

‘I didn’t read many books’: Chinese rural women’s reception of ‘born-digital’ social media and community engagement

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Abstract:

Currently, research on older Chinese rural women’s reading activities through social media is scarce. Many empirical studies centre on the reading behaviours of Chinese young people, especially school and college students (W Li, 2014; Wu Li, Wu, & Wang, 2017; Sun, 2015). This paper, based on a 2015 ethnographic study in the south-central Chinese city of Changsha, responds to this disparity. It highlights some of the reading choices and sources shared by a group of rural women (over 40 years of age) through the most popular Chinese social media platform *WeChat*. The discussion emphasizes that in particular women in this rural community actively sought and circulated articles that *WeChat*’s official accounts generate. Most of the articles the women chose to ‘read’ were articulated using sensational titles and attractive avatars (Harrell & Lim, 2017; Krcadinac, Jovanovic, Devedzic, & Pasquier, 2016), combined informational content with emotional appeals, and/or technically supported commercial enterprise through the advertising revenue mechanisms of *WeChat*’s official account platform. A significant finding is that Changsha’s rural women endorsed articles that appeared to reflect their off-line realities and aligned with their emotional states. Uncertainty about information accuracy was affected by their educational backgrounds, literacy levels, life experiences, and moreover, by underlying Chinese *social* conditions and cultural expectations, which together, meant they sometimes recirculated fake, sexual, misleading and poor-quality information.

Keywords: *WeChat*, reading communities, reading reception, rural Chinese women, ‘born-digital’ content, official accounts

Introduction

As rural China welcomes the penetration of the Internet and mobile phones (CNNCI, 2018), rural Chinese persons' online activities have begun to attract scholarly attention. At this nascent stage however, contemporary research on elder rural Chinese persons' reading through socialising interactions enabled by social media platforms is rare. Most current empirical studies centre on the interactive reading behaviours of Chinese young people, especially urban school and college students, who are more educated than older rural residents (W Li, 2014; Wu Li, Wu, et al., 2017). Wu Li and colleagues conducted a series of quantitative studies to explore relationships between Chinese students' socially networked reading behaviours and their needs, motivations for, and satisfaction with, various Chinese digital contexts. From a survey of Shanghai secondary school students' motivations for reading using the most popular social media platform *WeChat* (CNNCI, 2018), Wu Li, Wu, & Liu (2014) found that the majority (46.2%) of students were more interested in articles about recreation than content about functional information (22.2%) and news (17.8%). These students' *WeChat* reading activities were motivated more so by the need for social interaction with peers, than for sourcing information and expressing emotions (W Li, 2014; Wu Li, et al., 2014). In contrast, Wu Li, Huang, & Yang (2017) study of university students in Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou, found that the need for expression, news, useful information and entertainment was more important to these students than socialising, especially in terms of how frequently, and for what length of time, they read digital news. Meanwhile, research into Shanghai university students' acceptance of Flipboard-like digital reading applications (Wu Li, Wu, et al., 2017) found positive regard for innovative technologies designed specifically for reading, rather than for socialising in the digital space. These prior studies illustrate that even amongst younger Internet users in China, perceptions, practices and choices around how, what and why they read online varies.

While the growth of young Internet users (10-29 years old) has essentially stagnated (CNNIC, 2015a, 2016a, 2017, 2018), the population of elder Internet users, especially elder rural Internet users (those over 40 years old) has kept increasing (CNNIC, 2015b, 2016b). Despite this emerging online population, the reading activities of Chinese Internet users aged over 40 (23.6%) (CNNIC, 2018) have rarely been studied, let alone a cohort of elder rural *women*. Earlier studies of Internet use reveal that the top online activities of *urban* aged people (over 50) in China are reading news and searching information, followed by recreational activities and social networking (Ding & Shen, 2013; Gai, Liu, & Huang, 2017; Gan & Gai, 2013). These priorities demonstrate that online reading constitutes a key pastime for this particular demographic. Also, Zhou's (2018) study of *WeChat* use conducted in the modern metropolis of Shenzhen, discovered that 74% of aged Shenzhen citizens read articles generated by *WeChat's* official accounts quite proficiently. Yet, despite this technological proficiency Zhou also warned that because of a lack of digital thinking, potential risks could emerge for the older demographic to become disseminators and victims of online rumours.

In 2018 the China Academy of Social Sciences and Tencent produced a research report on *The Internet life of middle-aged and elderly people* (CASS & Tencent, 2018) that provided some insight as to older persons' reading interests. These interests included topics such as nourishing of life, life knowledge, news and current affairs, policies, travel, military affairs, inspiring and consoling content, science, humanities, finance and dancing. The scope and diversity of the topics showed that acquiring informational content and reading about positive expressions, were important aspects of the middle-aged and elderly persons' daily lives. Apart from actually reading the different threads of information, senior adults tended to also share them on *WeChat* Moments, targeting their children, friends, classmates or comrades-in-arms, all the while evidencing their needs for digitally enabled social interactions. Overall, existing literature indicates increasing interest in researching elder Chinese people's reading behaviours in the context of their social media use, and unsurprisingly, it also points to significant differences between the younger and older generations. Nonetheless, inquiry tends to concentrate predominantly on urban contexts while disregarding the increasing numbers of rural digital readers.

