassroots contributes more broadly to the phenomenon. On microblogs people tend to follow and give voice to opinions that they consider closer to what they think is right and they often adopt extreme attitudes because they feel justified by the group polarization. If more people adopt a certain attitude, the latter will be considered acceptable. Furthermore, the possibility of remaining anonymous leads to a lack of responsibility in what is expressed by cybercitizens. In sum, group polarization amplifies even more the social instability that is created through microblogs, because people belonging to a group judge negatively a social event based on the prejudices they have acquired both online and offline. It is for this reason that every information on microblogs must always be analyzed in a profound and rational way to avoid the creation of panic phenomena and harmful behaviors towards people or social events. As previously stated, microblogs revolutionized the way information is transmitted and attracted many users, leading to the creation of microblogging public opinion. When a user publishes or comments a post on microblogs, he immediately attracts the attention of his followers, who in turn spread the news in their social circle, therefore information is spread rapidly and public opinion is formed: this is called microblogging's fission-type model. This way of disseminating information is totally different relative to traditional media: on microblogs there is an interactive dissemination, meaning that cybercitizens control the generation and dissemination of online content.

This is very similar to what happened with BBSes and blogs: the decentralization of information on microblogs is even more accentuated and completely breaks down the "professional barriers". In the past, public opinion came only from official media and from a minority of professionals such as journalists, but with the emergence of microblogs people can participate in public opinion more freely and equally: everyone can contribute to the production of information and become also opinion leaders. This last point needs to be examined in detail with reference to the "dandelion effect", which happens when users can express their opinion and their thoughts and consequently become opinion leaders

when a social event arises. In order to better understand what the dandelion effect is, Kuang Wenbo described the concept in his book:

The Dandelion Effect explains that a venture company or start-up will not disappear even if it fails, because its talents will spread with the wind like dandelions before falling on proper ground [...]. Information is like a dandelion that is blown—it will spread in different directions, adapt to users' demands and fall on fittest ground.<sup>56</sup>

To summarize, when an opinion leader starts the discussion on a topic, the topic will start to circulate through the microblog in search of a suitable ground to lie on, that is the search for approval and comments from the users of the social circle. The more the topic attracts people, the more it will spread and gain resonance, not only online, but also in real life, attracting traditional media.

The microblogging's fission-type model described above is linked to other two concepts: the chain of reaction and circulating of replies. The concept of chain of reaction comes from physics, notably in combustion<sup>57</sup>. Similarly, on microblogs, the content posted by a user is instantly forwarded and commented by his or her followers, and then forwarded by the latter's followers. This implies that dissemination of information on microblogs is extremely advantageous with respect to traditional media, because its propagation is multiplied whenever the information reaches a new user.

With regard to the circulation of replies, when a topic attracts the attention of cybercitizens online, it will be reposted many times and thus it will continuously appear on the top of the personal page of a user. Overall, the power of the chain reaction and circulation of replies make sure that public opinion on microblogs is formed quickly and instantly.

Additionally, although often fragmented, information on microblogs has a wide resonance. The key-concept lies precisely in the term "micro": even if there is a limit of characters per post, the large number of cybercitizens on a microblog publishes a significant volume of information which far exceeds that of other media. This can be considered a positive aspect of the microblogging's fission-type model; the production of so much information that involves knowledge of different fields allows everyone to get close to topics they are not familiar with. But eventually, the possibility of sharing such a variety of information lead users to confine themselves in information cocoons.

The term "information cocoons" was coined by the scholar Cass S. Sunstein in his book *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce*<sup>58</sup>. The concept of information cocoons explains that in the Internet era users can select topics of their concern from this massive information container, namely cybercitizens customize what they want to see on their homepages, hiding topics that go against their ideals or beliefs.

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<sup>56</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.153.

<sup>57</sup> Combustion is a chemical reaction between substances, in which the molecules of the combustible will produce free radicals. These free radicals can combine with other free radicals or molecules and continue the combustion.

<sup>58</sup> J. Gram SLATTERY, *The Information Cocoon*, in "The Harvard Crimson", 2014,

<<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/3/5/harvard-information-cocoon/>>, 18-11-2019.

In this case, however, users hamper the knowledge and the contact with different realities, opinions and ideas and they remain immersed in the "personal daily", that is the topics they have chosen to follow. According to Sustain, although the information age has brought more democracy and freedom, allowing anyone to participate in public opinion, information cocoons threaten these two ideals. More so in a country like China, where the news is already controlled and filtered by the official media; if Chinese users slip into information cocoons, they risk to exclude different visions and consequently the possibility of creating an opinion that has analyzed both their own thinking and that of other people<sup>59</sup>.

By putting aside the negative consequences that can derive from the use of microblogs, it is important to underline how they have represented a field to be explored with regard to marketing. Since the emergence of microblogs, marketers have understood the power these tools can have in promoting products and services. An important role is played by the word-of-mouth marketing, which means that enterprises spread product information through the communication of consumers with their relatives and friends. In view of the above, companies should focus on the presentation of themselves and their products through official accounts in order to favor the propagation of the word-of-mouth marketing online. This type of marketing is highly reliable, because it happens among group of people with strong bounds and intimate relationships, namely relatives, friends, or colleagues.

The ease of use and the speed through which information is propagated on microblogs greatly emphasize the ability of companies to do marketing; but it remains important to note that they have to ensure enough followers in order gain resonance. Furthermore, microblogging entries have to be effective and catch the attention in few words, otherwise they will get lost in the information flow of microblogs.

In conclusion, microblogs are tools with both positive and negative aspects and it is up to users to decide whether to use them in a proper manner. They represent a revolution in the Internet arena, especially in countries where freedom of expression has always been limited and controlled by the media and the government. In the next paragraph we will analyze Sina Weibo, the most famous Chinese microblog, which despite the advent of the super app WeChat, continues to maintain a large share of users.

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<sup>59</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.139-140.

### 1.2.3.1 History of microblogs in China and the rise of Sina Weibo

In the wake of the success of microblogs like Twitter, China also decided to take this path. The earliest Chinese microblog was Fanfou.com founded in 2007, which is considered the Chinese copycat of Twitter. The history of Fanfou.com and other Chinese microblogs such as Taotao, Jiwai and Zuosa overlaps with that of the more famous Sina Weibo and sees as a turning point the Urumqi riots and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Protests in 2009. During the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Tiananmen Square Protests, Twitter and many of its domestic copycats were shut down because of the highlighted sensitivities relative to the event. The anniversary of the Tiananmen incident was then followed by a series of riots in Xinjiang province, which were thought to be triggered by an article posted on a microblog. The Chinese government decided to take action by blocking all foreign internet services like Twitter and Facebook, as well as by shutting down all local microblogging services<sup>60</sup>.

While Twitter and Facebook are still blocked in the mainland, some Chinese copycats remained inaccessible only for a limited number of days, like Fanfou or Zousa; other microblogs were less lucky: Jiwai.de is still not accessible, for instance.

Despite the crusade implemented by the government against microblogs, by that time they had attracted the attention of Chinese Internet users and the void generated by the setback did not prevent other companies from entering the microblogging sector. Specifically, in June 2009, the CEO of Sina Corporation, Charles Chao announced the launch of a new microblogging service: Sina Weibo, which was officially launched in August 2009. The success of this new microblog was immediate; within two months it managed to accumulate one million users and reach 100 million registered users in October 2010<sup>61</sup>. The vacuum left by the shutdown of its domestic and foreign competitors allowed Sina Weibo to become the leader of the microblogging sector in China. Meanwhile, many other companies launched their own microblogs, such as Sohu or Netease, but the only serious competitor of Sina Weibo was Tencent Weibo, which was launched in 2010 by the homonymous company Tencent. From the beginning, Sina Weibo was able to implement an effective marketing strategy by inviting celebrities such as actors, singers and famous business celebrities to create an account on the microblog. By taking into consideration that microblogs allow the sharing of short posts and that they mainly possess a timely feature, Sina Weibo immediately became attractive for celebrities, who could post short messages to promote their image and stay in touch with fans<sup>62</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> Jon SULLIVAN, "China's Weibo: Is Faster Different?", *New Media & Society*, 16, 1, 2014, pp.24-37.

<sup>61</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.6, pp.161.

<sup>62</sup> Eric HARWIT, "The Rise and Influence of Weibo (Microblogs) in China", *Asian Survey*, 54, 6, 2014, pp.1059-1087.

In addition to this strategy, the growth of microblogs and particularly of Sina Weibo is linked to the development of the mobile sector in China, which will be explored in the next paragraph and which will be crucial for the success of the super app WeChat.

Before analyzing how the most famous Chinese microblog works and how it played a predominant role in the dissemination of information and in the development of public opinion, it is important to mention some recent data about it. Sina Weibo nowadays has 497 million monthly active users, with a net addition of 21 million users year-over-year. For the second quarter of 2019, Weibo had \$431.8 (USD) millions of total net revenues, of which \$370.7 (USD) million were advertising and marketing revenues and \$61.2 (USD) million came from value added services. The net income of Sina Weibo in the second quarter of 2019 amounted to \$103 (USD) million<sup>63</sup>.

In order to understand the role of Sina Weibo in shaping Chinese society and its public opinion, it is interesting to look at some of its features, namely how the microblogging platform delivers messages. As mentioned above, the chain of reaction and the circulation of replies ensure that the delivered messages on microblogs continue to circulate through the platform; moreover, there is not a clear division between “sender” and “receiver”. In addition, the main features of Sina Weibo are based on the “Following” and “Follower” features of Twitter, and the majority of users choose to follow their friends, colleagues, relatives and classmates. According to Deaux theory of online newsgroup interaction, it is possible to argue that Chinese users of microblogs have the possibility to identify themselves in a group in order to increase their self-esteem, because they feel safe in an environment in which they are able to share their inner thoughts and ideas. However, Deaux theory is limited when applied to the sphere of Chinese microblogs and Sina Weibo. Users have the ability to share posts within their group of followers, but it is necessary to keep in mind that there is always a gap that allows the circulation of a message also outside this “group”<sup>64</sup>.

According to Zhang and Negro, when a user transmits a message within his group A, this message may be able to reach other groups, called B, C and D. Some of these groups may have users in common, thus the message of user A may circulate many times once it is transmitted and reach other groups. The difference among microblogs and traditional media, such as TV or newspaper lies in this example: traditional media use the “one to many” mass communication model, while microblogs use a fission process, which allows the message to reach an unconceivable resonance relative to traditional media.

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<sup>63</sup> *Weibo Reports Second Quarter 2019 Unaudited Financial Results*, in “Weibo”, 2019, <<http://ir.weibo.com/news-releases/news-release-details/weibo-reports-second-quarter-2019-unaudited-financial-results/>>, 18-11-2019.

<sup>64</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.6, pp.177-178.

These evidences have considerable implications in journalism and in the dissemination of news, as evidenced by a series of events which will be discussed later.

As previously mentioned, microblogs have a much lower entry barrier than blogs and bulletin board systems and they allow users to obtain greater freedom of expression and the ability to shape their own identity through published posts. This led to the creation of an impersonal communication model based on 4 “A” factors: Anytime, Anywhere, Anyone and Anything. As a matter of fact, microblogs enable the publication of posts at any time and in any place thanks to the combination with mobile and the fission model which allow users to reach anyone in any place, by sharing posts related to any topics. And this is precisely the revolution brought by microblogs and which distance them from blogs and BBSes, despite they share some common traits. Even though they are based on CMC, microblogs turn the CMC into a more effective tool by cause of the short and understandable nature of the messages. The success of Sina Weibo has brought a huge change in the way of doing journalism in China because users can become witnesses of an event and share it instantly on the web, threatening the supremacy of traditional media. Naturally, this led citizens to actively participate in journalism and allows opinion leaders to form more easily and have even more resonance thanks to the fission process of information diffusion. Furthermore, the frequent lack of direct sources from traditional Chinese media allowed Sina Weibo to play an increasingly predominant role in the dissemination of news, changing the dynamics of Chinese public opinion. In some cases, the news reported by the direct sources did not correspond to that reported by the traditional media, as witnessed by the Shaoyang boat accident. On 9<sup>th</sup> September 2011, a boat near Shaoyang in Hunan province capsized and sank due to overcrowding and many young people perished in the accident. The news was immediately given by the *Xinhua* agency and mainstream media, which spoke of 11 victims of a total of 50 people on the boat. The numbers presented by the official media, however, did not correspond to those declared by the witnesses of the accident and by their posts on Weibo: many people affirmed that there were 96 people on the boat and 63 victims<sup>65</sup>. The wide margin between the number of victims reported by the official press agencies and the number declared by the witnesses of the accident strengthened the position of Weibo as a primary source of news, while decreasing the trust of citizens in official sources. Since Chinese people started using Weibo and microblogs in general, the participatory journalism already mentioned for blogs has increased even more, thanks also to the possibility of being able to witness and simultaneously post events online via mobile phones. In some cases, Weibo not only supported traditional media in the dissemination of news, but even outclassed and replaced them, as happened during the Wenzhou railway accident. On 23<sup>th</sup> July 2011 two bullet-trains crashed near the

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<sup>65</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.6, pp.165.

city of Wenzhou, causing the death of 40 people and leaving 210 injured<sup>66</sup>. Not long after the accident, posts of travelers trapped inside the trains began to appear on Weibo, in which people described what happened. The first posts appeared two hours before any announcements from official media, which were in a way trying to cover the seriousness of the accident and for this reason many cybercitizens accused the government and official media of having putting profit before safety. The days after the accident Weibo became the primary source of news and, most importantly, the most reliable one, with many reports and comments from citizens. The posts published on the microblog were not just simple descriptions of the dynamics of the accident but were also related to the search for missing relatives and friends and requests for the donation of blood to the injured. The way in which the accident was handled on Weibo was entirely new for Chinese people, the government and the Chinese media environment and it started a new era for citizen journalism, which over the years has become an integrant part of the media landscape.

An influential role is played on Weibo by opinion leaders who take advantage of the "dandelion effect", which means that the more attention is paid to a topic in a post, the greater its diffusion. Microblogs allow opinion leaders to benefit of greater prominence by reason of their fission-type model of information dissemination and the dandelion effect. In relation to Weibo, one of the most influential opinion leaders of the last few years is certainly Yu Jianrong. Yu Jianrong became famous in December 2010, when he was voted by Chinese cybercitizens as one of the nine "men of the hour" along with other famous opinion leaders.

Within a few months of his first post on Weibo in October 2010, Yu Jianrong had managed to gain a large portion of followers and in January 2011 he started a campaign on the microblog to highlight the social problem of beggar children. The campaign called "Taking pictures to save beggar children in the streets" immediately had huge resonance and triggered a wave of emotions during the Spring Festival holidays of 2011, becoming one of the most important issues in the early months of the year<sup>67</sup>. The social commitment promoted by Yu Jianrong not only ensured the participation of Chinese microbloggers, but also helped the police in the investigation and parents looking for their children. The case of Yu Jianrong clarifies how a social platform like Weibo allows one or more opinion leaders to raise a social problem and at the same time reawaken the consciences of users with the result of creating an agenda setting that can be put into practice by every individual of the society and by official bodies.

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<sup>66</sup> *China bullet-train crash 'caused by design flaws'*, in "BBC", 2011, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-16345592>>, 30-12-2019.

<sup>67</sup> NEGRO, *Social Media in China...*, cap.6, pp.167.

Sina Weibo has managed to become the leading microblogging platform in China, offering to cybercitizens a channel to communicate, create new content, discover new topics and at the same time stay updated on last minute news. In addition, many celebrities, opinion leaders and prominent figures of Chinese society own a Weibo account, and this has certainly helped the microblog in gaining more users over the years. Its growing popularity has made it the subject of comparison with Twitter, the most famous microblog in the world. Both microblogs have a leading role in the microblogging sector, the first in China and the second one in the rest of the world and both share similar features. However, despite people often refer to Weibo as a copycat of Twitter, the Chinese platform has evolved in recent years and new features have been added, making Weibo a unique platform.

The first difference between Twitter and Weibo does not concern functionality, but their number of users and their diffusion outside national borders. Although Twitter is more popular abroad, with 80% of active accounts outside the United States<sup>68</sup>, the number of its monthly active users reached only 330 million in the first quarter of 2019<sup>69</sup>. It is interesting to note that, although Weibo is used only in mainland China, the number of its monthly active users is higher than that of Twitter. However, the number of users outside China has increased since the launch of the Taiwanese and Hong Kong versions of Weibo.

Sina Weibo has a more engaging interface than Twitter and it offers the possibility to personalize the homepage. In fact, users can sort the posts according to different categories and choose to see the posts of nearby users; while Twitter homepage shows only “Top Tweets” and “Latest Tweets”. Therefore, it is possible to affirm that Weibo users have greater freedom in deciding the content they want in their homepages and its orange interface makes the site less professional and more suitable for moments of leisure; on the contrary Twitter with its blue color has a more formal and clean aspect. As a matter of fact, Weibo is more used for entertainment reasons, while Twitter users prefer it to stay updated via official account of prominent people and media.

Another feature of Weibo is called "super topic" and can be compared in some sense to the hashtags of Twitter. However, unlike hashtags, each topic has its own page with moderators who oversees users. By taking into account the presence of moderators, the posts grouped under a topic are consequently more reliable than hashtags. Weibo has also been able to emulate one of the most famous trends in the social networks landscape by adding "stories" to its functions: users can share a 15-seconds video/photo that disappear after 24 hours. This function was first introduced by the social network

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<sup>68</sup> Vanessa WAN, *What is Sina Weibo? A Brief Introduction for Beginners*, in “Dragon Social”, 2019, <<https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/chinese-social-media-weibo-and-twitter-comparison/>>, 10-12-2019.

<sup>69</sup> *Number of monthly active Twitter users worldwide from 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2010 to 1<sup>st</sup> quarter 2019*, in “Statista”, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/>>, 10-12-2019.

Snapchat and then embraced by Instagram, Facebook and WhatsApp. To the present day, Twitter still does not have this feature, also by virtue of the fact that it is present in all the social networks belonging to Facebook Inc.

In addition, by leveraging on its 50% of users aged below 30, Weibo has launched a game center which offers games of different genres, in order to further attract users and keep them on the platform for as long as possible. In conclusion, Weibo has some interesting extra features such as Weibo Fit and Weibo Wallet, used respectively to track sports performances and to make online payments by connecting a credit card or an Alipay account<sup>70</sup>.

Therefore, Weibo is a sui generis microblog that has been able to further expand its functions and to become increasingly close to the aspects of the daily life of its users. Some of these functions will also be implemented on WeChat which, by combining with the potential of mobile internet and mobile phone media, will usher in an era of increasingly smart, cutting-edge technologies capable of combining with other sectors to simplify the lives of people.

### 1.3 Mobile internet

As stated in the previous paragraph, the emergence of mobile phone media has significantly changed the landscape of network media, which have adapted throughout the years in order not to be left out. When we talk about mobile phone media, we refer to a tool used for the dissemination of news through mobile phones and, for the importance that it has acquired in recent years, it can be said that it has become part of "new media", which is:

a catch-all term used for various kinds of electronic communications that are conceivable due to innovation in computer technology. In contrast to "old" media, which includes newspapers, magazines, books, television and other such non-interactive media, new media is comprised of websites, online video/audio streams, email, online social platforms, online communities, online forums, blogs, Internet telephony, Web advertisements, online education and much more.<sup>71</sup>

Although it is difficult to draw a line between what is considered new media and what is considered old media, their main difference lies in the term "interactive". As a matter of fact, new media have introduced the "user interaction", which means that the user has the possibility to interact with them no longer in a passive way, but in an active way. New media allow the user to personalize the contents

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<sup>70</sup> Vanessa WAN, *What is Sina Weibo? A Brief Introduction for Beginners*, in "Dragon Social", 2019, <<https://www.dragonsocial.net/blog/chinese-social-media-weibo-and-twitter-comparison/>>, 10-12-2019.

<sup>71</sup> *New Media*, in "Technopedia", <<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/416/new-media>>, 19-12-2019.

according to his or her own tastes and needs, to leave feedbacks and to interact with the information carrier. It should be noted, however, that over the years traditional media have begun to adapt to the Internet and to mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets. It can therefore be said that BBSes, blogs and microblogs mentioned above are also part of the new media. In particular, the latter are the ones that have best adapted to the characteristics of mobile phones because of their ability to disseminate fragmented contents<sup>72</sup>. Considering that mobile phone media needs mobile devices by definition, a look at how mobile devices have changed over the years and how mobile phone media has emerged is essential to understand also their characteristics.

Although mobile phones have been around since the 1970s, it is only in 1994 that the ancestor of current smartphones is launched: the IBM Simon. It is important to take into account that the thirty years that divide the first cell phones from the device of IBM saw the advent of the Internet, which started the digital communication phenomenon that continues today<sup>73</sup>. Even though the term smartphone in those years had not yet been coined and the device had basic functions relative to current smartphones, it still presented telephony features and PDA elements. PDA is an acronym that stands for "Personal Digital Assistant" and refers to a portable device that functions as a personal information manager. PDAs are used for various functions such as Web browsing, watching videos or viewing photos and they usually have touch screen displays, Wi-Fi connectivity, mobile software applications and multimedia support as features. It is important to highlight how before the development of smartphones there was a clear distinction between mobile phones and PDAs. Over the years more and more PDA features have been incorporated into mobile phones, including the touch screen, and at the same time PDAs can include telephony features<sup>74</sup>. The Simon Personal Communicator of IBM is considered a prototype of smartphones because, aside from its phone features, the device presented applications such as email, calendar, calculator, notepad and multiple on-screen keyboards. All these features are still present in recent smartphone models, meaning that the IBM Simon paved the way for the development of future smartphones.

During 1990s many other companies developed their own "smartphone" model: in 1996 Nokia introduced the Nokia 9000 Communicator, while in 1999 Ericsson launched on the market the Ericsson R380. Meanwhile Microsoft began to develop a mobile version of its operative system Windows in

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<sup>72</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.6, pp.174.

<sup>73</sup> *History and Evolution of Smartphones*, in "Simple texting", <<https://simpletexting.com/where-have-we-come-since-the-first-smartphone/>>, 9-12-2019.

<sup>74</sup> *Personal Digital Assistant*, in "Technopedia", <<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/4619/personal-digital-assistant-pda>>, 9-12-2019.

2000, after a series of handheld prototypes<sup>75</sup>. However, the crucial step towards the development of mobile phone media was the connection of mobile phones to the 3G network in 2001<sup>76</sup>: in this way it was possible to wirelessly access the Internet through a portable device. However, the cost of data was not as cheap as it is today and most of mobile phones were still used only for business purposes.

The turning point in the market of mobile phones took place in 2007 when Steve Jobs and his team released the first iPhone. The Apple device was innovative and advanced, and it aimed to be used in everyday life, not just in the business sector. The main innovation was its touch screen, which required the use of fingers instead of a stylus, unlike previous models. Apple was reinventing the mobile phone and it can be said that it paved the way for the development of a new generation of smartphones. A year after, the first phone with the Android operating system was released. This operative system, developed by Andy Rubin, was purchased by Google and the first model on which it appeared was the HTC Dream<sup>77</sup>.

Both the Android operating system by Google and iOS developed by Apple have been successful since their first introduction and, despite the fact that other companies have tried to outclass them, such as Windows or Nokia, they still continue to dominate the mobile market.

The Apple devices and those of other companies that support Android are the perfect representatives of the new mobile phone standard released in 2011: the 4G. In contrast to the 3G standard, the 4G standard allows a download speed of 326.4 Mbps (megabit per second), granting video streaming in HD and 4K, music streaming and online payment. In other words, 4G allows advanced multimedia applications and data connections with high bandwidth<sup>78</sup>.

Mobile phones and mobile phone media have revolutionized the life of people: nowadays there are 6.8 billion mobile phones users<sup>79</sup> worldwide of which 3.2 own a smartphone<sup>80</sup>. They have embedded in the life of people to a great extent and they have deeply affected the way people communicate, spend their free time, conduct their businesses and spend their money.

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<sup>75</sup> Adam POTHITOS, *The History of the Smartphone*, in “Mobile Industry Review”, 2016, <<http://www.mobileindustryreview.com/2016/10/the-history-of-the-smartphone.html>>, 9-12-2019.

<sup>76</sup> For further information about mobile phone standard consult: *1G, 2G, 3G, 4G, 5G: storia dell'internet mobile. Cosa cambierà con il 5G?*, in “Italia Mobile”, 2019, <<http://www.italiamobilesrl.it/blog/1g-2g-3g-4g-5g-storia-delle-reti-internet-mobile-cosa-cambiera-con-il-5g/>>, 20-12-2019.

<sup>77</sup> Adam POTHITOS, *The History of the Smartphone*, in “Mobile Industry Review”, 2016, <<http://www.mobileindustryreview.com/2016/10/the-history-of-the-smartphone.html>>, 9-12-2019.

<sup>78</sup> *1G, 2G, 3G, 4G, 5G: storia dell'internet mobile. Cosa cambierà con il 5G?*, in “Italia Mobile”, 2019, <<http://www.italiamobilesrl.it/blog/1g-2g-3g-4g-5g-storia-delle-reti-internet-mobile-cosa-cambiera-con-il-5g/>>, 20-12-2019.

<sup>79</sup> *Forecast number of mobile users worldwide from 2019 to 2023*, in “Statista”, 2019, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/218984/number-of-global-mobile-users-since-2010/>>, 16-12-2019.

<sup>80</sup> *Number of smartphone users worldwide from 2016 to 2021*, in “Statista”, 2019, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/330695/number-of-smartphone-users-worldwide/>>, 16-12-2019.

As the most populated country in the world, China has not been exempt from this mobile revolution and, since in recent years many Chinese companies have started to dominate the smartphone market, it is important to introduce the history of mobile phones and smartphones also from the Chinese perspective. At the beginning of 2000s, China had less than 140 million cell phone users, which is 10% of the entire population at that time: 1,269 billion people<sup>81</sup>. In those years, the most famous cell phone manufacturers in the country were the American Motorola and the Finnish Nokia: in particular the Finnish company launched its first phone aimed at the Chinese market, with the pinyin input supporting simplified Chinese characters. Cell phones began to be used by people, thus replacing landline phones. However, their price was still excessive for some sections of the population and so cell phones were for the majority owned by the urban middle class. At the same time, many Chinese companies realized that the mobile phone market was set to grow therefore they took the opportunity and began to develop their own devices. The most remunerative company was Ningbo Bird, the biggest phone vendor in the mid-2000s. In 2005, the company based in Zhejiang province reached the total number of 13.93 million mobile phones sales and exported 6.11 million mobile phones, which was equivalent to over 60% of the total country mobile phones export quantities<sup>82</sup>.

The release of the iPhone in 2007 represented also for China an epochal change in the phone market, especially since Apple opened its first retail store in the country a year later. The release of the Apple device started the 山寨 *shanzhai* device industry in the country, namely copycats of iPhones, but sold at a lower price<sup>83</sup>.

It took a while before a Chinese phone brand returned to dominate the market in China as in the days of Ningbo Bird. First with Apple and later with the Korean Samsung, the Chinese market was dominated by foreign brands. The situation remained unchanged until 2014, when Xiaomi, a company founded in 2011 debuted on the market. Xiaomi smartphones offered Apple-esque features and design, of high quality and at a lower price.

As a matter of fact, the strength of some Chinese phone manufacturers has been the ability to offer a premium experience at a lower price, so as to reach even low-income groups and inhabitants in rural areas. Brands like Oppo and Vivo, for example, decided to open their retail stores on streets in rural towns and to avoid online sale<sup>84</sup>. If between 2010 and 2015 the global smartphone market was

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<sup>81</sup> Erik CROUCH, *China's Mobile Revolution: 15 years in phones*, in "That's", 2015, <<http://www.thatsmags.com/china/post/11260/china-s-mobile-revolution-15-years-in-phones>>, 13-12-2019.

<sup>82</sup> *Introduction of Ningbo Bird Company*, in "China Bird", <<http://www.chinabird.com/en/about/about.asp>>, 15-12-2019.

<sup>83</sup> Erik CROUCH, *China's Mobile Revolution: 15 years in phones*, in "That's", 2015, <<http://www.thatsmags.com/china/post/11260/china-s-mobile-revolution-15-years-in-phones>>, 13-12-2019.

<sup>84</sup> Mary-Ann RUSSON, *China's eight-year-long smartphone growth comes to an end*, in "BBC", 2018, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-42830375>>, 15-12-2019.

dominated by Apple and Samsung, in recent years there has been a penetration of Chinese brands also in the international market; companies such as Huawei, Oppo, Meitu and OnePlus have enriched the arena of mobile market in China and in many other countries.

Therefore, considering how essential and irreplaceable smartphones are today, it is important to show the main features of mobile phone media, as well as the problems it can present. In his book *Social Media in China*, Kuang Wenbo exposes the main advantages and disadvantages of this new media.

First of all, mobile phone media is highly mobile and portable, that is people can access it at any time and in any place; this makes mobile phone media extremely personalized as mobile phones are devices next to skin. Mobile phone media is customizable relative to traditional media because it is shaped according to the interests and tastes of the owner of the smartphone. In a way, this also makes it extremely private, as confidential information can be found inside it.

What makes mobile phone media so innovative compared to mainstream media is its conformability: mobile phone media can actually incorporate all the different existing media such as newspapers, TV and broadcasting<sup>85</sup>. At the same time mobile phone media enjoys all the dissemination advantages of network media. As a matter of fact, information dissemination via mobile phones is fast and timely and can also rely on a far greater audience than that of other information channels. Moreover, information is dynamic relative to TV or newspaper as when a sudden event happens, people can receive information instantly and news are usually updated frequently and without the high costs of mainstream media. However, the information dissemination that takes place via mobile phone media, besides being carried out by traditional channels and media agencies, can also be conducted by ordinary people. As stated in the previous paragraph, as a result of the rapid spread of microblogs and social media, people are able to share their thoughts, ideas or opinions online at any time and in any place. It follows that when a sudden event occurs and people witness it, they can instantly share it via social channels. This is the "grassroots journalism" that was previously mentioned in relation to Weibo: anyone in the era of smartphones and social media can become a journalist through a video or a photo taken at the right time.

It is therefore possible to state that mobile phone media is much more competitive than traditional media as some of its advantages cannot be found in other media. One of these is related to the real and potential audience population of mobile phone media: mobile phones can reach a large audience composed of different types of people; the same cannot be said for other media which have a more limited and less heterogeneous audience. Consequently, it is clear that mobile phones are powerful tools information dissemination as well as pivotal devices in the lives of people for various reasons,

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<sup>85</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China...*, cap.7, pp.180.

first of all for entertainment. In fact, now that many phone markets have reached a saturation point, the main goal of companies is shifting from the sale of new devices to maximizing profits with existing users<sup>86</sup>. This is what Tencent is trying to do with WeChat and which will be uncovered in the next chapter.

Another advantage of mobile phone media is its interactivity: compared to the one-way dissemination of traditional media, in which there is a clear distinction between the disseminator and the recipient, mobile phone media allows also two-way or even multi-way dissemination, thus the audience can interact with the disseminator of news, by providing a timely feedback. This interactive dissemination emphasizes humanity and enhance user participation: mobile phone media is diversified in terms of dissemination forms, namely it integrates interpersonal, group, and mass dissemination into one. Mobile phones are tools for interpersonal communication, but there are several channels that can enhance this type of communication: chat rooms, QQ, WeChat and WhatsApp are the most famous ones, for instance. As far as concerns group dissemination and mass dissemination, mobile phones are very convenient tools since through them it is possible to access to microblogs, social media, BBSes and thematic forums in order to share interests with other people. Finally, mobile phone media is humanized because the more people use it, the more it will adapt to their tastes, therefore meeting their demands<sup>87</sup>. Ultimately, mobile phone media presents synchronous and asynchronous news dissemination, namely users receive the information from the disseminator in real time and it is up to them decide whether have a real-time communication with other people, or decide to check the news at any selected time.

Anyway, despite the various advantages just mentioned, mobile phone media is not exempt from some disadvantages and mobile phones are tools with potentially dangerous characteristics when used for malicious purposes. Moreover, mobile phones themselves have some technical defects that could weaken their performance. The first problem related to mobile phone media can also be found in the already presented network media, namely BBSes, blogs and microblogs. Mobile phone media is not exempt from phenomena similar to those of the network water army in BBS forums and from the problem linked to the diffusion of false information through microblogs. Some uncontrollable people start to behave deceptively and deliberately spread false information through microblogs that could be considered harmful. The main problem is that when this false information starts to circulate through social channels, it can easily reach also "more intimate" channels, such as text messages, up to the point of spreading through the classic offline word of mouth, creating rumors that jeopardize society

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<sup>86</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China*, cap.7, pp.178.

<sup>87</sup> Ivi, pp.177.

and undermine its harmony<sup>88</sup>. Although the diffusion of false and destructive information was not born with mobile phone media and mobile phones, their widespread has certainly amplified the phenomenon.

The second problem is related to the infringement of the privacy of users: thanks to the portability of smartphones and to the cameras incorporated in them it is possible to take photographs at any time, even without asking permission from a person or when being in a place where it is forbidden. In addition, all smartphones have the function called screenshots, which allows users to save what is displayed in the screen as an image. The implications that this functionality has for privacy are huge because anyone can take possession of photographs taken by other people and use them for their own purposes. Two other problems of mobile phone media concern information security and information garbage. With regard to the first one, mobile phones are not exempt from attacks of hackers and viruses, especially when surfing the Internet; while it is easy for users to run into a lot of information garbage as well as spam messages and spam emails given the multitude of information circulating on mobile phone media. Finally, mobile phones have technical defects that could reduce their performance, first of all the insufficient battery capacity. As a matter of fact, battery life of smartphones is still a problem and, as people rely more and more on smartphones for every aspect of their life, mobile phones manufacturers should develop better batteries and increase their capacity.

In any case, despite all the problems and defects described above, the biggest problem related to mobile phone media and mobile phones in general is the addiction. Nowadays mobile phones are used for many purposes or even simply to pass the time when people are bored and for this reasons some people have developed an addiction to them, which makes them unable to give up their devices for a few minutes or hours. In the following chapter this problem will be analyzed in more detail in relation to the use of WeChat in China.

### **1.3.1 The concept of SoLoMo**

In order to understand the general web 2.0 trends mentioned above, including the revolution brought by mobile phones, it is necessary to introduce the acronym SoLoMo, which refers to “online services that offer social and localized activities on mobile devices”<sup>89</sup>. The acronym is composed by the first two letters of the words: social, local, and mobile.

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<sup>88</sup> KUANG, *Social Media in China*, cap.7, pp.180.

<sup>89</sup> NEGRO, *The Internet in China...*, cap.7, pp.199-200.

This term was first used in 2010 by John Doerr, CEO at Kleiner Perkins, during a meeting along with Bing Gordon, former CEO of Electronic Arts and Chi-Hua Chien, former venture advisor at Accel Partners<sup>90</sup>. During the meeting, Doerr explained that three periods had to be taken into account in order to understand the SoLoMo trend: the first period highlights the importance of personal computers, the second period focuses on the Internet, and the third one emphasizes mobile platforms and all the opportunities provided by them, such as iOS, social networks and localized commerce services. Doerr refers to this third period as a "third wave" that would lead to a shift from "proactive" technology, namely technology that quietly works to eliminate problems before the end user notices them, to an "interactive technology", in which users take an active part<sup>91</sup>.

The SoLoMo phenomenon did not emerge from nowhere, but it is the result of some crucial steps, first of all the increase in the number of smartphones and tablets with integrated GPS systems, which are more efficient than the IP services offered by personal computers. Another important point is the growth of localized search engines: the local search allows people to find the closest results when searching for a business on a search engine. This type of research is very useful for local businesses, which need more advertising and emphasis than large multinational chains. Local businesses therefore need to promote their business on the search engine and periodically update their profile. Since mobile phones are the most used tools for online researches, local businesses should make their site as mobile friendly as possible. Localized search is essential because it helps to give relevance to less prominent activities; it relies on user generated content and the flow of information that users provide with their researches<sup>92</sup>.

With reference to the "third wave", SoLoMo implies the union of the abovementioned mobile platforms, namely iOS, social networks and local commerce, which in order to carry on this trend should complement each other. The SoLoMo trend is of crucial importance especially in the marketing field and the three aspects that constitute the acronym explain why. In regard to the social aspect, with the advent of social networks, microblogs and mobile phones, consumers have become more social and very often rely on what they read on the web before going into the purchase of a product and they do that through different devices and in different places thanks to the portability of smartphones, which explains also the mobile aspect of the trend. Lastly, the local aspect refers to the use of location-based services, which help marketers and businesses to know the habits of real and potential customers.

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<sup>90</sup> Seth SIEGERMAN, *Why SoLoMo isn't going anywhere*, in "Mashable", 2013, <<https://mashable.com/2013/04/30/solomo/?europe=true>>, 14-10-2019.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> *Cos'è la Local Search? Cos'è il Local SEO?*, in "SEO Webmaster", 2019, <<http://www.seowebmaster.it/cose-la-local-search/>>, 28-12-2019.

However, there are some people, such as analyst Jenny Wise, who believe that this term offers a "limited view" of the SoLoMo trend and consequently it limits the actions that companies could take towards consumers. Jenny Wise affirms that instead on focusing on social, mobile and local, companies should emphasize the person, the entire context and the device-agnostic aspect; otherwise speaking they should put their effort on the consumer, on the reason why he or she is in a certain place and on whichever device is near them when they are looking for something<sup>93</sup>.

Whatever the opinion on SoLoMo, it is clear that it has become increasingly important in these years of technological development of the mobile market, apps and e-commerce. The acronym has also reached China and it has been discussed during conferences like the Global Mobile Internet Conference in 2011 held in Beijing. Many companies, including Sina Corporation, developer of Sina Weibo, declared that this trend should have become the cornerstone of future developments. For Sina, a company that had strongly relied on microblogs and personal computers for its success, it was necessary to pay more attention to the mobile phones market, which was expanding at the beginning of the decade. By taking into consideration that in 2012 China became the country with the most mobile phone users in the world, this trend has become crucial for all the companies in the sector and some of them have succeeded more than others.

The company that has become a leader in the field of mobile application development is certainly Tencent, founded in Shenzhen in 1998. First with QQ and then with the more famous WeChat, Tencent has been able to take advantage of the trends in the mobile sector, creating an application for mobile phones that has evolved far beyond the simple instant messaging and revolutionizing all sectors that came into contact with the application itself.

#### **1.4 Tencent Holdings: the parent company of WeChat**

Tencent Holdings is nowadays one of the three technology giants in China along with Alibaba, leader in the e-commerce sector, and Baidu, the most famous Chinese search engine. These three companies are usually identified collectively as BAT. Tencent headquarter is based in the city of Shenzhen, the Chinese Silicon Valley and its business is directed to value-added services and online advertisements, which means online and mobile games, applications for different Internet and mobile platforms, as well as many other segments such as trademark licensing, software development and sale.

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<sup>93</sup> Seth SIEGERMAN, *Why SoLoMo isn't going anywhere*, in "Mashable", 2013, <<https://mashable.com/2013/04/30/solomo/?europa=true>>, 14-10-2019.

Tencent was co-founded on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1998 by Ma Huateng and four classmates and friends: Zhang Zhidong, Chen Yidan, Xu Chenyi and Zeng Liqing. The personality of Ma Huateng does not at all follow the classic stereotype of the extrovert entrepreneur; on the contrary he is shy and modest. Ma was born in 1971 and moved to Shenzhen when he was 13 years old. During those years, China had just started its opening reforms and Shenzhen was at the beginning of its economic revival; namely the city offered fertile ground for the establishment and development of what is today the second highest-valued company in Asia<sup>94</sup>.

During his college years, Ma started to develop a software for stock analysis, which was sold for CNY 50,000 (USD 7,578): it was not the analysis tool itself that caught the attention, since many people built similar tools, but the graphic interface. Ma graduated in 1989, a tricky and complex year for the Chinese politics and government; anyway Ma had never participated in any students organizations, and he started to work for Runxun Corporation along with Zhang Zhidong and Xu Chenyi, respectively the future CTO and CIO of Tencent<sup>95</sup>.

The year 1994 represents a turning point for Ma: fascinated by FidoNet, a US worldwide computer network which allowed the communication between BBSes, he decided to start up its own FidoNet cluster, thanks to the sale of his stock market analysis tool. By that time, FidoNet was used by some of the future founders of the most influential internet companies of China, first among all Ding Lei, NetEase founder.

Ding Lei had become aware of all the developments in the internet field, inspired in particular by the service of Microsoft Hotmail; he put together all his savings and set up NetEase, nowadays an internet technology giant which provides premium online services in a variety of sectors<sup>96</sup>.

Ding Lei was not the only one who joined this wave of development in the internet Industry; 1990s can be defined as the “golden generation’s years” of Chinese entrepreneurship, as Jack Ma established Alibaba in 1998, Zhang Caoyang set up Sohu and Robin Li returned to China from the United States and founded the famous search engine Baidu. Ma Huateng was surely motivated by these young Chinese entrepreneurs, thus he decided to set up Tencent and came into play.

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<sup>94</sup> Ella Zoe DOAN, *Brand Value of the leading 10 companies of Asia in 2019*, in “Statista”, 2019, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/267923/brand-value-of-the-leading-10-companies-of-asia/>>, 24-10-2019.

<sup>95</sup> WU Julia, *The Chinese Social Network, an origin story of Tencent and Chinese internet companies*, in “Hackernoon”, 2019, <<https://hackernoon.com/the-chinese-social-network-bb282204af9c>>, 22-10-2019.

<sup>96</sup> WU Xiaobo 吴晓波, *Tengxun zhuan 1998-2016. Zhongguo hulian gongsi jinhualun 腾讯传 1998-2016. 中国互联网公司进化论* (Tencent 1998-2016. The evolution of the Chinese Internet company), Hangzhou, Zhejiang University Press, 2016.

Currently his company has a market capitalization of USD 403.16 billion<sup>97</sup>, thanks primarily to its two most remunerative products: QQ and WeChat. As on October 2019, the company is ranked 8<sup>th</sup> in the list of World 100 companies by market capitalization<sup>98</sup> and it is the second highest ranking Asian company, preceded only by the e-commerce giant Alibaba.

Ma Huateng is often compared with his western equivalent Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, as declared by Lulu Chen, Bloomberg's China technology reporter:

Both were thrust in the spotlight at a relatively young age and have had to adjust their vision, personality, and skill sets drastically via turmoil and crisis at companies that penetrate every aspects of people's lives.<sup>99</sup>

This statement is to some extent true since Tencent, from its first days had to deal with several financial problems and legal cases for unfair competition related to its copycat reputation.

### 1.4.1 The first struggles of Tencent

In order to reach the current success, Tencent had to struggle during its first years to find a position in the market; in its early period its main efforts were directed to pagers, which were wireless communication tools popular in 1980s and 1990s employed to send voice and text messages within a geographical area. Ma Huateng came up with the idea of using the Internet for sending messages and emails between pagers, hoping that this business would have lasted longer. The premise of Ma was clearly wrong, and the company had to channel its efforts into something new.

That is the reason why Tencent decided to emulate an Israeli-made instant messaging service named ICQ ("I seek you"), which was extremely popular in 1990s. Ma Huateng realized the potentiality of this communication tool for the Chinese market, thus he decided to give it a chance. Therefore, the company developed its first ever product, OICQ, where the O stands for "Open"<sup>100</sup>.

In those days there were several Chinese copycats of ICQ, the first of them a Taiwanese version, but Ma believed that each one of them lacked in strategy, branding and product-market fit, thus Tencent team focused on creating a version of OICQ more suitable for Chinese users, which gained a moderate success. Ma just did not know this was the beginning of a period of crisis for his company: as the

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<sup>97</sup> *World Top 100 Companies by Market Capitalization*, in "Value Today", 2019, <<https://www.value.today/world-stock-news/world-top-100-companies-market-cap-oct-20-2019>>, 22-10-2019.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> CHEN Lulu, *The Rise of China's Tencent Billionaire*, in "Bloomberg", 2018, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Te\\_RgED13e4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Te_RgED13e4)>, 22-10-2019.

<sup>100</sup> WU Julia, *The Chinese Social Network...*, in "Hackernoon", 2019, <<https://hackernoon.com/the-chinese-social-network-bb282204af9c>>, 22-10-2019.

number of users soared, servers were not enough to keep up with them, consequently the company soon ran out of money, due also to the lack of a revenue model<sup>101</sup>.

The situation escalated when the owner of ICQ, AOL<sup>102</sup> sued Tencent for the theft of the intellectual property of ICQ, asking to abandon the domains “OICQ.com” and “OICQ.net”. Since starting a legal battle was out of the question for financial reasons, Ma only had two paths: sell his company or cutting costs while raising capital. Since the first option was met with aversion by potential acquirers, Ma thought of borrowing money and became more aware to the concept of venture capital, which was still quite unknown in China.

In April 2000, Tencent was able to reach an agreement with IDG (International Data Group) and the Hong Kong’s Pacific Century Cyberworks (PCCW): the two companies co-invested USD 2.2 million for a 40% stake<sup>103</sup>. Had it not been for these two companies, Tencent would have probably failed due to the collapse of NASDAQ in April 2000. The investments of IDG and Hong Kong’s Pacific Century Cyberworks brought a breath of fresh air to Tencent, but soon the need to find a source of revenues came up to the surface. It was during this troublesome period that Wang Dawei, a representant of MIH, an investments firm owned by Naspers, approached Tencent: during this series of financing, Tencent was valued USD 60 million and MIH became the second largest shareholder with a 32.8% stake<sup>104</sup>.

### 1.4.2 QQ, the stepstone of WeChat

After the profitable agreement between Tencent and MIH, the issue of the source of revenues was still open, as proved by numerous attempts of the company to monetize OICQ, which was renamed QQ in 2001 and it was provided with its famous penguin logo. By the time mentioned, Tencent forged a strategic alliance with China Mobile, a state-owned telecommunication company established in 1997. The Monternet (Mobile+Internet) program offered by China Mobile allowed Internet Service Providers and Internet Content Providers to partner with China Mobile and offer different net-based value-added services<sup>105</sup>. Value-added services can be defined as:

[...] premium features and add-ons to basic core functions. Although they can often operate on a stand-alone basis, they are used by telecommunications companies in order to stimulate demand for core services. [...] Value-added

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<sup>101</sup> WU Julia, *The Chinese Social Network...*, in “Hackernoon”, 2019, <<https://hackernoon.com/the-chinese-social-network-bb282204af9c>>, 22-10-2019.

<sup>102</sup> AOL is a web portal and online service provider owned by Verizon Media.

<sup>103</sup> WU Xiaobo 吴晓波, *Tengxun zhuan 1998-2016*.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> CHEN Yujie et al., *Super-sticky WeChat and Chinese Society*, Bingley, Emerald Publishing, 2018, cap.1, pp.23.

services are believed to benefit both customers and service providers, as they not only add product functionality for the end user, but can also source enhanced data and analytics for business use.<sup>106</sup>

Tencent had sensed the potentiality of this business hence it launched its mobile QQ business: people subscribed to QQ could link their account with their phone number after paying a fee. The integration of QQ into Monternet brought to Tencent a profit of RMB 10.22 million (USD 1.23) in 2001<sup>107</sup>.

Meanwhile, among all the attempts to monetize QQ, only one caught on: in 2002 a new feature was introduced, QQ Show. This feature is largely inspired by a Korean website, sayclub.com, in which there was a paid service that allowed users to customize an avatar. Thanks to Xu Liang, Tencent Product manager, Tencent was driven to develop an equivalent feature<sup>108</sup>.

QQ Show became the moneymaker for Tencent: through the purchase of Q Coins, users could buy accessories, clothes, background scenarios for their avatars or wallpapers for QZone, a virtual space where users could post photos and blogs. After the launch of QQ Show, the service got about 5 million paying users and it is argued also that it activated a cultural movement as well: formerly Chinese people were used to be collective, but with the launch of QQ Show they were given the opportunity to express themselves in a more individualistic way<sup>109</sup>.

But the revolution of QQ Show breached also the organizational structure of Tencent, since it favored an environment open to the creation of independent teams committed to a project<sup>110</sup>. It is worth noting that this kind of management system has been favorable for Tencent in 2010: its most popular product, WeChat, was created by a team led by Zhang Xiaolong.

During the years 2000s, Tencent fought to find a position in the market in order to dominate instant messaging sector and it launched Mobile QQ and Super QQ, respectively a preinstalled software and an SMS portal which offered news, weather forecasts, games and entertainment. The success of QQ can be traced in the industrialization period of China occurred from the 2000: in those years urbanization was taking place at a fast rate with low-pay labor and rural-to-urban migration as the core of this industrial development. As the labor market was continuously fluctuating, Chinese workers were seeking for a sense of stability in their lives and QQ became the perfect tool to satisfy this need.

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<sup>106</sup> *Value-Added Services*, in “Technopedia”, <<https://www.techopedia.com/definition/25234/value-added-service-vas>> 23-10-2019.

<sup>107</sup> LIU Liang 刘亮, *Tengxun: xia ge shi nian you “moshi qudong” dao “jishu qudong”* 腾讯: 下个十年由“模式驱动”到“技术驱动” (Tencent: the next decade will be from “mode drive” to “technology drive”), in *Zhongguo xin shidai*, 8, 2009.

<sup>108</sup> WU Julia, *The Chinese Social Network...*, in “Hackernoon”, 2019, <<https://hackernoon.com/the-chinese-social-network-bb282204af9c>>, 22-10-2019.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> WU Xiaobo 吴晓波, *Tengxun zhuan 1998-2016*.

By paying RMB 5 in order to get QQ data service in their low-end phone, they obtained a QQ number which remained unchanged even in the event of switching mobile phone number<sup>111</sup>.

Nevertheless, QQ had to face several problems, especially in relation with its China Mobile partnership and the Monternet project. As mentioned before the Monternet project benefited both China Mobile and Tencent, but there is also a downside with regards of this partnership. The success of QQ threatened the market share of China Mobile. State-owned China Mobile controls the access to information infrastructure and Wireless Application Protocol. Once denied this access, Tencent faced troubles and its profit plummeted in 2005.

During the same period, Tencent suffered from negative publicity because of its spread and its success, especially among young people, as well as because of its troubled relation with the Chinese political and economic system. Since the Chinese government, together with state companies, sets the parameters for the development of private companies such as Tencent, the latter has always been forced not to exceed certain limits in order not to further antagonize the government.

Therefore, in order to continue to carry out its business, Tencent had to come to terms with the government on several occasions; among the most important is the initiative to join other companies in the technology sector to persuade the government to create laws for the regulation of virtual currencies. The purpose of Tencent was to limit the circulation of Q Coins from the virtual to the real world, which in the past had caused friction between the company and the government.

By gaining favor with the government, Tencent obtained protection from political and legal risks and also from foreign competitors; however the Chinese government requested the company to provide its data from both QQ and WeChat, securing itself an online social control tool<sup>112</sup>. By considering that QQ and WeChat together provide a huge user base, the government now find itself tied to the company in a symbiotic relationship in which they both need each other.

Despite the various troubled periods, Tencent has managed to become a technological giant, thanks also to the turning point that occurred in 2004: on 16<sup>th</sup> July Tencent went public in the Hong Kong Stock Market with an initial IPO (Initial Public Offering) of HKD 3.7<sup>113</sup>.

In any event, QQ was able to become a platform capable of meeting the needs of its users and of being incorporated into their lives, which is also what Ma Huateng had envisioned in 2001 on the eve of the launch of QQ. The features of the app are many and respond to different needs: messages, emails, music, games, chat rooms, online purchases, virtual space to share photos and blogs, are just some of

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<sup>111</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.1, pp.24.

<sup>112</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.1, pp.31-32.

<sup>113</sup> *Ivi*, pp.34.

the functions offered by QQ and, as we will see in the next chapter, they laid the foundations for the development of WeChat. The purpose of Ma Huateng of creating 'a new online lifestyle' which offers different internet service solutions has started with QQ and will be achieved with WeChat in the future. In conclusion, the birth and development of WeChat cannot be separated from the history of QQ, which continues to be part of the lives of many Chinese people. Its success and that of Tencent itself is the result of a series of social conditions, first of all the large diffusion of mobile devices. Even though the company had to face some challenges from the political environment and the government, it was able to survive and to become the second largest Chinese company by revenue.

## Chapter 2: The advent of the super app WeChat

### 2.1 The development history of WeChat

The previous chapter focused on the long journey accomplished by China from the dawn of the Internet to the success of the mobile market and of technology companies such as Tencent Holdings. During this journey, radical changes have occurred in the Internet landscape and more and more tools for information dissemination and online discussion have appeared, granting the connection among people. These network media, like blogs and microblogs, have shaped Chinese society and at the same time have been shaped by it, creating a dynamic and receptive environment. Thanks also to the astounding Chinese economic growth of the last few years, many IT companies flourished, granting China a global competitive position in the technology and telecommunications sector. Among all these companies, Tencent Holdings, with its focus towards Internet-related services, has managed to establish itself in this sector despite its outset with the unprofitable pager market. Through a series of targeted actions such as the partnership in the Monternet project and the launch of QQ as a mobile application, Tencent has succeeded in reaching the Olympus of the most successful Chinese companies. However, Tencent abroad is not very well known for QQ, despite its success in the Chinese market. Nowadays its most widespread product is WeChat, which has become a phenomenon in China and which has attracted the attention from abroad for its features and their overwhelming impact in Chinese society.

The mind behind the WeChat phenomenon is that of Zhang Xialong, who graduated from Huazhong University of Science and Technology in 1994 and who became known in the sector by developing Foxmail, a domestic e-mail client software. In the same period Microsoft was dominating strongly the Chinese market of computers and in 2001 it decided to further expand its web portal MSN in China. MSN became immediately a competitor of QQ, thanks to its sophisticated features, which made it suitable for business purposes. On the other hand, QQ was considered just a casual chat, used mainly by young people for leisure reasons. In order to oppose the advance of Microsoft, Tencent decided to focus its efforts on e-mail, a sector in which Microsoft was the undisputed leader by reason of its e-mail service Hotmail. Therefore, Tencent decided to acquire the Foxmail team of Zhang Xialong in 2005 and to develop QQ mail<sup>114</sup>. The turning point occurred in 2010, when kikMessenger, a free-to-send mobile app developed by the Canadian company Kik Interactive gained sudden success. Zhang

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<sup>114</sup> WU Julia, *The Chinese Social Network...*, in "Hackernoon", 2019, <<https://hackernoon.com/the-chinese-social-network-bb282204af9c>>, 22-10-2019.

Xialong noticed the growth of the app and wrote to Ma Huateng, proposing him to launch a similar product with the Tencent brand.

The idea came at a key moment in the history of the mobile market. As seen in the previous chapter, the mobile market in China was developing at a high speed and Ma Huateng was aware that losing this opportunity would have harmed the company as well as the mobile version of QQ. For this reason, he decided to approve the project, with an investment of CNY 100 million. It is interesting to note that once the project came out, Ma Huateng took advantage of the traditional "wolf fighting" inside Tencent, hence he entrusted the project to three teams: the team of Zhang Xiaolong, the mobile QQ team and the Q letter team<sup>115</sup>. In the end, the team led by Zhang Xiaolong prevailed and, after several months of research and development in the city of Guangzhou, WeChat was released on 21<sup>st</sup> January 2011 on iOS devices and only later on Android. The strategy to prioritize the Apple operating system was not a coincidence, since around the same time as Zhang Xiaolong and his team were working on WeChat, Chinese electronics company Xiaomi had launched a copycat of kikMessenger called MiChat. After only a month of development, its first version was released for Android and later for iOS<sup>116</sup>. For the first few months the two apps competed, but only one of the two managed to establish itself as the most used messaging application: WeChat.

Even though abroad the mobile application is known by the name WeChat, in China its name is Weixin 微信 ("micro letters"); only in 2012 the app was renamed WeChat as a strategy by Tencent to promote its new product abroad. Anyway, at the moment of its launch, WeChat did not gain much recognition from international news since in the meanwhile kikMessenger and the more famous WhatsApp were gaining users in foreign markets. Initially WeChat had only three basic functions that did not make it different from other messaging apps; users with WeChat could send messages, photos and voice clips. The aim of Tencent was to beat the competition from telecommunications companies and remove the use of SMS thanks to an app that could work on any device.

During its lifetime, WeChat has undergone more than 30 updates which have introduced increasingly advanced and integrated features in Chinese society. In the first months of 2011, two functions in particular played a fundamental role in increasing the number of users: these updates allowed users to link their QQ account to WeChat and to find new people through the "people nearby" function. By taking into consideration the first function, in the book *Super-sticky WeChat and Chinese society* the

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<sup>115</sup> "Weixin diguo neizheng yu waifa" 微信帝国内争与外伐 (WeChat Empire internal struggles e outer cutting), in *Boke tianxia*, 136, 2013.

<sup>116</sup> WU Julia, *The Chinese Social Network...*, in "Hackernoon", 2019, <<https://hackernoon.com/the-chinese-social-network-bb282204af9c>>, 22-10-2019.

authors affirm that WeChat can be considered a silver-spoon app because it relies on the huge QQ user base. As a matter of fact, the QQ user base reached 700 million users<sup>117</sup> when WeChat came out. Once people had the chance to link their QQ accounts, the number of WeChat users increased exponentially. As for the “people nearby” function, it was very useful in the incipient phase of WeChat because it allowed people to find strangers in their proximity using WeChat and add them to their friend list. By reason of these two functions, after only 14 months, WeChat user base reached 100 million users<sup>118</sup>. By making a comparison with its sibling app QQ or Facebook, it is possible to state that WeChat has reached a large number of users in a short space of time: it took four years to QQ and five and half years to Facebook to reach the same user base<sup>119</sup>. This is an outstanding result when considering that Facebook is used almost everywhere in the world, while WeChat was known only in the Chinese market, at least in its preliminary phase. As already stated, it was only in 2012 that Tencent decided to implement an international expansion strategy, by picking the English name WeChat and by adding several languages to the app. The first market in which Tencent focused its efforts was the Indian one, just as the country was entering the era of the mobile market. Nevertheless, the attempt was a failure since in India WhatsApp was already the prominent communication tool. After this attempt, Tencent tried to expand in Indonesia and Thailand, but it resulted in another failure. Even though WeChat is extremely popular in China, currently WhatsApp remains the most used messaging app in the world with 1.6 billion monthly active users<sup>120</sup>. Therefore, China is an exception to the rule: as a matter of fact WeChat completely dominates the landscape of mobile applications in the country, with 1.15 billion monthly active users<sup>121</sup>. During 2012 and 2013 Tencent released new updates that introduced new features, putting distance between WeChat and other messaging apps. WeChat then went from being a simple communication tool to a social, e-commerce and citizen services platform. With the 4.0 update, WeChat added new social functions, such as Moments, My album and Public accounts, while on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2013 the 5.0 update introduced social gaming integration. In addition, with this update WeChat began to offer mobile payments, paving the way to WeChat Wallet. Users could now link

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<sup>117</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.1, pp.21.

<sup>118</sup> Steven MILLWARD, *7 Years of WeChat*, in “Tech in Asia”, 2018, <<https://www.techinasia.com/history-of-wechat>>, 20-01-2020.

<sup>119</sup> CHEN et al., *op.cit.*, cap.1, pp.26.

<sup>120</sup> *Most popular global mobile messenger apps as of October 2019, based on number of monthly active users*, in “Statista”, 2019, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/258749/most-popular-global-mobile-messenger-apps/>>, 21-01-2020.

<sup>121</sup> *Number of monthly active WeChat users from 2<sup>nd</sup> quarter 2011 to 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter 2019*, in “Statista”, 2019, <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/255778/number-of-active-wechat-messenger-accounts/>>, 22-01-2020.

their bank account to their WeChat account and purchase online<sup>122</sup>. Ever since this update, Tencent broadened the functionalities of WeChat Pay, allowing for instance cash transfers among users or cashless in-store payments. However, one update particularly requires an in-depth analysis as it takes up a centuries-old Chinese tradition and presents it in digital format. The introduction of red envelopes or red packets (红包 *hongbao*) during the 2014 New Year celebrations caught the attention of the public and went viral. The impact that this digitized tradition had on Chinese society is closely linked to WeChat Pay and will be uncovered in the next chapter.

In addition to its application in the daily life of people for communicative and social use, WeChat was also introduced in working environments in April 2016. Tencent released WeChat Work, which is a separate app, but still connected to WeChat. The app is an enterprise version of the original app and its purpose is providing tools and features to help businesses in being more productive during working hours; besides it helps them to connect more effectively with other companies and consumers<sup>123</sup>.

The path that led WeChat to be the multipurpose platform that is today is scattered with strategic moves and updates that deeply undermined the environment of messaging apps, while challenging large companies in the technology and telecommunication sector. With the launch in 2017 of Mini Programs, namely apps that work within WeChat and that do not require download and, of an embedded search engine, Tencent has put a strain on the app stores of Google and Apple, as well as Baidu, the leading search engine in China.

One of the sectors in which WeChat had the strongest impact is mobile commerce. In 2014 Tencent began to penetrate the sector through a partnership with Didi Dache, a Chinese transport company now known as Didi Chuxing. As a result of this partnership, users are now able to hail a cab and pay for the ride via WeChat Pay, without the use of cash. Another step occurred in March of the same year, when Tencent bought a stake in the e-commerce site JD. JD is known to be the nemesis of the e-commerce site Alibaba; thus this acquisition challenged its supremacy in the sector. The acquisition allowed WeChat to embed the store of JD into its main shopping area. In the following months WeChat allowed also other businesses to open their own store within a WeChat brand account. The rivalry between Tencent and Alibaba is now a constant and the two giants are continuously competing to earn market share. In 2016 Tencent embedded the bikesharing service Mobike within WeChat, perpetuating

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<sup>122</sup> Steven MILLWARD, *7 Years of WeChat*, in “Tech in Asia”, 2018, <<https://www.techinasia.com/history-of-wechat>>, 20-01-2020.

<sup>123</sup> Jons SLEMMER, *What is WeChat Work and how is it different from WeChat*, in “LinkedIn”, 2019, <<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/what-wechat-work-how-different-from-jons-slemmer-%E9%98%B3%E6%96%AF->>>, 20-02-2020.

its rivalry with Alibaba. The response of the e-commerce site was not long in coming and in fact Jack Ma decided to finance ofo, the main competitor of Mobike<sup>124</sup>.

Nowadays WeChat has become a super app as a result of the ability of Tencent to create an ecosystem of functions and services which are now embedded in the lives of Chinese citizens. By analyzing the updates throughout the years, it is possible to underline how each new feature affected a certain aspect of daily life by allowing the interconnection among people, services, organizations and devices. The idea of building an ecosystem which connects people to services was already present in the rhetoric of Tencent Holdings when talking about QQ mobile. The same idea was applied to WeChat in each new annual report:

Important changes can be achieved through connecting millions of internet users [...] [Through] the ‘smart’ living system in QQ and Weixin/WeChat, people and public services can be digitally connected, facilitating developments in transport, healthcare, environmental protection, public safety and other social arenas<sup>125</sup>.

Every update of WeChat represented a step toward this ecosystem: official accounts, WeChat Pay, Mini Programs, WeChat at Work and many others nowadays exemplify this interconnected environment. The economic and social impact reports of WeChat explicate the structure of this ecosystem and how it works. The ecosystem of WeChat involves two layers: the Base Layer and the Connection Layer.

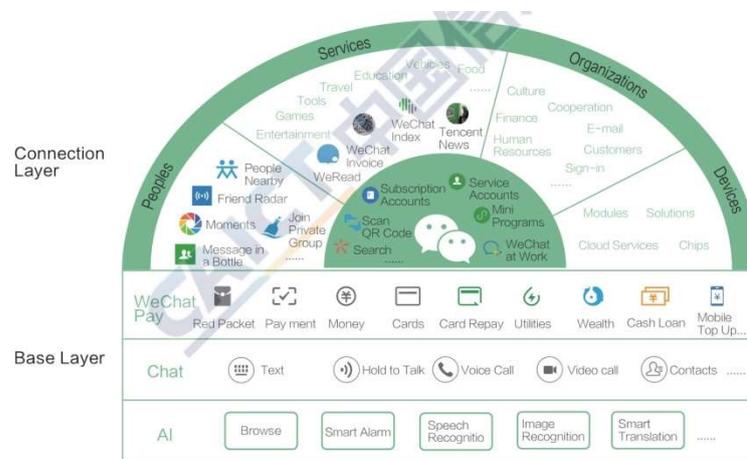


Figure.1: WeChat community of shared digital ecosystem. Source: CAICT.

By observing the image, the Base Layer outputs tools and capabilities, which are grouped under three categories: artificial intelligence, chat and WeChat Pay. Each of these tools groups together the main features of the app. Nonetheless it is the Connection Layer which represents the core of the ecosystem

<sup>124</sup> Steven MILLWARD, *7 Years of WeChat*, in “Tech in Asia”, 2018, <<https://www.techinasia.com/history-of-wechat>>, 20-01-2020.

<sup>125</sup> *Tencent 2017 Annual Report*, in “Tencent”, 2017, <<http://cdc.tencent.com-1258344706.image.myqcloud.com/storage/uploads/2019/11/09/cdb07cc0cb662de41d86d18a5180ecee.pdf>>, 21-01-2020.

and connects people, services, organizations and devices. By means of the actions undertaken by Tencent over the years, a considerable number of partners and organizations have joined this ecosystem, resulting in a mutualistic win-win situation in which everyone receives benefits.<sup>126</sup>

To date, WeChat has a wide range of features that allow users to take advantage of both online and offline services. Besides the basic functions of a messaging app, WeChat presents other functions which have revolutionized not only the application itself, but also Chinese society. While features such as Official Accounts and Moments embody the social aspect of the app, WeChat Pay and Mini Programs are undoubtedly the main objects of study. Particularly, these two functions created rivalry among Tencent and other Chinese companies, turning the situation of Tencent Holdings around after the success of WeChat in the market. While in the past Tencent used to emulate products from other companies, after 2011 the same companies tried to replicate the WeChat model in their messaging applications. Both Sina Weibo and Alibaba have tried to launch their own messaging app on the market, without any real success.

As already mentioned, it is with Alibaba that Tencent and WeChat maintain a tough competition. The 5.0 update marks the entry of WeChat into the online payment sector, of which Alibaba held 48.7%<sup>127</sup> of market share at that time. Naturally, this move undermined the leadership of Alibaba in the payment industry as it will be uncovered in the next paragraphs.

By taking into account the outstanding development of WeChat throughout the years, it is possible to affirm that Tencent has achieved what it had hoped to accomplish with QQ in the past. As a matter of fact, many of the functions of WeChat overlap with those of QQ; moreover the main difference between the two apps developed by Tencent lies in WeChat Pay. As seen in the previous chapter, on QQ it is possible to make purchases through Q coins, which enable real money transactions as one Q coin is worth CNY 1<sup>128</sup>. But while users can only use Q Coins within QQ Show to customize their avatar, WeChat Pay allows users to purchase goods and services both online and offline, pay in stores or transfer money between users. Both functions, however, have represented and continue to represent one of the most remunerative sectors for Tencent. Another substantial difference between QQ and WeChat can be found in their respective icons. Whereas the penguin in the QQ icon is considered fresh but unprofessional, the “two dialog boxes” in the WeChat icon have succeeded to attract not only young people, but also mature people and business professionals. Therefore with the purpose of

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<sup>126</sup> *WeChat Economic and Social Impact Report 2017*, in “China Academy of Information and Communications Technology”, 2018, <<http://www.caict.ac.cn/kxyj/qwfb/ztbg/201805/P020180529380481819634.pdf>>, 21-01-2020.

<sup>127</sup> *China Third-Party Online Payment Market Share in 2013*, in “China Internet Watch”, 2014, <<https://www.chinainternetwatch.com/7057/china-third-party-online-payment-market-2013/>>, 25-02-2020.

<sup>128</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.1, pp.30.

collecting more users from different age groups of the population, Tencent decided to put aside QQ Show, one of its most profitable part of QQ. Although QQ Show has brought profit to the company, it has always been pointed out as something superficial and childish by adults who have seen their children squander money buying virtual items<sup>129</sup>.

After years of development and updates, WeChat eventually managed to establish itself as the dominant messaging app in China, shifting from being an application for messaging and social interaction to being a tool that offers an array of services to users. Its success in China cannot be separated from the socio-techno conditions at the time of its launch on the market, mainly the huge increase in the use of mobile phones and the development of new technologies such as 3G and later 4G.

Since nowadays WeChat is the first app by monthly active users in China, the importance of studying and analyzing how this super app works is particularly interesting both from a cultural and a business point of view. This chapter aims at introducing the most used features of WeChat, namely the social features, WeChat Pay, mini programs and other extra features. The purpose is to show that WeChat represents a separate case in the global mobile applications landscape, by displaying comparisons with other leading messaging apps, social networks and third-party payment platforms.

## **2.2 The social features of WeChat**

When Zhang Xiaolong proposed the project of a new communication tool to Ma Huateng, he aimed at developing an app that could connect people by eluding the costs of telephone companies. Zhang Xiaolong explained that he was inspired not only by the Canadian app kikMessenger, but also from the growing use of smartphones by citizens. At the beginning of 2010, the market of smartphones was developing really fast in China, thus not paying attention to its growth would have been counterproductive. Zhang Xiaolong realized that there was an opportunity in this field as well as a lack of good communication tools in many PCs products, consequently he decided to develop an app to allow communication among people. As a matter of fact, WeChat was released directly on mobile devices unlike its sibling app QQ, which started as a web-based messaging service. This means that WeChat was created and designed to match the “smartphone lifestyle”<sup>130</sup>. Over the years, Zhang Xiaolong has repeatedly reiterated that the slogan of WeChat is "WeChat is a lifestyle" as it has

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<sup>129</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.1, pp.30.

<sup>130</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*, London, UCL Press, 2016, cap.2, pp.38.

penetrated over time more and more aspects of daily lives. This explains why the WeChat team has never referred to it as a simple communication tool; it would have been superficial and would have limited the potential of the app<sup>131</sup>.

On 21<sup>st</sup> January 2011, WeChat was finally released in the market and people could download it for free on Apple, Android and Symbian systems. The app provided text messaging, voice messaging and voice calls, as well as the possibility to share multimedia content. Over the years WeChat has become a tool that greatly promotes social communication among users; in addition to its basic functions, WeChat provides features such as WeChat Moments and WeChat Subscription/Service accounts, which have proved to be very successful. Despite the current success of the app, in the first six months after its release its performance in the app stores was mediocre and it never reached the top three in the category of social networking apps. Nonetheless, Zhang Xiaolong was not overly concerned about the initial performance of the app. On the occasion of the WeChat's open class pro event held on 9<sup>th</sup> January 2019, he explained the reason why the development team of WeChat was not worried:

At that time, we had one principle: if a new product can't grow naturally, we shouldn't market it. So in the first five months, we didn't promote it ourselves; we were waiting to see if users would be attracted to WeChat, if they would promote it themselves. If users weren't willing to do this, whatever marketing we did would be meaningless<sup>132</sup>.

The early strategy of the development team was to not allow users to automatically add the entire contact list to WeChat, but to leave them free to choose who to import to their list. In this way Zhang Xiaolong could observe how the product grew gradually and above all spontaneously. As it was foreseeable, however, the function of sending messages soon extinguished the enthusiasm of users as there were already other apps with the same identical function. Zhang Xiaolong and his team needed to find more appealing features in order to attract as many users as possible.

After a few months, new features were added, allowing WeChat to exponentially increase the number of users. All these features allow people to connect with strangers and they can be found in the "Discover" section of the app. With the "People nearby" function (附近的人 *fujin de ren*) users can find new contacts within 20 km; while "Shake" (摇一摇 *yao yi yao*) enables users to shake their phone and find people shaking theirs at the same time. Finally, with "Message in a bottle" (漂流瓶 *piao liu ping*), users can leave an audio or text message that can be picked up by a random stranger. Anyway,

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<sup>131</sup>“Guanfang zui wanzheng ban: Zhang Xiaolong weixin gongkai ke chaoshi yanjiang, zongjie weixin ba nian”官方最完整版：张小龙微信公开课超时演讲，总结微信8年 (The most complete version: Zhang Xiaolong's WeChat public lecture overtime, summarizing WeChat 8 years), in “WeChat Chatterbox”, 2019, <[https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71)>, 10-10-2019.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

this last feature is no longer available on the app. After several complaints from users, who found inappropriate content in received messages, Tencent decided to remove this feature in December 2018<sup>133</sup>.

However, Chinese people generally use WeChat to connect with few people, namely relatives, friends or colleagues. By examining the methods to add new contacts on WeChat, they all require either direct contact with another user or a targeted search. Users can add new people to their list by scanning a QR code from the smartphone of another person, or by entering mobile contacts, QQ numbers or WeChat ID<sup>134</sup>.

Lastly, the chat group function on WeChat requires an analysis, even though it is less popular than text or voice messages. Groups are used for a variety of reasons and they usually include work colleagues, family members, or friends. There are also groups that revolve around certain topics or hobbies. WeChat users can form groups to send a message to different users at the same time. In its early days, WeChat allowed only a limited number of group members, but with the increasing of users the maximum size of members increased as well. Today the maximum group size is 500 members, but if a group reaches 100 members only users with a bank card linked to their account can join the group. The rules for adding new members change according to the size of the group: if a group has less than 100 members, anyone can add any of their contacts to it. If the group is larger, the user being added must accept the invite to join the group. Every group has its own leader, who has the power to remove other users from the group. Usually the leader is at the top of the list of members within the group settings<sup>135</sup>.

Within the group settings, some features allow members to manage the group. Each group has its personal QR code, which makes it easier and faster to add new members, by simply scanning the code. Users can also stick a group at the top of their timeline in order not to miss any updates, especially when users are in many groups. Since people usually do not have enough time to follow every WeChat group, two search functions are also available within the group: "all photos" and "search chat history". The first one allows users to navigate through all the photos sent in the group, while the second one allows users to do a targeted research using keywords.

When users are member of several groups, they often receive messages which cause them stress; that is why on WeChat users can mute the group notifications, so as not to be overwhelmed with messages.

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<sup>133</sup> Masha BORAK, *WeChat is suspending one of its popular feature because people are using it to sell porn*, in "Tech in Asia", 2018, <<https://www.techinasia.com/wechat-suspending-favorite-features-people-sell-porn/>>, 10-03-2020.

<sup>134</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*, cap.2, pp.41-42.

<sup>135</sup> Matthew BRENNAN, *How to Manage Your WeChat Groups: Wechat Essential Tips*, in "China Channel", 2015, <<https://chinachannel.co/how-to-manage-your-wechat-groups-wechat-essential-tips/>>, 11-03-2020.

However, on WeChat groups it is not possible to decide how long to mute notifications in a group, whereas on WhatsApp users can mute a group for eight hours, a week or a year.

Considering that people through WeChat spread promotions or marketing information, there is also the need to communicate to several groups at the same time. The "save to contacts" function allows users to save the groups they are interested in in a single section called "group chats". The mute notifications and the "save to contacts" functions are considered very useful by WeChat users because in China people lead busy lives, thus they do not have many moments to pay attention to every notification they receive. Anyway, WeChat is the most used mobile application in the country by reason of its unlimited functions and features, thus it is clear that Chinese people spend a lot of time within the application. In addition to its use as a means of communication among people, WeChat is mainly employed as a social network through the "Moments" feature introduced by the 4.0 update. Moments is possibly the best-known feature of WeChat and, given its differences with other Chinese and non-Chinese social networks, it is noteworthy to analyze how it works.

### 2.2.1 Moments

In April 2012 Tencent released the 4.0 update of WeChat, launching a new innovative feature. With "moments" WeChat has gone from being a simple messaging app to a social networking tool, allowing people to share their lives with their contacts. Moments, in Chinese called 朋友圈 *pengyou quan* ("circle of friends") can be compared to Instagram in terms of its mode of operation and in this respect, it is considered a visually oriented feature. Users who want to share on moments have to upload at least an image, otherwise the text input area does not appear. Although later WeChat added the possibility to write also "pure text" posts, most users still post images and some of them are not even aware of this option. WeChat has not even promoted it extensively, as the development team believes that the visual aspect has more impact on users and on their level of attention to posts<sup>136</sup>. In addition to Moments, in which users can find all the posts of their contacts, there is also an "album" (相册 *xiangce*) that corresponds to the profile of a user. If users want to see the history of the posts on moments of one of their contact, all they have to do is scrolling their album.

The choice of implementing a visually oriented social feature can be traced in the idea of Zhang Xialong about socialization. He explained that socialization to him is "the process of inculcating one's

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<sup>136</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*, cap.2, pp.39.

self-image into another person's mind"<sup>137</sup>, thus Moments is the best tool to accomplish this purpose. This is the reason why the development team of WeChat implemented a feature that encourage posting pictures instead of text. Zhang Xiaolong believes that if a person wants to portrait his or her image on a social platform, posting an image is the best way because writing a text can be difficult and many people are not able to express themselves properly with words. Nevertheless, he added that there is also a downside in posting on Moments: people only show the positive sides of their lives, thus Zhang Xialong and the WeChat team launched a new feature on the app called "time capsule". This feature allows users to create a short-video status and share it with friends for 24 hours and it can be considered a copycat of the "stories" feature on Instagram. With "time capsule" Zhang Xiaolong hopes people could show every aspect of their lives in a more truthful way.

Although Moments can be considered as a social network, it has significant differences compared to more popular social networks such as Facebook or Sina Weibo. First of all, posts are shared on WeChat in a different way, and the interaction among users is limited. When users share a post, only people accepted in their contacts list can see the post, like it or comment it. This means that users cannot see the comments or likes of other people to a post if they are not in their contacts list, hence it is possible to view only the engagement of mutual friends. Therefore, WeChat presents a closed community, in which users get in contact and share information only with people they have a strong bound with. The characteristic of being a closed community separates WeChat from the main function of social networks, that is to put in contact also strangers. The level of privacy on WeChat is high when compared to Facebook or a more public-facing platform such as Sina Weibo. There are some actions users cannot do on Moments, such as viewing posts of people not in their contacts list, viewing the contacts list of their friends or sharing posts of their friends. In addition, comments on a post can just be text and it is not possible to geo- or photo-tagging. During a conference about WeChat Zhang Xialong explained the choice to limit the display of posts to the contacts list, a choice always linked to the concept of socialization. For the WeChat founder Moments is the backbone of online socialization for Chinese people, hence he compares the feature to a public square. Posting on Moments is like publicly shouting something in public and it can create stress, all the more so if the posts are visible to anyone. Therefore WeChat is a closed community: by only showing posts to accepted contacts, users can avoid embarrassing engagement with people they are not familiar with. To enhance the limitation

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<sup>137</sup> "Guanfang zui wanzheng ban: Zhang Xiaolong weixin gongkai ke chaoshi yanjiang, zongjie weixin ba nian" 官方最完整版: 张小龙微信公开课超时演讲, 总结微信8年 (The most complete version: Zhang Xiaolong's WeChat public lecture overtime, summarizing WeChat 8 years), in "WeChat Chatterbox", 2019, <[https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/?\\_\\_biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/?__biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71)>, 16-03-2020.

on posts, WeChat has also introduced the possibility to limit posts to certain groups of people or even make them visible for only three days<sup>138</sup>.

In conclusion, even though the Moments feature does not present a fission-type diffusion model as microblogs and does not allow the same freedom of Facebook, it remains an excellent social tool for Chinese people to share their lives with friends.

### 2.2.2 Official Accounts

Even though Moments constitutes the social side of WeChat, that is a space that allows users to share images of their daily life and express themselves, it is still an intimate space without branded content from companies or media, let alone articles from newspapers. As a matter of fact, users would never find advertisements when scrolling the moments of their friends. Reason for this is that Tencent has made a smart move in developing WeChat as a social networking tool, by keeping separate the information and socialization aspects. On 19<sup>th</sup> April 2012 Tencent released the 4.0 upgrade of WeChat, launching two new social features: Moments and Public Accounts.

Public accounts can be compared to Facebook business pages and their purpose is to provide a space to individuals, companies and organizations for the interaction with their customers or audience. With Public Accounts users can gather followers, send them notifications or redirect them to an e-commerce website. As of update 5.0 released in 2013, Public Accounts were renamed Official Accounts (公众号 *gongzhong hao*) and were divided into two categories: Subscription Accounts (订阅号 *dingyue hao*) and Service Accounts (服务号 *fuwu hao*)<sup>139</sup>. With respect to these two account types, the first difference that stands out is their position in the “chat” section. Subscription Accounts are all grouped into one folder, while Service Accounts appear as friends in the “chat” section. However, there are several features that set them apart; by analyzing them, users or companies can decide which one is suitable for their purposes. An important aspect besides the visibility in the chat section is the level of interaction permitted according to the type of account. Although Subscription Account are less visible, they can send one message per day, while Service Accounts can only send four messages per month.

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<sup>138</sup> “Guanfang zui wanzheng ban: Zhang Xiaolong weixin gongkai ke chaoshi yanjiang, zongjie weixin ba nian” 官方最完整版: 张小龙微信公开课超时演讲, 总结微信8年 (The most complete version: Zhang Xiaolong’s WeChat public lecture overtime, summarizing WeChat 8 years), in “WeChat Chatterbox”, 2019, <[https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71)>, 16-03-2020.

<sup>139</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.2, pp.58.

Since Official Accounts are generally used for marketing and business purposes, integrating WeChat Pay was essential for the WeChat team. However, only Service Accounts allow users to make transactions within them. For Subscription Accounts this functionality is not available, with the exception of media and government accounts. There are also other features available only for Service Accounts, such as the voice recognition which converts sounds into Chinese characters for auto replies. It is also possible to geo-localize users when they write to the account, even though this function requires the explicit approval of the users. Finally, Service Accounts can also generate multiple QR codes for one account in order to identify the traffic sources, namely the channel through which users had access to the Official Account<sup>140</sup>.

Despite all the above-mentioned differences, Subscription Accounts and Service Accounts have also some features in common. First of all, they both have a menu at the bottom of the account, which can give users access to their webpage. Furthermore, both the accounts can send targeted messages, i.e. they can divide their followers into subgroups according to interest or personal data. Lastly, Official Accounts run by shops can collect users WIFI usage data to promote their account. By observing the features offered by the two types of accounts, users might think that Service Accounts are more convenient in terms of interactivity. As a matter of fact, it all depends on the purpose for which an official account is created. If providing content regularly is relevant for an individual or an organization then they should opt for a Subscription Account. In contrast, Service Accounts are recommended for companies that want to offer different services on WeChat, such as e-commerce, vouchers, games or customer service<sup>141</sup>.

There are several ways for users to find Official Accounts to follow. The easiest method, mainly used by individuals, is to share an article on the timeline of Moments; thereby their contacts will be redirected to the official account by clicking on the article. Nonetheless this method has some limitations because the article on Moments is visible only to their contacts, hence the audience is quite narrow. Another analogous method is sharing the name card of an Official Account in friend or group chat. A third method involves scanning a QR code that can be found on a web page or offline. This is usually very convenient when a business wants to attract followers to its page, by displaying its QR code inside the store. Moreover, when a user completes a payment with WeChat Pay offline, the user can choose to follow the Official Account of the store.

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<sup>140</sup> Thomas GRAZIANI, *WeChat public accounts: what is the difference between subscription and service accounts?*, in “Walkthechat”, 2017, <<https://walkthechat.com/it/wechat-public-accounts-difference-subscription-service-accounts/>>, 24-03-2020.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

WeChat offers also an internal search engine for Official Accounts; however, this function still needs some improvements and it is useful if users already know the exact name of the Official Account they are looking for. Finally, when users find an advertisement on WeChat, they can click the “One Click Follow” button in order to follow a new Official Account<sup>142</sup>.

Therefore, if individuals or companies need to advertise themselves and offer online services to users, Official Accounts are an effective tool, thanks to their “one to unlimited number of strangers” communication model. This is because there is no limit to the number of followers of an Official Account, as there is for regular group chats. Whether they are managed by an individual or a company, Official accounts are indeed more business oriented, hence they need to reach as much people as possible. In this respect they are comparable to Weibo official accounts or Facebook business pages, as they allow celebrities, news agencies, or corporations to reach as many users as possible. However, on Official Accounts the interaction is limited, that is comments published by a user on the post of an Official Account will be visible only to the account manager and will not be shared with the rest of the followers. Moreover, users cannot see how many followers an Official Account has, thus it is not possible to precisely assess whether an account is popular or not<sup>143</sup>. To sum up, public discourse among users is impractical on WeChat, both on Official Accounts and Moments.

Although Official Accounts can be compared to Facebook business pages, there is one aspect that clearly set them apart: Official Accounts do not combine promoted content with social updates from friends. The strategy carried out by Tencent was to classify content and services in different categories by creating different channels in accordance with this distinction. The result is a separation of the content of Official accounts from posts on Moments, and a distinction from the content and services of Subscription accounts and those of Service accounts<sup>144</sup>. In addition, Official accounts are more text-oriented than Moments, which relies more on the sharing of images from users. This means that Official accounts are meant to offer customer services and information to users via text messages.

As a consequence of the easy access to customer services, information, and content provided by Official accounts of individuals, companies, or media, their success among WeChat users was immediate. According to the report released by the research company Questmobile in April 2019, 49.3% of WeChat users follows from 10 to 20 Official accounts, followed by 24% of users who follow less than 10 Official accounts. Among these users, the gender distribution is quite balanced, with 57.2% of

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<sup>142</sup> Thomas GRAZIANI, *WeChat Official Accounts: a simple guide*, in “Walkthechat”, 2019, <<https://walkthechat.com/wechat-official-account-simple-guide/#find-acct>>, 20-03-2020.

<sup>143</sup> Erik HARWIT, “WeChat: social and political development of China’s dominant messaging app”, *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 10, 3, 2017, pp.312-327.

<sup>144</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.2, pp.59-60.

male followers and 42.8% of female followers. Age distribution is balanced as well, with 49.5% of followers younger than 30 years old and 50.5% of followers older than 30 years old. By dividing these two groups into smaller ones, users between 25 and 30 years old constitute the largest group with 28.3%; while the smallest one is that of people older than 46 years old, with only 4.3% of users who follow an Official account. On average, WeChat users spend a lot of time on Official Account: 53.7% of users spend from 10 to 30 minutes, 19.3% less than 10 minutes, 22% from 30 to 60 minutes, while the remaining spend more than 1 or 2 hours<sup>145</sup>.

Although Official accounts are not used as much as Moments or group chats, they are still an efficient tool to connect users with companies, celebrities or government organizations. Their ability to provide a wide variety of services and at the same time keep their followers updated through advertising, articles and entertainment content makes them capable of meeting the needs of all types of WeChat users.

### **2.3 WeChat Pay, a mobile wallet**

According to the opening paragraph of the chapter, the most substantial difference between WeChat and QQ lies in the WeChat Pay feature. In a way, WeChat has earned its reputation outside China thanks to this feature. Before the release of the 5.0 upgrade on 5<sup>th</sup> August 2013, other competitors had already offered the possibility to make online payments, however WeChat is given credit for making mobile payments part of the daily life of businesses and individual citizens, at least in China. The enormous success of mobile payments in China is mainly linked to two factors. The first is the lack of a solid credit card infrastructure, which is not as developed as in other advanced countries. The second factor is related to the increase in QR codes use in China from 2012 onwards. The built-in QR codes were already available in WeChat as they allowed users to add new contacts or follow an official account by scanning them. After the introduction of the WeChat Wallet, Tencent decided to use QR codes for mobile payment as well, paving its way for a market hitherto dominated only by Alipay.

WeChat Pay is an in-app product of WeChat and it allows users to link their credit or debit card to their WeChat account through the wallet function. After linking a credit or debit card, users have access to an array of services and transactions, such as transferring money to friends, perform transactions on

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<sup>145</sup> Thomas GRAZIANI, *WeChat Official Account report 2019 reveals importance on cross-promotion & social shopping*, in "Walkthechat", 2019, <<https://walkthechat.com/wechat-official-account-report-2019-reveals-importance-of-cross-promotion-social-shopping/>>, 23-03-2020.

e-commerce sites, paying utilities bills, paying taxi rides, buying train, plane or movie tickets<sup>146</sup>. WeChat Pay has proved to be extremely crucial for small and medium-sized vendors, who have been able to connect to the online network without the need for large resources or infrastructures. As a payment platform, WeChat Pay has incorporated O2O (online to offline), B2C (business to consumer), C2C (consumer to consumer), and P2P (peer to peer) services across different industries<sup>147</sup>. The above-mentioned purchase channels are supported on WeChat by different payment methods available for users. First of all, WeChat Pay allows transactions in physical stores, in which a direct contact between users and storekeeper takes place. By using the Quick Pay function users can show their payment code on WeChat Pay when purchasing a product. The vendor scans this code, completing the transaction. This payment method is very simple and fast, and it is mainly used in physical stores, such as department stores, convenience stores, hospitals, or cinemas. Besides WeChat users, storekeepers can also generate their own individual payment collection QR codes, both for physical and online stores. In such a situation, users only have to scan the QR code of the vendor, enter the payment amount and confirm the payment. This method is usually common among merchants not provided of cash registers, especially market stalls. The remaining types of payments do not require the use of QR codes, and they are mainly used online. The first one is the Mini programs payment for the purchase of goods or services within WeChat Mini programs. Users open the mini program of the merchant, select the products to add to the cart and finally enter the password to confirm the payment. In order to accept the payment, merchants take advantage of the WeChat mini program payment API. As reported in the previous paragraph, it is possible to open a shop within a WeChat official account: the seller enables the payment feature therefore the user can make purchases. Since Official accounts are efficient channels for the promotion of products and services, the possibility of making purchases within them grants brands to gain greater prominence. Lastly, WeChat Pay is also guaranteed inside external merchants' apps. If a specific brand has its own app, the vendor can integrate WeChat Pay inside the app, thus allowing users to make purchases<sup>148</sup>.

Even though mobile payments and WeChat Pay have gained a huge success in China, the diffusion of the above-mentioned payment methods was achieved thanks to a particular function of the WeChat Wallet: Red Packets (红包 *hongbao*). This function was released by Tencent on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2014, a

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<sup>146</sup> Thomas GRAZIANI, *How to set up WeChat Pay? A simple guide*, in "Walkthechat", 2019, <<https://walkthechat.com/wechat-payment-5-reasons-tencent-might-kill-alipay/>>, 18-03-2020.

<sup>147</sup> KIM Ahyoung, *The Chinese mobile payment market: focus on the growth of WeChat Pay from cultural perspectives*, in "Seoul National University", 2018, <<http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/144174/1/000000152504.pdf>>, 25-01-2020.

<sup>148</sup> *Payments products*, in "WeChat Pay", <[https://pay.weixin.qq.com/index.php/public/wechatpay\\_en](https://pay.weixin.qq.com/index.php/public/wechatpay_en)>, 15-02-2020.

few days before the celebrations of the Chinese New Year and it embodies a digitized version of the Chinese tradition of red envelopes. In China, it is traditional for seniors to give money to children inside red envelopes during the main festivities. The money inside the envelopes are called "lucky money" because their purpose is to drive away evils and bring good luck to those who receive them<sup>149</sup>. The new Red Packets feature of WeChat has transferred this longtime tradition online, making it more appealing by virtue of its playful entertaining feel. There are two types of Red Packets: users can decide to send a fixed amount of money to another contact; otherwise they can decide to allocate a certain amount of money in a chat group. In the latter case, the system of WeChat determines randomly how to divide the sum among the receivers<sup>150</sup>. By taking into account the massive use in China of red packets and their deep repercussions on Chinese relationships, it is interesting to understand how this feature has caught the attention of Chinese people. Red packets have gained recognition in China mainly because they combine the tradition of red envelopes with the more recent IM trend. From the year 2000 onwards, the use of text messages in China increased considerably, especially during New Year holidays, a time of the year in which Chinese people send greetings to their loved ones. Text messages remained popular until the release of WeChat in 2012, when they were replaced mainly by video and voice messages. All this, combined with the release of red packets in 2014 allowed Chinese users to combine the tradition of "lucky money" and New Year greetings. The immediate success of red packets is mainly linked to the marketing strategy implemented by Tencent, specifically its partnership with the 2015 Chinese New Year Gala of China Central Television. Throughout the program, viewers were asked to shake their phones to win a combined CNY 80 million in red envelopes from sponsors, with the result of 25,000 red envelopes opened for every minute during peak time<sup>151</sup>. By taking into consideration that to withdraw money of red packets users need to link a debit or a credit card to their WeChat account, it is clear how this feature has further accelerated the spread of WeChat Pay among Chinese people. Over the years, the number of users sending and receiving red packets during the New Year festivities has steadily increased: throughout the Chinese New Year in 2019, 823 million<sup>152</sup> Chinese sent or received red packets, against 200 million<sup>153</sup> in 2015. In conclusion, the introduction of red packets has boosted the use of WeChat Pay, which has profoundly changed the

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<sup>149</sup> KIM Ahyoung, *The Chinese mobile payment market: focus on the growth of WeChat Pay from cultural perspectives*, in "Seoul National University", 2018, <<http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/144174/1/000000152504.pdf>>, 25-01-2020.

<sup>150</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in...*, cap.2, pp.46.

<sup>151</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.2, pp.63-65.

<sup>152</sup> GAO Coco, *WeChat data report on Chinese New Year 2019*, in "The egg", 2019, <<https://www.theegg.com/social/china/wechat-data-report-on-chinese-new-year-2019/>>, 23-03-2020.

<sup>153</sup> Matthew BRENNAN, *WeChat red packets data report of 2018 new year eve*, in "China Channel", 2018, <<https://chinachannel.co/2018-wechat-red-packets-data-report-new-year-eve/>>, 23-03-2020.

way transactions occur, as well as the way people consider money in their life. The social implications produced by the use of WeChat Pay will be addressed in the third chapter. Although at the time of its release, the features of WeChat Pay were not revolutionary compared to its competitors, this did not prevent Tencent from getting on the podium of the most popular mobile payment platforms.

### **2.3.1 The mobile payment market in China: a comparison between WeChat Pay and Alipay.**

In relation with the success of WeChat Pay, it is interesting to analyze how its main rival Alipay reacted to its entry into the mobile payment market. In China Alibaba was the first company to introduce online payments in 2004 and mobile payments in 2008 via its third-party platform Alipay. Particularly mobile payments have taken off thanks to their increasingly worldwide frequent adoption<sup>154</sup>. Although Alibaba was the first company to enter the mobile payments market, WeChat Pay was not the first mobile payment platform developed by Tencent. Back in 2005, Tencent had developed another third-party payment platform called Tenpay, implemented to promote e-commerce on the ecosystem of QQ. WeChat Pay operates on the same legal license of Tenpay, thus Tencent was inspired by it when developing WeChat Pay<sup>155</sup>.

Nowadays, the Chinese mobile payment market is essentially based on third-party payment platforms, namely “trading platforms with [...] credit guaranteed that are launched by scale enterprises or institutions that have contract/cooperation with major banks”<sup>156</sup>. Third-party payment platforms were well received by Chinese people and, although there are also mobile payment platforms developed by major banks, Alipay and Tenpay remain the most popular. According to a research conducted by iResearch Consulting Group, in the third quarter of 2019, Alipay and Tencent had the highest market share of 54.5% and 39.5% respectively<sup>157</sup>. The remaining share is divided among other competitors, including Union Mobile Pay, the payment platform developed by the credit card issuer UnionPay. It is essential to underline how the success of WeChat Pay is partly due to Alipay which has created the conditions to accustom Chinese people to the use of third-party mobile platforms. The history of

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<sup>154</sup> KIM Ahyoung, *The Chinese mobile payment market: focus on the growth of WeChat Pay from cultural perspectives*, in “Seoul National University”, 2018, <<http://s-space.snu.ac.kr/bitstream/10371/144174/1/000000152504.pdf>>, 25-01-2020.

<sup>155</sup> CHEN et al., *Super-sticky WeChat...*, cap.2, pp.72-73.

<sup>156</sup> CONG Yanmin 从砚敏, *Yidong jinrong: zhifu geming 移动金融: 支付革命* (The Innovation and Future of Mobile Internet Finance), Beijing, Tsinghua University Press, 2016.

<sup>157</sup> *China's Mobile Payments Market grows over 15% in Q3 2019, Alipay's Market Share exceeded half*, in “China Banking News”, 2020, <<http://www.chinabankingnews.com/2020/01/21/chinas-mobile-payments-market-grows-over-15-alipays-market-share-exceed-half/>>, 24-03-2020.

Alipay is directly linked to Taobao, the e-commerce platform owned by Alibaba. In 2004, the main problem in e-commerce in China was the trust between sellers and buyers. Many transactions often failed because both the buyer and the seller suspected each other as fraudsters. To overcome this problem, Alibaba introduced Alipay as a third-party platform to ensure secure transactions for buyers and sellers. As a platform, Alipay retained the money paid by the buyer and release the payment to the seller only after the buyer received the product<sup>158</sup>. Alipay has therefore been able to solve a crucial problem for e-commerce, guaranteeing reliability in online transactions. Being released at a time when mobile commerce was becoming increasingly popular in the country, Alipay was able to position itself as the dominant payment method.

In these circumstances, it is obvious that Alibaba felt threatened when WeChat Pay was released. Particularly it was the success of WeChat red envelopes that worried Jack Ma, who considers that moment a failure for his company. This is because the concept of virtual red envelopes was not conceived for the first time by Tencent. Back in 2012, Alibaba had launched its own red envelopes, but they were much more basic than the WeChat version: person A could send a certain amount of money to person B. However, the red envelopes of Alibaba failed to catch the attention of Chinese people. Since the red envelopes of WeChat were gaining recognition in China, a "war" began between Alibaba and Tencent for the supremacy of their own red envelopes. Despite the efforts to make its red envelopes more appealing, Alibaba has failed to counter the strategic moves of Tencent<sup>159</sup>.

In addition to red envelopes, Alipay and WeChat Pay are very similar in terms of features and payment methods, thus the choice between one or the other is generally determined by the personal preference of users. However, Alipay is generally used for purchasing expensive goods and paying loans, while WeChat Pay is preferred for the payment for everyday activities, as it focuses more on social interactions among users.

## 2.4 The revolution of Mini Programs

Although being not a groundbreaking payment method, WeChat Pay has revolutionized WeChat as an application, by penetrating every aspect of Chinese society. However, WeChat Pay is not the only

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<sup>158</sup> LIU Charlie, *Every thing you need to know about Alipay and WeChat Pay*, in "Medium", 2017, <<https://medium.com/@charlieliu/everything-you-need-to-know-about-alipay-and-wechat-pay-2e5e6686d6dc>>, 24-03-2020.

<sup>159</sup> CHAO Eveline, *How WeChat became China's app for everything*, in "Fast Company", 2017, <<https://www.fastcompany.com/3065255/china-wechat-tencent-red-envelopes-and-social-money>>, 24-03-2020.

revolutionary feature introduced by Tencent. In February 2017 the company released a new service for its users which has completely changed the very concept of mobile applications. Mini Programs are lightweight apps that run inside another app; namely Tencent allowed third-party developers to run a lite version of their apps inside the ecosystem of WeChat.

In the late 2016, Zhang Xiaolong announced the launch of a new technology called Mini programs (小程序 *xiaochengxu*). Zhang Xiaolong described them as “mini apps”, claiming that they would have been a trend in the future for their efficiency and user-friendliness. This is because of the concept of app-within-app: they do not need to be downloaded and installed on the smartphone as all the other apps. This is very convenient, especially when users want to replace low frequency app, namely apps used once or twice. In addition, Mini programs are easy to create for developers, because Tencent provides pre-defined layouts, allowing also amateurs to offer a positive experience to users. According to Zhang Xiaolong, through Mini programs content creators and developers can cultivate value and benefit from it<sup>160</sup>. There are several ways to access to WeChat Mini programs: users can swipe down on WeChat to access the Mini programs search bar, access them through the menu of an Official account, scanning a QR code, sharing the Mini program card in a chat or embedding the link to the Mini program inside an article on WeChat. Despite their innovative aspect, Mini programs were not well received at the beginning since many users complained about their limited functionalities and the difficulty to find them on WeChat. Anyway, Mini programs began to gain more recognition at the end of 2017 when Tencent released a mini game called “Jump Jump” which boosted the popularity of Mini programs. According to a 2019 survey of Questmobile, games are the most popular type of mini program (42%), followed by local life service (14%) and e-commerce (11%). Therefore, nowadays Mini programs have gained considerable success as many users prefer them to standalone apps. By means of Mini programs, users can perform numerous actions and access different services without leaving the WeChat ecosystem. It is precisely for this reason that the release of Mini programs has threatened the app ecosystems of iOS and Android<sup>161</sup>. Users no longer download apps from app stores, they search instead for the corresponding Mini program within WeChat.

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<sup>160</sup> “Guanfang zui wanzheng ban: Zhang Xiaolong weixin gongkai ke chaoshi yanjiang, zongjie weixin ba nian” 官方最完整版: 张小龙微信公开课超时演讲, 总结微信 8 年, in “WeChat Chatterbox”, 2019, <[https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?\\_\\_biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NTE4Njc4NQ==&mid=2657617314&idx=1&sn=be4f256844b9dd5623a8719d1dbc0c71)>, 16-03-20.

<sup>161</sup> WU Julianna, *Mini Programs: The apps inside apps that make WeChat so powerful*, in “Abacu News”, 2019, <<https://www.abacusnews.com/who-what/mini-programs-apps-inside-apps-make-wechat-so-powerful/article/3000920>>, 31-03-2020.

In addition to games, another category that has benefited from Mini programs is e-commerce, especially the one related to WeChat influencers. Through Official accounts, an increasing number of influencers have made themselves known to Chinese users, by giving them advices for their online and offline purchases. As mentioned in the first chapter, the word-of-mouth among Chinese people is more effective than traditional advertisings of brands, hence the Official accounts of these influencers started to gain followers, while increasing sales of recommended products. Nevertheless, influencers could only recommend products in an article, but they could not incorporate links to e-commerce websites. This is because articles in Subscription accounts cannot contain hyperlinks. The problem was solved with the release of Mini programs because they made possible to link an Official account article to an e-commerce Mini program<sup>162</sup>. E-commerce mini programs are nowadays popular, and they can be divided into three main categories: platform, content and brand e-commerce. Platform mini programs are developed by e-commerce sites such as JD.com, which is the most famous e-commerce mini program on WeChat; while brand mini programs are developed by brands in order to maintain a closer relationship with their customers. This type of Mini program usually provides membership privileges to customers, vouchers or discounts. Finally, content mini programs are related to influencers and content creators, who develop Mini programs to monetize their follower base.

Besides e-commerce, mini programs are efficient channels to connect users to online services of local businesses. Through the "mini program nearby" function (附近的小程序 *fujin de xiaochengxu*) users can view all local businesses in their proximity and connect to them through their mini programs and official accounts. This function is particularly effective when users want to search for bike rental and mobile charger: as a matter of fact, the mini program of the shared-bike company Mobike is one of the most used by Chinese citizens. Lastly, Mini programs have proved to be useful also for provincial governments, which have started to offer legal services, payment of fines, traffic control trough their own mini programs<sup>163</sup>.

Therefore, it is clear that mini programs have a certain appeal for users, brands and provincial government; even though at the beginning they struggled to gain traction among WeChat users. The year 2019 was a profitable year for Mini programs because there were 300 million mini programs daily active users and more than 200 industries developed their own mini program. Over the years more and more people started to use Mini programs, especially because of their combination with WeChat Pay and Official accounts. This means that mini programs have contributed to the expansion of the WeChat

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<sup>162</sup> Thomas GRAZIANI, *What are WeChat Mini-Programs? A Simple Introduction*, in "Walkthechat", 2019, <<https://walkthechat.com/wechat-mini-programs-simple-introduction/>>, 29-03-2020.

<sup>163</sup> WU Jeffrey, *WeChat Mini Program Report*, in "Mindworks", 2018, <<https://www.mindworks.vc/interest/wechat-mini-program-report-2018/>>, 1-04-2020.

ecosystem and, although it is still too early to understand which direction their trend will take in the future, Mini programs can be considered one of the most revolutionary products developed by Tencent.

## 2.5 WeChat Work, a strategic tool for businesses

The issue of using personal software or application during working hours affects many companies, which have to control their employees and communicate effectively with them. Over the years, several companies tried to create tools to increase efficiency in workplaces, by connecting employees, employers, and customers.

In the business world and in the western corporate world, the most popular software is Slack, which was conceived by the co-founder of Flickr<sup>164</sup> and released in 2013 by Slack Technologies. According to the site, Slack is “a collaboration hub, where the right people and the right information come together, helping everyone get the work done”<sup>165</sup>. A year after the launch of Slack, Alibaba Group also introduced a similar software on the market: DingTalk. DingTalk aims at being “an all-in-one workplace”<sup>166</sup>, paving the way for better management of business relationships, work tasks and deadlines between employees and employers.

The opportunity to penetrate more into the business world and increase the number of professional users led also Tencent to develop its own software, and the conditions for its success were positive. When WeChat came out people used it mainly for personal purposes, but as the users and the success of the app grew, many aspects of the working life started to penetrate the app. This mix of work and private life began to cause stress to users, resulting in what was called “WeChat fatigue”. WeChat began to address this problem in 2014, by creating inside WeChat an Enterprise Account (企业号 *qiye hao*) with the possibility of having a section of enterprise messaging. This helped people to group all the work messages into a separate folder. In 2016, Tencent decided to incorporate the enterprise account into a separate app, in order to enhance the quality of both working and private life. Therefore, WeChat Work (企业微信 *qiye weixin*) was released in April 2016 for Windows, Mac, iOS and

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<sup>164</sup> Multilingual website that allows users to share photographs.

<sup>165</sup> For further information, <[https://slack.com/intl/en-it/lp/three?utm\\_medium=ppc&utm\\_source=google&utm\\_campaign=d\\_ppc\\_google\\_it\\_en\\_brand-hv-exp-messaging&utm\\_term=slack&ds\\_rl=1249094&gclid=CjwKCAiAnfjyBRBxEiwA-EECLJtTM1Cq7ybhTY-Jiy-HR75eGTC0yhfe0bbBNXOzGV4JtoCuzK0HxxoCHNoQAvD\\_BwE&gclid=aw.ds](https://slack.com/intl/en-it/lp/three?utm_medium=ppc&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=d_ppc_google_it_en_brand-hv-exp-messaging&utm_term=slack&ds_rl=1249094&gclid=CjwKCAiAnfjyBRBxEiwA-EECLJtTM1Cq7ybhTY-Jiy-HR75eGTC0yhfe0bbBNXOzGV4JtoCuzK0HxxoCHNoQAvD_BwE&gclid=aw.ds)>, 3-03-2020.

<sup>166</sup> For further information, <<https://www.dingtalk.com/en?spm=a3140.220470.1174087.2.404686c3WylWKO>>, 3-03-2020.

Android<sup>167</sup>. WeChat at work is an enterprise version of WeChat and it offers different tools to companies, employers and employees to carry out their business efficiently. The app is a productivity tool, as well as a connector for internal and external corporate communication and its purpose is to build a win-win ecosystem, akin to the original WeChat. WeChat Work is similar to WeChat in comparison to its basic features, but deviates from it for additional functions. Users are provided with a workspace which includes all the basic apps from Tencent, apps created by users and third-party apps. In their profile users can add their business card and their to-do list, in order to monitor their work assignments. WeChat at work provides a range of tools for users to work more efficiently, in order to reduce costs and maximize the human resources of a company. This is why some of the features of this app are effective in the work environment; it allows people to add the content of a message to their to-do list, create larger chat groups of up to 2,000 members, and grant greater control by the administrators of a chat group. WeChat Work removes also some of the common problems companies face when using WeChat in the workplace. These problems consist of incorrectly adding a person to the wrong chat group, using a personal chat on the corporate computer, or the difficulty to ignore work chats when off duty<sup>168</sup>. The main features that stand out in WeChat Work are very useful in work environments, as they primarily separate work from personal life. By using two different apps, people can focus on one or the other according to their schedules. With WeChat Work, users can make video conferences with 300 people, create a corporate app store with internal and third-party apps, collaborate on documents via desktop or mobile devices, all with greater control over their profile and with improved security.

One of the most interesting aspects of WeChat Work is the possibility to create a workplace where users can employ different apps: Tencent 'basic' apps, smart devices, third-party apps, mini programs and self-built apps. In addition, users can decide whether enable the apps for all employees or just to some groups. Self-built apps are interesting to analyze, since they can be created by users and they reflect the corporate organization. The ability to implement and improve internal communication between employees and employers is one of the winning aspects of the app and self-built apps are the right tool. Whether it is official announcements or internal communications, a different app can be created for each topic and employers can set users visibility. Tencent also provides some internal apps to facilitate communication and workflow such as announcements, reports, approval requests, email,

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<sup>167</sup> *Guide to WeChat Work*, in "Grata", 2020, <<https://blog.grata.co/wechat-at-work/>>, 3-03-2020.

<sup>168</sup> *What is WeChat at Work?*, in "Grata", 2017, <<https://blog.grata.co/wechat-at-work-2017-12/>>, 3-03-2020.

cloud storage and company phone. Inside WeChat Work, users can also share company moments, which are supervised by admin users in order to avoid undesired content<sup>169</sup>.

WeChat work is an essential tool for organizations and companies, but its use is currently limited to the Chinese territory. Unlike WeChat, it is possible to register an account if a company or an organization is located in mainland China, thus the app is not well known abroad.

Once a company has created one or more accounts (up to a maximum of five), it can proceed by adding its employees. There are several ways to add new contacts to an account such as by scanning QR codes, by email or SMS invitation or by sharing an invitation page. Users can also add new members from their WeChat contacts or from the contact list on their mobile device.

The communication among users is not only limited to employees and employers, but also to customers. As stated above, WeChat Work guarantees not only corporate internal communication, but also external communication. The app is therefore an effective channel for connecting employees and customers and for targeted marketing. One of the latest upgrades is WeChat Work Customers, which allows employees to add the WeChat contacts of customers to their WeChat Work external contacts. This feature is beneficial for companies since before WeChat Work release, employees used to communicate with their customers via their personal account on WeChat. This was counterproductive because Chinese companies did not have visibility into contacts; in addition when an employee left the company, the list of his or her contacts migrated with him/her. By means of WeChat Work Customers, companies can include customers in their customer relationship management database and make sure they remain tied to the company. A key aspect is the ability to perform marketing activities based on customers segmentation through the app. Employees can broadcast targeted messages, post stories on moments to promote their products or services, create chats and respond to customer FAQs<sup>170</sup>.

When implemented, WeChat Work can be an excellent tool for companies; nevertheless, its competitor DingTalk still holds the record for number of users. The platform of Alibaba has 200 million monthly active users, while WeChat Work has 60 million<sup>171</sup>. Besides these two platforms, there are also other competitors in China, such as Lark and Huawei WeLink, but the number of their users is small compared to the above-mentioned platforms. WeChat Work and DingTalk are equivalent in terms of features and the only difference between them is the cost for additional space in the cloud storage, with DingTalk slightly more expensive than WeChat Work. Both platforms offer 100 Gigabyte free and if

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<sup>169</sup> *Guide to WeChat Work*, in “Grata”, 2020, <<https://blog.grata.co/wechat-at-work/>>, 3-03-2020.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

an enterprise wants supplemental space, it can pay an additional fee depending on the size of the company. For instance, medium enterprises can take advantage of 40TB (Terabytes) of cloud storage by paying CNY 400,000 on DingTalk, while WeChat Work requires a payment of CNY 320,000<sup>172</sup>. Since the last update of WeChat Work, Tencent is focusing on the implementation of more functions that can best connect the users of the platform, especially companies and their customers. To date, there are 2.5 million<sup>173</sup> companies using WeChat Work in China, but the number is set to grow as the features of the app increase. The goal of Zhang Xiaolong is to create an all-round platform that “only when it extends outside the enterprise does it produce greater value”<sup>174</sup>.

This chapter aimed at presenting and explaining the main features offered by WeChat; these features over the years have shaped and expanded the huge ecosystem of the super app WeChat. The impact of such an ecosystem on Chinese society has been inevitable, because its countless and pervasive functions have completely transformed the dynamics of interaction among Chinese people, as well as many aspects related to the economy. These changes will be uncovered in the next chapter, by explaining why the ecosystem of WeChat has brought both advantages and disadvantages in Chinese society.

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<sup>172</sup> *Guide to WeChat Work*, in “Grata”, 2020, <<https://blog.grata.co/wechat-at-work/>>, 3-03-2020.

<sup>173</sup> *WeChat statistical highlights 2020*, in “China Internet Watch”, 2020, <<https://www.chinainternetwatch.com/30201/wechat-stats-2019/>>, 9-03-2020.

<sup>174</sup> *Guide to WeChat Work*, in “Grata”, 2020, <<https://blog.grata.co/wechat-at-work/>>, 3-03-2020.

## Chapter 3: The impact of WeChat on Chinese society

### 3.1 WeChat and social relationships

Since their emergence, social networks have radically changed the way people interact with each other. From the first Western social networks such as Twitter or Facebook, to their Asian counterparts, social networks have become part of the lives of millions of people. At first, their use was limited to young generations, but over the years more and more adults have begun to approach these communication tools. Furthermore, it is difficult nowadays to find companies or associations that do not have a profile on the most well-known social networks for business purposes. Social networks have brought great convenience to human relationships, allowing people to stay in touch with friends, share information and moments of their life. However, they are tools that should be used with caution as they bring with them various problems, first and foremost impersonality in human relationships.

By moving on to WeChat, it could be argued that its communication features have played an important role in shaping both online and offline relationships among the Chinese population. The changes in interpersonal relationships are the result of how people use the different features of the application. The most surprising aspect of WeChat was that it was able to involve in these changes not only young citizens, but also middle-aged people, rural-to-urban migrants, and country-dwellers.

Social media and WeChat have set new social norms regarding their use and Chinese people have reacted immediately to them, by applying these rules when engaging in online social relationships with their families, friends, colleagues and also strangers. Since WeChat has become an integral part of everyday life in China, people have been able to adapt their offline life to online life over time. However, this adaptation is not the same for everyone and, in some cases, there are differences between the online and offline "I" guided by the socio-economic condition of the user.

One of the most successful features among WeChat users is that of voice messages. This feature may seem insignificant to Westerners, but for Chinese people the chance to receive or leave a voice message has proved to be a revolution. As a matter of fact, few Chinese have experienced the use of telephone answering machines in previous decades; for this reason the introduction of voice messages has started a revolutionary practice in China. Although voice messages are mainly used by young people, their utility and convenience has proved to be of utmost importance for certain categories of the population. First and foremost, voice messages have become popular among elderly: according to most of them leaving "a voice message is as simple as making a phone call"<sup>175</sup>. There are several reasons why elderly

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<sup>175</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*, London, UCL Press, 2016, cap.2, pp.39.

people prefer voice messages. The first reason lies in their lack of knowledge of Pinyin, the system of romanization for standard Chinese and its application on smartphones. When a Chinese person wants to write a message, he or she has to type the Pinyin pronunciation of a Chinese character. After typing, a series of ideograms corresponding to that pronunciation appears and the user makes his/her choice. Alternatively, some systems allow the writing of ideograms using a stylus in order to bypass the problem of Pinyin knowledge. However, this method is still cumbersome for older people. Voice messages have therefore solved this problem, by allowing Chinese elderly to send messages. Another problem is the size of smartphones screens and words, which are often too small to read clearly.

The convenience of voice messages is reflected not only on the elderly population, but also on other categories of people. As matter of fact in China live several ethnic minorities who often do not speak standard Chinese. Therefore, voice messages become useful to them. Moreover, voice messages are also used a lot by illiterate people, for whom the knowledge of ideograms is rather limited. Voice messages have broken the Pinyin knowledge barrier, which precluded certain categories of people from sending text messages. In this way it has been implemented a mechanism of inclusion in the use of WeChat and a consequent increase of its users.

Anyway, despite the great diffusion of voice messages and individual chats, it is in chat groups that it is possible to better observe the interpersonal dynamics within WeChat. These interpersonal dynamics are very interesting especially with regard to transgenerational relationships. Over the years, the use of WeChat has also extended to middle-aged people in urban areas, hence new aspects about its use have emerged in relation to kinship. In Chinese cities, chat groups are very common among families and they include members of all ages, each one with his/her own personal characteristics and the characteristics of his/her generation. The interaction among the different generational groups has allowed users to discover new aspects of their relatives that normally remain hidden in offline relationships. Young people in particular were able to see how, behind their typical tough exterior, senior family members can be funny and cheerful people. In addition, the availability of countless stickers on WeChat has accentuated this new attitude. In a society in which male family members are required to maintain a certain demeanor, the widespread use of WeChat has allowed senior family members to discover a more "human" side of themselves and share it with younger generations.

The wide spread of WeChat among middle-aged people in urban areas has also brought with it the question of surveillance of the youngest members of the family. Many young people in fact, after adding parents or relatives to their WeChat friends, found themselves under surveillance. This issue refers in particular to the use of moments and content posted by young people. Young people have

received complaints from their parents in relation to the content of their posts, hence the best solution to them was to limit the viewing of their own posts to certain people<sup>176</sup>.

Despite this, however, many young Chinese affirm that WeChat act as a buffer for them when dealing with senior family members. In “face-to-face” relationships it is difficult for young people to ignore complaints or advice from their parents or senior family members. This attitude stems from Confucianism and its model of patriarchal family as the most constitutive element of socio-political order. According to Confucius, the younger members of the family were obliged to pursue "filial piety", that is, respect, care, and obedience towards the older members<sup>177</sup>. The non-observance of filial piety was considered a serious lack. Nevertheless, over the years and as a result of the progressive openness of China to Western values, filial piety has suffered a setback. It still remains part of Chinese society, but its importance has declined over the years. The Internet, smartphones and social networks have undoubtedly accelerated this process. According to young Chinese people, thanks to WeChat, they can “ignore their [senior members] enquiries or reply later”.

In spite of this attitude towards senior family members, WeChat groups have begun to play a vital role for those households that find themselves separated for work reasons. Particularly in the case of rural-to-urban migrants, chat groups serve to keep workers in the cities and those left in the countryside in contact. For families in urban areas, chat groups allow members to gather in a virtual space, socialize and thus make up for the lack of time to cultivate offline relationships. In both cases, the use of WeChat has made it possible to overcome the physical distance between people and thus maintain ties among family members.

### **3.1.1 Differences between online and offline life and concept of *mianzi***

In the previous paragraph WeChat has been depicted as a platform that has changed the approach of people in different contexts of interpersonal relationships. In the environment of social networks, it is fair to say that people use them according to their personality and, no less important, according to the image they want to convey to others. The way people show themselves publicly on social networks can be traced in several factors including their social position and the type of life they lead. This assumption is particularly applicable to Chinese society and WeChat users.

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<sup>176</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*, London, UCL Press, 2016, cap.4, pp.107.

<sup>177</sup> Tamara JACKA, Andrew B. KIPNIS, Sally SARGESON, *Contemporary China. Societal and social change*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 2013, cap.1, pp.27-28.

On the basis of the content posted by users, in some cases a difference has been found between offline and online life. This paragraph describes two categories of users and their use of WeChat in everyday life. The aim is to show how according to the social category they belong to, the way they use the social platform also varies. Before the explanation of how rural migrants and urban citizens approach WeChat, it is necessary to introduce the concept of *mianzi*.

The concept of *mianzi*, whose English translation is "face", has been rooted in Chinese society for centuries. Despite the various transformations that have taken place throughout Chinese history, Chinese people are still anchored to it. Over the years, scholars have tried to find a definition of this concept, but essentially *mianzi* can be defined as “the regard a person experiences and receives as a result of his/her doing something that meets other people’s criteria”<sup>178</sup>. The concept of *mianzi* is linked to those of filial piety and *guanxi* (social relationships).

In the traditional Chinese family, young people learn the ritual rules by observing the elderly and gradually learn to insert *mianzi* into their core beliefs. This concept helps young Chinese people to form their behaviors in everyday life, which are reflected in practice in what a person "should" and "should not" do when meeting someone outside the family. The behavior to adopt in social contexts is therefore not based on the wishes and feelings of the individual, but on the dictates of the community and the perception that a person has of his/her interpersonal relationships. With the advent of social networks, the application of the concept of *mianzi* has also moved to online interactions, taking on peculiar characteristics and transforming the boundaries of interpersonal relationships<sup>179</sup>.

In the case of WeChat, it was observed that there are differences between urban citizens and rural migrants in the way they show themselves to the public through their social profile. In his book *Social Media in industrial China*, Wang Xinyuan explains how there are substantial differences between these two groups with regard to the visual material that is posted on their profile. These differences are not causal but come from the place occupied by these two groups within Chinese society. Among the different categories analyzed by Wang, those with the highest number of sharing concern the categories "travel", "political", "events" and "food". Based on the data collected, it is evident that the urban population shows a greater propensity to publish this type of images. As far as urban migrants are

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<sup>178</sup> TANG Junhui, *Mianzi: uncovering its roles in Chinese people’s way of living*, in “Academia”, 2014, <[https://www.academia.edu/31560145/MIANZI\\_UNCOVERING\\_ITS\\_ROLES\\_IN\\_CHINESE\\_PEOPLES\\_WAY\\_OF\\_LIVING](https://www.academia.edu/31560145/MIANZI_UNCOVERING_ITS_ROLES_IN_CHINESE_PEOPLES_WAY_OF_LIVING)>, 25-05-2020.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

concerned, the most shared categories are "fantasy", "compulsory shared", "chicken soup for the soul"<sup>180</sup> and "anti-mainstream".

The difference in the topics posted deeply reflects the socio-economic differences and lifestyle between these two categories. With reference to rural migrants it can be affirmed that there is a kind of rejection and shame in posting images recording their domestic offline lives. The reason is to be found in the offline conditions of rural migrants, who lead a floating life, moving from city to city, from factory to factory according to the demands of the labor market. This is the reason why rural migrants post these kinds of images: they are taken from the Internet and therefore do not show the offline situation they live in. The images in these categories show the desire of rural migrants for a modern, urban lifestyle. WeChat in this sense represents an alternative to their precarious life and their profile on Moments a haven where they can aspire to a better condition. This means that WeChat has become a better home for migrant workers, a place in which they can build a new personal identity.

This assumption is easily applicable to the younger generations, who consider social networks and WeChat as a place in which they can be free from social norms and the rules imposed by their family. In particular the rural youth make extensive use of the "anti-mainstream" images, i.e. a category of images that involve a specific visual language of rebellious gestures or gestures that are not accepted in offline situations<sup>181</sup>. In this case, it can be said that thanks to WeChat, young people in rural areas can be less worried about the *mianzi*, as they enter an area where the traditional rules of society exist, but are much more flexible and subject to constant change.

The same can be applied to romantic relationships: WeChat moments and its high level of privacy allows people to practice online relationships with more freedom than in real life. Young villagers are therefore free from the disapproval and judgment of family members and fellow villagers, hence the risk of "losing face" is radically reduced. Nevertheless, it is not completely removed as they can still be judged by their peers.

There is also a difference in the perception of online friendships between urban citizens and rural migrants. While for citizens, most WeChat contacts include offline friends; for rural migrants the situation is reversed: they consider friends only people met online. In rural areas it is normal to give more importance to kinship or regional ties and people generally establish mutually supportive relationships. The concept of friendship as it is known in Western countries has begun to spread in China as a result of the economic development reforms, particularly in large urban centers. In the

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<sup>180</sup> This expression refers to shared articles on social media which offer career and lifestyle advices. Usually these articles present images that refer to the topics covered and are generally inspirational for those who post them.

<sup>181</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*, London, UCL Press, 2016, cap.3, pp.90-92.

countryside and villages, the concept of friendship is still difficult to understand, as only those between family members or fellow villagers are considered authentic ties. It can be said, therefore, that the introduction of social networks and WeChat has changed the idea of friendship of rural migrants. In order to feel closer to the idea of an urban lifestyle, they have started to value more online friendships by considering WeChat the perfect place to cultivate “purer” relationships, far from the constraints and rules imposed by village life<sup>182</sup>.

In conclusion, WeChat has allowed rural migrants to free themselves from the concept of *mianzi*, or at least to mitigate it with regard to online social relationships.

### **3.1.2 The impact of a new digital tradition: the case of red packets**

The previous chapter introduced red packets, one of most successful features of WeChat. Since their introduction in 2014, red packets have gained a special place in the lives of Chinese people, by transforming or reshaping relationships among them. WeChat deserves credit for having transformed a centuries-old Chinese tradition into a digital product, increasing at the same time the occasions for its use. This means that WeChat red packets have changed Chinese social relationships between family, friends, colleagues, and strangers. Before the introduction of the digital red packets, the giving of traditional red envelopes was limited to special occasions such as the New Lunar Year or weddings. Now Chinese users are sending red packets via WeChat for different purposes: this has triggered a new mechanism of approach in different contexts of everyday life.

In their own way, red packets have established a faster and more convenient manner to stay connected with other people, especially in the case of family members. As a result of the opening reforms of Deng Xiaoping, China has experienced an unprecedented period of urbanization, which has consequently led to mass migrations from rural areas to eastern urban areas. In order to find job opportunities, many people had to leave their hometowns and their families behind; hence social networks and messaging applications such as QQ and WeChat have played a pivotal role in keeping members of families in touch. Additionally, the life of people in Chinese cities has become more and more hectic over the years, thus many WeChat users rely on the app and on red packets to make their virtual presence felt in the lives of friends and relatives. Consequently, instead of visiting a family member in person or spending time shopping for a gift, people prefer to send red packets with greetings

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<sup>182</sup> WANG Xinyuan, *Social Media in Industrial China*, London, UCL Press, 2016, cap.4, pp.109-119.

messages via WeChat<sup>183</sup>. Therefore, the dynamics of relationships have undergone some changes: since people find more favorable to send red packets, the human aspect that previously permeated the relational exchanges is now replaced by the digital and playful aspect of red packets.

Red packets have become addictive for Chinese of all ages because of their convenience and their speed in communicating different feelings to the recipient. To some extent, the abuse of red packets in social interactions can be considered from a negative point of view; however, in certain contexts their use has caused positive changes in interpersonal dynamics.

One of the WeChat functions in which red packets are most used is that of chat groups. When a member of a group sends a red packet, other members are immediately taken by the frenzy of being the first to catch the highest sum, the so-called "luckiest draw". This game is common among family members, who usually create group chat to send and obtain red packets during the Lunar Year celebrations. The dynamics within these groups are interesting because there is generally a mechanism of reciprocity among the members of the group. In addition, in order to be the first ones to catch the highest amount, many adults also involve children in this "game war" by teaching them how to open red packets. This creates greater involvement within the household, and it allows busy adults to leave the task of opening digital red packets to their children or grandchildren. With the purpose of maintaining interpersonal relationships within the group, once a person receives a certain amount of money, part of it is usually returned to the sender as a sign of courtesy<sup>184</sup>. In conclusion, within the dynamics of family or among friends, red packets are mostly tools to show closeness, affection or purely to return a favor. In contrast, within the working environment the issue of red packets is more complex and sensitive. This is because relationships among workers are not all on the same level, but there is a hierarchical pyramid that must be respected. This is the reason why red packets sent by general managers or team leaders are hardly opened by their subordinate group members. Even among colleagues, sending and opening red packets can create misunderstandings and situations in which, in order not to lose "face", some colleagues who have obtained the luckiest draw several times had to offer lunch or return part of the sum obtained. In order to avoid this office game, less people in work environments open red packets, which results in the red packets being returned to the sender unopened.

Since users need to link a credit or debit card to use red packets, this feature is sometimes employed for illegal purposes. In fact, gambling and many frauds are carried out through red packets. Gambling

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<sup>183</sup> Ji Xiaojing, *Red packets in the real and virtual worlds*, in "Research Gate", 2017, <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314165930\\_Red\\_Packets\\_in\\_the\\_Real\\_and\\_Virtual\\_Worlds\\_How\\_Multi-Function\\_WeChat\\_Influences\\_Chinese\\_Virtual\\_Relationships\\_Ethnographic\\_Perspectives\\_Across\\_Global\\_Online\\_and\\_Offline\\_Spaces](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314165930_Red_Packets_in_the_Real_and_Virtual_Worlds_How_Multi-Function_WeChat_Influences_Chinese_Virtual_Relationships_Ethnographic_Perspectives_Across_Global_Online_and_Offline_Spaces)>, 25-12-2019.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

is usually performed within WeChat groups. In these groups, each member is required to send red packets with a total value of RMB 288. Whoever within the group withdraws the lowest amount, in turn has to send another round of red packets in the group. And while all these money exchanges are taking places, the group leaders earn an RMB 28 commission fee from each transaction. In addition to gambling, red packets are also used to get access to personal information and to acquire illegal wealth. By exploiting the desire of users to earn some extra money, these fraudsters send instead red packets containing viruses<sup>185</sup>.

In conclusion, digital red packets can be considered a Chinese tradition as much as traditional red envelopes. As in the past, the value of red packets does not concern only the amount inside them, but also symbolizes an emotional value, a link between the sender and the receiver. In any case, with the growth of Chinese economy, the amount inside red packets has increased compared to the past because the conditions and incomes of Chinese citizens have improved. Red packets help also to strengthen existing relationships between two people offline and, at the same time, they allow users to create new bonds online.

To be specific, red packets have become a public mechanism to deal with certain situations: from returning a favor, to greeting a new member in a group chat, to celebrating holidays, red packets have become an essential pastime for Chinese people.

### **3.2 WeChat and smart cities**

In the previous chapter the ecosystem of WeChat and its two layers were introduced in order to highlight the different connections created by the super app throughout the updates. While the base layer encompasses all the built-in features of the app; the connection layer allows WeChat to transfer these features in the real world and it grants the meeting among people, services, organizations, and devices. Over the years, one of the main objectives of Tencent and WeChat has been to increasingly promote a "smart life" in different contexts through collaboration with different partners. In addition, the introduction of the WeChat Pay payment system has greatly accelerated this process, allowing Chinese citizens to access many paid services in any place and at any time.

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<sup>185</sup> Ji Xiaojing, *Red packets in the real and virtual worlds*, in "Research Gate", 2017, <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314165930\\_Red\\_Packets\\_in\\_the\\_Real\\_and\\_Virtual\\_Worlds\\_How\\_Multi-Function\\_WeChat\\_Influences\\_Chinese\\_Virtual\\_Relationships\\_Ethnographic\\_Perspectives\\_Across\\_Global\\_Online\\_and\\_Offline\\_Spaces](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314165930_Red_Packets_in_the_Real_and_Virtual_Worlds_How_Multi-Function_WeChat_Influences_Chinese_Virtual_Relationships_Ethnographic_Perspectives_Across_Global_Online_and_Offline_Spaces)>, 25-12-2019.

By leveraging its digital ecosystem, WeChat can promote the development of smart cities, driven by the “Internet + government” project. The "Internet + government" plan is part of a series of projects proposed by premier Li Keqiang in 2015, grouped under the collective name of "Internet Plus". According to premier Li Keqiang, China will “develop the Internet Plus action plan to integrate the mobile Internet, cloud computing, big data, and the Internet of Things with modern manufacturing, to encourage the healthy development of e-commerce, industrial networks, and Internet banking, and to guide Internet-based companies [...]”<sup>186</sup>. The aim of the project is to implement the use of the Internet in different fields of the economy of China in order to promote social development and economic growth. To better understand how WeChat and its services are related to this project, it is necessary to depict a concept that is inextricably linked to the development of "Internet plus": the Internet of Things. The term Internet of Things or IoT refers to web-enabled smart devices that use processors, sensors and communication hardware to collect, send and act on data that they acquire from the environment. In other words, the Internet of Things consists of devices with an assigned Internet Protocol address which can transfer data without the human-to-human or the human-to-computer interaction. The Internet of Things is a relatively new concept, but its importance has increased over time because it promotes a smart life which allows people to have more control over their lives and gain more time. The Internet of Things is the concept behind smart cities, and it can be applied in different contexts in order to help citizens and government in their daily activities. The Internet of things can be used in the home environment, for example: smart homes are in fact equipped with appliances, thermostats and electronic devices that can monitor energy consumption and reduce waste.

At the same time, the IoT is of extreme importance in many businesses, as data collection can concretely help companies in all their production processes. Through IoT devices, companies can automate production processes and thus reduce labor costs and waste of resources. IoT touches many industries, such as agriculture, healthcare, finance, and manufacturing. In healthcare, for instance, it can help to monitor patients closely and provide hospitals with the inventory management for pharmaceutical and medical instruments. In the agriculture sector, IoT-based smart farming can help monitor all the variables that influence the farmed land and the harvest: temperature, humidity, light, irrigation, etc.

In practice and if properly implemented, the Internet of Things can therefore bring considerable benefits in every area of the economy and everyday life. Its advantages include the possibility to access information from anywhere at any time, the enhancement of communication between devices, time

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<sup>186</sup> *Internet Plus: Premier Li's new tech tool*, in “The state council. The People’s republic of China”, 2015, <[http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2015/03/13/content\\_281475070887811.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/premier/news/2015/03/13/content_281475070887811.htm)>, 25-05-2020.

and money savings, the improvement of the quality of services and the reduction of human intervention. However, despite all these advantages, the Internet of Things has some disadvantages which are mainly related to the theft of information, data, and connection problems<sup>187</sup>. Anyway, the concept of the Internet of Things is still relatively new, especially in Western countries, while China made IoT its strategic priority in 2015 with the “Internet Plus” plan. As stated at the beginning of the paragraph, the project was proposed by Premier Li Keqiang and aims to integrate the Internet with all traditional industries in order to boost the economic growth of the country. With this project, the government also called for the creation of new industrial models as well as the promotion of innovation and entrepreneurship. The project establishes a series of targeted actions to implement the Internet in all economic sectors of the country: lowering the limits for entering the market of Internet Plus-related products, credit system optimization, training of local and foreign talents, financial support and tax references. In summary, with the "Internet Plus" plan China hopes to "push the Chinese economy to a higher level"<sup>188</sup>.

In a context in which the Internet is the cornerstone around which everything revolves, the major Chinese technology companies such as Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent play a key role in the creation of services that promote a "smart life".

WeChat fits well into this environment by virtue of its shared digital ecosystem that integrates deeply with all key industries of the country: transportation, finance, healthcare, education, e-commerce, retail, etc. The goal of WeChat is to transform existing industries, improve operational efficiency and cut operational costs.

All the above-mentioned industrial areas have become part of the "Internet Plus" project and in this paragraph they will be uncovered in relation to the ecosystem created by WeChat. The aim is to make people understand how in Chinese cities the use of the app has become essential, especially in order to pursue a smart life. First of all, it is important to underline that among all the services offered by WeChat there is a common line that allows its operation, namely WeChat Pay. Without WeChat Pay it would have been difficult to develop so many and varied services and, in this sense, WeChat would have been reduced to a mere messaging app. One of the areas where the development of a smart city is most evident is transportation. WeChat has been able to produce an ecosystem of smart transportation through technological innovation. The aim is to improve the efficiency and quality of

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<sup>187</sup> Margaret ROUSE, *Internet of Things (IoT)*, in “Internet of Things Agenda”, 2020, <<https://internetofthingsagenda.techtarget.com/definition/Internet-of-Things-IoT>>, 25-05-2020.

<sup>188</sup> *China unveils Internet Plus action plan to fuel growth*, in “The State Council. The People’s republic of China”, 2015, <[http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latest\\_releases/2015/07/04/content\\_281475140165588.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/policies/latest_releases/2015/07/04/content_281475140165588.htm)>, 25-05-2020.

public transport making it "green" and "smart". The smart transportation ecosystem consists of several services that include not only urban but also intercity transport. Intercity travel is convenient for Chinese citizens because Railway 12306, the website from which Chinese citizens can buy train tickets, makes use of WeChat Pay: users are able to buy train tickets and receive information on the situation of the railway lines directly on their smartphones.

As far as urban transport is concerned, WeChat has introduced the mini program Tencent Ride Code in 2017. The mini program allows the payment of underground or bus fares automatically through QR code scanning, thus alleviating the problem of queues at ticket kiosks. In July 2019, the mini program reached 100 million users and it is planning to make its debut in Hong Kong by 2021<sup>189</sup>. Finally, thanks to the introduction of the mini program ETC<sup>190</sup> (Electronic Toll Collection) Assistant WeChat has greatly improved traffic efficiency on Chinese highways through real-name authentication, WeChat Pay access, free-payment password, and e-invoice.

Another sector that has undergone a revolution is healthcare. Through the implementation of mobile internet, WeChat has been able to integrate healthcare services and improve all aspects related to medical treatment and diagnosis.

In collaboration with the major hospitals of the country, WeChat has built a mobile-based medical service system which frees patients from long queues for registration at the hospitals. One of the most successful examples of the integration of WeChat with the healthcare system is Hospital 301. Hospital 301 is a high-level medical institution located in Beijing, which through its "PLA General hospital/301 hospital" official account allows patients to make appointments. In this way, the hospital has been able to streamline medical procedures and to reduce time costs of patients. The official account also provides an overview of the features of each hospital department as well as assistance for registration. The integration of the healthcare system with WeChat has also paved the way for greater collaboration between hospitals and insurance companies. In fact, WeChat provides a smart commercial health insurance platform which enables patients to make "fast claims". By reason of this platform, patients do not need any more to provide paper proof materials such as medical bills and medical records<sup>191</sup>.

The healthcare system has been increasingly embedded into WeChat as evidenced by the issue of electronic certificates in November 2019 by the National Healthcare Security Administration. These

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<sup>189</sup> FANG Tianyu M., *100 million transit riders are paying with WeChat mini program: Tencent*, in "CX Tech", 2019, <<https://www.caixinglobal.com/2019-07-31/100-million-transit-riders-are-paying-with-wechat-mini-program-tencent-101445697.html>>, 27-05-2020.

<sup>190</sup> ETC is a high-tech technology under the control of the Ministry of Transport which allows traffic control on highways.

<sup>191</sup> *WeChat Economic and Social Impact Report 2017*, in "China Academy of Information and Communications Technology", 2018, <<http://www.caict.ac.cn/kxyj/qwfb/ztbg/201805/P020180529380481819634.pdf>>, 27-05-2020.

electronic certificates constitute a digital version of China social security card. Once the electronic social security card is activated through WeChat, citizens can benefit of all the healthcare services<sup>192</sup>. In the wake of the innovations brought to the education system by means of the rapid development of science and technology, WeChat has made great efforts to promote smart education. The integration of information technology with education has led to a networked personalized e-learning system and environment in which people can acquire new skills anywhere and at any time. In the educational field, the most effective tools are official accounts, which allow people a more convenient access to educational resources. Through official accounts, mini programs or group chats, many people have been able to conduct online e-learning or buy educational products even in many remote areas of the country. The possibility to benefit from online educational services and resources has therefore reduced regional disparities, allowing rural dwellers to access to the education system.

The commercial sector is also part of the “Internet Plus” project, and in relation to WeChat it plays an essential role. Particularly the e-commerce sector is of central importance for WeChat since many e-commerce companies have started to focus their attention on social e-commerce.

In this sense WeChat is a strategic platform for e-commerce sites as it is able to leverage its advantages in content, technology and users to innovate e-commerce operating models.

The most useful feature to increase the e-commerce traffic are mini programs: as a matter of fact in 2018, e-commerce mini programs had 252 million users<sup>193</sup>, slightly less than lifestyle services mini programs. The strength of WeChat lies in its ability to create personalized e-commerce services, through its online-offline connection. Thanks to mini programs, e-commerce sites have acquired a new channel to promote their business. Mini programs offer to e-commerce companies greater control over their e-commerce store design and data. At the same time, they channel traffic through WeChat. There are several reasons why it is convenient for companies to use WeChat and its mini programs as an e-commerce platform. All these reasons, if exploited efficiently, allow companies to engage customers and encourage them to share mini programs with their acquaintances. First of all, mini programs allow the creation of user-generated content as well as the personalization of the products customers want to purchase. Many e-commerce mini programs offer also social gifting, namely customers can buy gift cards or gifts and share them with their friends on WeChat; in alternative there is also the possibility to carry on group-buying campaigns in which people purchase goods in bulk to obtain a discount. In

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<sup>192</sup> The WeChat-based social security card first appeared in 2018 in 26 Chinese cities with the aim of replacing the traditional state issued social security cards. The e-card enables users to provide their identification, payment records and other information to official online inquiries about benefits and insurance coverages. For more information: <<https://www.scmp.com/tech/china-tech/article/2127010/chinas-social-security-system-turns-wechat-electronic-id>>.

<sup>193</sup> *WeChat e-commerce: what you need to know before 2019*, in “Jing Daily”, 2018, <<https://jingdaily.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/WeChat-e-Commerce-What-You-Need-To-Know-Before-2019.pdf>>, 1-06-2020.

addition, customer service is improved through a more visual and attractive interface. Finally, brands can use mini programs to convert offline traffic to online or to provide offline services to online customers<sup>194</sup>.

This last point is important because it is linked to the retail sector, which has made use of WeChat to increase sales, reduce costs and improve the customer experience in retail stores. Through mobile internet and new technologies, such as big data and artificial intelligence, WeChat helps retail stores in managing their services, such as membership, QR code purchases and home services. The ecosystem created by WeChat and all its features allow to create a connection between services and “people, goods and markets”, by enhancing the mutualistic win-win set by the platform.

However, the sector in which the development of the digital economy is crucial is manufacturing. For China, the largest manufacturing producer in the world, the improvement of this sector is vital in order to maintain this record. WeChat is therefore at the forefront of integrating mobile internet into the manufacturing sector. Through the main tools of WeChat (Official accounts, mini programs, WeChat at work, etc.) information networks, sales networks and supply chains of enterprises are connected to each other, boosting the transformation of the manufacturing sector.

### **3.2.1 WeChat government services**

In relation to the context of the "Internet Plus" project, WeChat has been strategic in promoting the "Internet + Government" plan. The purpose of the plan is to provide citizen-centered public services. Thanks to its ecosystem, WeChat guarantees the development of smart cities through the WeChat City services platform. This platform was launched in 2015 and allows users to access 9,930 services in 30 categories. Some of these services revolve around public security, human resources, social security, transportation, taxation, education, and civil affairs. Since the first appearance of public services on the platform, Chinese citizens have begun to enjoy a more convenient lifestyle. Users can access the city services platform via a button on the WeChat interface. Through the platform, citizens can then pay utility bills, penalties, apply for administrative procedures, book medical examinations, check the weather or traffic conditions.

In addition to the platform, WeChat provides citizens with several government official accounts through which they can check government information and enjoy one-stop services from different

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<sup>194</sup> *The WeChat mini program. Playbook for e-commerce*, in “Jing Daily”, 2019, <<http://313ct818yszd3xd6xa2z47nm-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/wechat-mini-program-playbook-for.pdf>>,1-06-2020.

departments<sup>195</sup>. WeChat in Government is a platform that allows citizens to receive information directly from government agencies, improving the interaction between them and the government. Usually, each municipality has its own official account in order to publish information articles and offer increasingly efficient services to citizens. Government official accounts play an important role in Chinese society because they guide the public through the information they disclose, while allowing citizens to express their opinions. In this regard, the feedback from citizens is crucial because it enables the government to build a reliable image and improve its services<sup>196</sup>.

The services offered by the government through WeChat put the wellbeing of citizens first and provide increasingly convenient access to the public services of smart cities. Through WeChat, Chinese government was able to achieve the goal of the "Internet Plus" project: by means of technology, internet and mobile applications, the government can bring benefits to as many people as possible in Chinese society.

### **3.2.2 From smart cities to smart countryside: the WeCountry platform.**

The issues related to the development of rural areas and the gap with urban areas have always been critical to Chinese government. During the 19th CPC National Congress in 2017, the politburo of the Communist party strongly emphasized the goal of alleviating poverty in all poor regions of the country by the year 2020. Throughout the congress it was reiterated that the government “should make steady progress in ensuring people’s access to childcare, education, employment, medical services, elderly care, housing and social assistance”<sup>197</sup>. In this perspective, a mobile platform like WeChat can ensure the achievement of these goals and at the same time it can help reducing the digital divide.

The introduction of Internet and the simultaneous period of urbanization in China has created a digital divide, that is people living in rural areas find difficult to access ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and the services it provides. The main reason is the underdevelopment of Internet infrastructures in these regions and the low incomes many villagers have, which do not allow them to afford mobile devices. In addition, people from rural areas do not have a sufficient knowledge of the skills they need to use ICT.

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<sup>195</sup> YANG Yao, “Towards a new digital era: observing local e-government services adoption in a Chinese municipality”, *Future Internet*, 9, 3, 2017.

<sup>196</sup> *WeChat Economic and Social Impact Report 2017*, in “China Academy of Information and Communications Technology”, 2018, <<http://www.caict.ac.cn/kxyj/qwfb/ztbg/201805/P020180529380481819634.pdf>>, 27-05-2020.

<sup>197</sup> YE Lisha, YANG Huiqin, “From digital divide to social inclusion: a tale of mobile platform empowerment in rural areas”, in *Sustainability*, 12,6, 2020.

These three main reasons have caused huge disparities between rural areas and Chinese cities as well as different types of social exclusion: political exclusion, social participation exclusion and economic exclusion. For what concerns political exclusion, without ICTs, villagers have more difficulty in finding policy information and are therefore cut off from policy decisions, without the possibility of making their voices and opinions heard. Villagers also face social exclusion because the lack of communication tools limits their ability to interact and participate in community life. Finally, the limited access to ICTs leads to economic exclusion and to the inequality of less privileged groups. The lack of access to technologies, tools and social media does not allow villagers to improve their social position through the acquisition of new knowledge.

By taking into account the seriousness of the digital divide, the Chinese government and many government enterprises have tried to make up for deficiencies in rural areas. Among the different solutions, mobile platforms seem to have the advantages to solve or at least mitigate the abovementioned problems. Because of its widespread in the country, WeChat is the perfect platform in which to implement useful tools to villagers, thanks to its communication (moments, official accounts, chat, voice and video call) and transactional features (WeChat Pay)<sup>198</sup>. Through the empowerment of ICTs and mobile platforms, rural inhabitants can achieve social inclusion, which is “the extent that individuals, families, communities are able to fully participate in society [...]”<sup>199</sup>

In relation to the objectives set by the 19th CPC National Congress, Tencent and WeChat have been engaged in reducing poverty through mobile internet applications since 2015. This is the reason why Tencent has introduced WeCountry, a mobile portal built on WeChat whose purpose is to provide resources, technical guidance and assistance to villagers in developing rural areas. Through the WeCountry platform, each village has access to its own profile, which offers different services, thus villagers can get closer to the above-mentioned social inclusion. On the village profile, the village committee can publish information and village affairs notice so that villagers can read, comment, and share it with other fellow villagers. While previously communications were delivered only through trumpet or bulletin of the village committee, after the release of this platform villagers can join political participation and feel more involved in the decision-making processes.

The WeCountry platform has gained success since its release, by radically improving the situation in rural villages and by bringing innovations on several levels. To date, there are more than 15,000

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<sup>198</sup>YE Lisha, YANG Huiqin, “From digital divide to social inclusion: a tale of mobile platform empowerment in rural areas”, in *Sustainability*, 12,6, 2020.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

villages and 2 million villagers on the platform, with the most covered areas being the provinces of Guangdong, Shandong, Hunan, and Sichuan<sup>200</sup>.

Among all the villages that make use of WeCountry, those in the prefecture-level city of Heze in Shandong province seem to have achieved the best results in involving their citizens and making changes in village dynamics. For a long time, the area of Heze city has been underdeveloped, especially the ICT infrastructures. The absence of a suitable infrastructure and the lack of IT knowledge and skills has led to a considerable digital divide and several related problems. The first problem concerns the lack of an efficient channel of communication between the village committee and villagers. As mentioned above, in rural areas it was standard practice to deliver news and information through bulletins; however, bulletins are not a prompt channel of communication. As a result, the inhabitants of Heze received the news sporadically and late. In addition, they did not have the possibility to give their own direct feedback on the decisions of the village committee. The second problem is the lack of safety valves, which can lead to mental deprivation. Since villagers usually engage in jobs that require physical effort, at the end of the day they need to release tension and communicate their thoughts to others. Before the introduction of WeCountry, villagers could only communicate face-to-face or by phone call and many people had few tools to connect with their relatives who had moved to the cities for work. Finally, the last problem is the high poverty rate in villages. The majority of the inhabitants are employed in agriculture, with little chance of increasing their income and living conditions, hence this situation intensifies rural distress<sup>201</sup>.

The government of Heze city has decided to rely on ICTs practices in order to reduce the digital divide, thus after hearing about the WeCountry platform, it has pursued supporting policies to implement it and have grassroot village leaders use the platform in the first place. As the platform provider, Tencent has played a pivotal role in helping villages implement WeCountry, by also supporting the villagers economically when buying mobile devices. The WeCountry platform has therefore transformed village life, both from human and economic perspectives. WeCountry offers more than 20 functions divided into three categories: village information management, affective interaction, and e-commerce.

In the village information management functions, the village committee can publish information about government policies, village activities or financial information, thus filling the lack of an efficient communication channel. Through this function, citizens can also have their say, raise questions directly to the village secretary and leave their feedbacks in the designated section. The affective interaction

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<sup>200</sup> YE Lisha, YANG Huiqin, "From digital divide to social inclusion: a tale of mobile platform empowerment in rural areas", in *Sustainability*, 12,6, 2020.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

functions are also crucial for villagers, especially in order to maintain sanity and to allow them to distract themselves from their burdensome life. Through WeCountry, people can share their emotions with fellow villagers and keep in touch with their relatives living in cities. By means of this function, villagers can broaden their horizons through the interaction with other people and migrant villagers are able to alleviate the sense of separation from their village.

Last of all, the e-commerce functions can be considered the most helpful to villages to create job opportunities and consequently increase the income of villagers. On the WeCountry platform, villagers can sell their agricultural or handicraft products and the entire village can actively participate in the management of the trade, from product packaging to after-sales services. The agricultural e-commerce platform can therefore connect efficiently villages with urban areas and help them develop local resources in the long term. To better implement the WeCountry platform, a series of initiatives have also been carried out to alleviate the political, social participation and economic exclusions. Under the guidance of Tencent, for instance, each local government organizes usage training to prepare WeCountry administrators to manage their village profile. In return, WeCountry administrators are given the task of educating villagers in the usage of mobile devices as well as cultivating their ICT skills. In the interests of achieving social inclusion, Tencent implemented a ranking system called WeCountry index in the home page of each village: the more villagers use the platform, the highest the village position in the ranking. Through this ranking system, Tencent tries to stimulate the participation of the villagers and to increase the sense of belonging to a community<sup>202</sup>.

The case of Heze city therefore represents the greatest success of the WeCountry platform and the perfect combination of "Internet+village". According to the Senior Vice president and Party Secretary Guo Kaitian of Tencent through WeCountry: "[...] rural areas could realize rural values, whether it's cultural or economic"<sup>203</sup>. In the city of Heze the conference "WeCountry for everyone" was also held on 19<sup>th</sup> August 2018 with the participation of all those villages that use the platform. The aim of the conference is to explore how to take advantage from the use of WeCountry and how to integrate smart villages with rural revitalization. Since the birth of the WeCountry platform, the aim of Tencent has been that of connecting emotions, information, and rural products in these areas through the integration of ICT technologies.

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<sup>202</sup> YE Lisha, YANG Huiqin, "From digital divide to social inclusion: a tale of mobile platform empowerment in rural areas", in *Sustainability*, 12,6, 2020.

<sup>203</sup> *Rural areas embrace the Internet in the new era with 14 all-for-one WeCountry demonstration areas in five provinces*, in "Tencent", 2018, <<https://www.tencent.com/en-us/articles/2200002.html>>, 12-02-2020.

### 3.3 WeChat cashless society

By taking into consideration the entire digital ecosystem of WeChat, nothing has changed the world of mobile applications like WeChat Pay. The functionality that led WeChat to distance itself from all other apps on the market has changed Chinese society forever, pushing it more and more towards a cashless economy. The previous paragraphs have demonstrated how WeChat Pay has revolutionized the way people shop and access services offered by companies or the government, by means especially of QR codes. QR codes have been the tool that has made the presence of WeChat Pay so pervasive in Chinese society. China has spontaneously moved from being a cash-based society to a society in which mobile payments are the norm. This has happened because China has for most of the time been a cash-based society with an underdeveloped banking system, hence there was not a solid credit card infrastructure. This was until the country started producing cheap mobile phones in the early 2000s. The intentional development of China in this sector has therefore enabled the creation of mobile phones and later of increasingly high-performance smartphones which allowed the country to skip the credit card payment system and replace directly cash with mobile payments<sup>204</sup>.

Therefore, China can be considered the prototype of the futuristic cashless society, an example for other countries for the realization of reliable mobile payment systems. Despite the benefits brought by WeChat Pay in different sectors of the Chinese economy, the development of a cashless society brings with it several problems. The speed with which the country has moved from cash payments to mobile payments has left some sections of the population, such as the elderly and rural residents, behind. Although China is not the country with the highest percentage of elderly population in the world, it is the first one when considering the number of older adults. As of today, the percentage of people aged over 65 years is 12%<sup>205</sup>, which is about 156 million people. Such a high number cannot be overlooked and that is why taking into account the problems related to the cashless society is important.

The problem for older people derives from their approach to this technology, which is mainly hampered by age-related complications, such as poor eyesight or poor memory. As a result, elderly people struggle to see the phone screens or forget how to use the installed applications.

In most Chinese cities, paying via WeChat Pay has become common practice, so much so that vendors often have trouble making change for cash or even refuse to take it. This kind of situations can provoke discontent in the population as happened in 2018 in a city in northern China. An older regular customer

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<sup>204</sup> Ryan CHAMPION, *Payments in China: how do they work?*, in “Eggplant Digital”, 2019, <<https://eggplantdigital.cn/payments-in-china-how-do-they-work/>>, 15-06-2020.

<sup>205</sup> *Countries with the oldest population in the world*, in “Population Reference Bureau”, 2020, <<https://www.prb.org/countries-with-the-oldest-populations/>>, 15-06-2020.

of a supermarket argued with the staff at the checkout for preventing him from paying with cash, inviting him to pay with the app instead. After the complaints from the man and the witnesses of the scene, the staff finally allowed him to pay in cash<sup>206</sup>. The growing cashless society risks to create problems of economic instability while at the same time it cuts certain sections of the population out of the economy.

Another segment of the population that has suffered from the cashless society is that of rural citizens. According to the 2017 World Bank Global Findex database, about 200 million<sup>207</sup> Chinese rural citizens remain unbanked or outside the financial system. Since in order to activate cashless payment it is necessary a formal enrollment in banks, which are then linked to the WeChat Pay mobile payment platform, it is clear that this number of rural citizens remains also excluded from the cashless economy. WeChat Pay has become *de facto* the default payment system, nevertheless there are still many Chinese citizens who do not have the suitable mobile devices to run the application or who do not even have a bank account. The ongoing attempt of WeChat Pay to become the leading payment method in the country has created enormous risks to the economy in those rural areas where transactions are still cash-based. Rural dwellers have found themselves shut out of the financial system, hence they are unable to conduct all transactions related to the agricultural sector.

Despite this problem, a company like Tencent does not care so much about including these sections of the population into the WeChat Pay platform. As long as urban users continue to purchase through the platform, the fact that lower-income or lower-technology users do not participate in mobile payments is irrelevant<sup>208</sup>.

Even though elderly still make a little difference in the e-commerce sector for WeChat, however, it is necessary for the super app to pay more attention to the "silver economy" and develop applications and products for this market. One solution applied by WeChat in February 2019 was to allow users to issue virtual cards to their elderly relatives. In this way, elderly users, even if they have not activated the payment function of the platform, can still pay via WeChat<sup>209</sup>.

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<sup>206</sup> Kyle MULLIN, *China's cashless economy is leaving its elderly behind*, 2018, <<https://qz.com/1435320/chinas-cashless-economy-is-leaving-its-elderly-behind/>>, 16-05-2020.

<sup>207</sup> "2017 Quanqiu pu hui jinrong zhishu shujuku" 2017 全球普惠金融指数数据库 (2017 World Bank Global Findex database), in "World Bank Group", 2017, <<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29510/211259ovCH.pdf?sequence=8&isAllowed=y>>, 16-06-2020.

<sup>208</sup> Rui ZHONG, *China can't afford a cashless society*, in "Foreign Policy", 2018, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/11/china-cant-afford-a-cashless-society/>>, 20-05-2020.

<sup>209</sup> SONG Jingli, *WeChat Pay is now more convenient for senior citizens*, in "KrAsia", 2019, <[https://kr-asia.com/to-break-growth-bottleneck-wechat-pay-now-binds-the-elderly-with-their-childrens-cards](https://kr-asia.com/to-break-growth-bottleneck-wechat-pay-now-binds-the-elderly-with-their-childrens-cards/)>, 16-06-2020.

In conclusion, it is possible to state that the cashless economy fostered by WeChat has brought several advantages. First of all, it has brought advantages to the application itself so that it was able to increase its number of users. In order to make a purchase through WeChat Pay, people need to subscribe and create a WeChat account. After the introduction of WeChat Pay, the application has seen an increase in the number of its users.

Secondly, it has benefited businesses, which were able to expand their payment methods and link WeChat Pay to other app features such as mini programs and official accounts in order to offer discounts, promotions and vouchers.

Finally, WeChat Pay has brought convenience into the everyday lives of Chinese citizens. It has become common for WeChat users to leave home without a wallet because they only need their smartphone to purchase or to take the public transports.

## CONCLUSION

The decision to talk about WeChat and its impact on Chinese society has been dictated by the lack of knowledge in Western countries about this app. Outside the Chinese borders, there are few Westerners who have come into contact with WeChat and its features and, in general, these people have, for work or study reasons, had to deal with China.

The full understanding of the birth and development of this super app cannot be separated from an excursus about the development of the Internet in China and all those tools, such as BBSes, blogs and microblogs that have entirely changed the way people communicate around the world.

Although Western countries have been the pioneers of network media, the Chinese Internet landscape is as rich as the Western one. Such a fertile environment is due to the presence of the Great firewall which, by preventing access to foreign sites, has encouraged the creation of Chinese alternatives.

By means of the consultation of the book of Gianluigi Negro, “Internet in China” and of Kuang Wenbo, “Social media in China”, it was possible to retrace the history of Chinese Internet and its development, as well as the impact of network media on the population.

With the advent of mobile internet, the app market began to take hold and, in the case of China, Tencent was the most innovative and successful company. The rapid increase in the production of smartphones has prompted the company to adapt its website QQ as a mobile application, by creating an ecosystem of features never seen before in the mobile application landscape. The development of the ecosystem of QQ has laid the foundation for the creation of the super app WeChat, which it is safe to compare nowadays to a “Swiss army knife” because of its array of features.

The work of Tencent with WeChat has been remarkable: by starting as a copy of Kik messenger and WhatsApp, over the years and through various updates the app has become an essential tool for everyday life. Through the analysis of its different features it is possible to notice that there is no sector in which WeChat has not penetrated. By means of its features it is possible to connect to an ecosystem that embraces all aspects of the life of Chinese people: from moments to chat groups in terms of interpersonal relationships, from WeChat Pay to City services with regard to trade, e-commerce, retail and services to citizens, up to WeChat Work for an efficient management of working environment. Every aspect of the country can be under the control of this app and, not having a WeChat account, often means being cut off from an important part of Chinese urban life.

One wonders, after analyzing the features of WeChat and their impact on Chinese society, why the app has not gained the same success abroad. Such an intrusive app, which has access to so much data and information of many users, could hardly have the same success in Western countries like Italy.

So, why WeChat has not gained the same success abroad? The first reason is the competition from other messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Messenger. These apps have now gained ground in Western countries and the shift to a new app would require both psychological and time-based switching costs. The second reason, which is also the one with the greatest limitations, is related to the socio-political situation in China.

In China, state control and privacy issues are different than in the West, and Tencent, in order to continue to do business, has frequently had to come to terms with the government on the management of app data. In a country where this is the norm, an app like WeChat can work and take root among citizens; in the West, however, it would encounter obstacles before it could be fully operational.

Anyway, WeChat is a revolutionary app that has forever changed the society of China, by bringing it into the future by means of its features. Beyond its being a messaging and social app, WeChat deserves credit for having changed the management of several aspects of the country, such as the provision of services to citizens and the creation of smart cities on a "human scale".

Despite these successes, however, attention should not be diverted from the problems that may arise in using the app. By analyzing WeChat Pay and its impact, we have seen the consequences of a cashless society. In a country like China, where there is still a big gap between the countryside and cities, between urban citizens, migrant workers and rural dwellers, measures must be taken to ensure that disadvantaged areas do not fall behind. A project like WeCountry is certainly one of the solutions to reduce these disparities.

The study of WeChat is therefore important to understand how a mobile app can have such a profound impact on society. Regardless its advantages and disadvantages, WeChat can be taken as an example for the creation of new apps, not only in China but also in Western countries. Moreover, its study should not only be limited to China, but also to the West, as the app market represents the future and WeChat is an essential part of it. Therefore, its study must be taken into consideration for the production of apps that are efficient but do not harm the privacy of their users.

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