X. Wang's (2016) and McDonald's (2016) ethnographic studies of rural-to-urban migrants, and rural people who remain in the local countryside respectively, present accounts of how some rural Chinese have connected with and circulated content on popular social media platforms such as *WeChat* and *QQ*. X. Wang (2016) offers a gendered perspective on rural migrant women's social media postings, explaining that female migrants working in an industrial town in Southwest China expressed ideals for equality and femininity to coexist, through shared posts about gendered relationships. McDonald (2016) analysed posts shared on the popular Chinese social media platform *QQ* by residents living in a rural town (Anshan Town) in East China. He identified that young people there (teenagers, unmarried couples and newly married couples) had a propensity to share memes about marriage, love and devotion, while people who were in their thirties showed less interest in them. McDonald explained that the main reason for this difference is that for the younger generation these types of posts represent 'the importance of family-oriented values into moral frameworks' and constitute 'one of the most important places for Anshan Town society to idealise love and life-long devotion' (p. 76). However, members of Anshan Town's older generation were more wary, conforming to embedded monogamous conjugal ties, especially because they viewed social media as a potential way to have affairs with strangers. Although X. Wang's and McDonald's findings reflect more on the younger generation, they do shed light on some of the socio-cultural factors that play out in rural Chinese persons' reading experiences online. Yet, how *older Chinese women* who reside in the countryside make sense of what they read in novel digital contexts, particularly social media, remains unexplored. This paper, based on a 2015 ethnographic study in the inland south-central Chinese city of Changsha, makes an effort to address this gap in the research literature. It explores the reading activities of a group of rural Chinese women (over 40 years of age) through their interactions on the social media platform *WeChat*, demonstrating that this community of older females actively sourced, explored and spread articles generated by

WeChat's official accounts. The discussion closely examines some of the forms, styles and content of certain *WeChat* articles that the women were drawn to and circulated. It subsequently explains that while their reading actions were influenced by the new technology available to them, significantly, their receptions were clearly underpinned by entrenched socio-cultural conditions and concerns.

Methodology

Twenty-five rural women aged from 40 to 52, from Hanpu Town in rural Changsha participated in the research. These participants were chosen based on opportunistic and purposive sampling methods (Rapley, 2014). Between February and July 2015, online participant observation of their *WeChat* interactions and 50 in-depth semi-structured interviews took place. Participant observation focused on the online space that has been considered as a legitimate field site for ethnographic inquiry by various scholars (Boellstorff, 2008; Hine, 2000; Hjorth, Horst, Galloway, & Bell, 2017). In terms of exploring individually filtered *WeChat* use, the platform's *Moments* was revealing. This affordance is the digital space where users have options to communicate aspects of their everyday lives by posting texts, photos, short videos, and links to articles that have been generated by *WeChat*'s official accounts. Reading postings the women made, liking, reposting, and/or commenting on them, and having conversations about the posts (via other social media platforms) allowed the ethnographer to obtain rich first-order constructs¹ (Schutz, 1962), gain more insights about the data, and build and maintain good relationships with the participants (Baker, 2013). Texts, photos, videos, links, conversations and a vast range of threads the women posted were captured using screenshots and NCapture, a feature of the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) (Ezzy, 2013) *NVivo*. Results were categorised, codified and underwent subsequent analysis after follow-up interviews, during which the dominant characteristics of the women's *WeChat* reading behaviours were identified.

Rural Women in Hanpu Town

How Westerners define a woman as rural is very different to the notion of rural women in China. The development of China's rural economy has improved rural women's living standards to a great extent. Many rural Chinese women are freed from heavy agricultural production and are less involved in farming and livestock chores. They have more time for entertainment and social interaction, according to a survey from the All China Women's Federation and China's National Bureau of Statistics (Song et al., 2011). Literally, rural women (*nongcun funü*) are women with agricultural *hukou*² who live in rural areas. Rural women who have migrated to cities for better opportunities for advancement become rural migrant women (Jacka, 2006) and they are very different from rural women who remain in the countryside, given that they spend a long time working and living in cities. The 25 elder rural women in this research were all residents living in the rural region of Changsha City,³

Hanpu Town. They differed from traditional peasants who exclusively work in farmland and manage livestock. Only five of them were still doing farm work at the time the field work occurred. Six were unemployed, but their husbands were working in non-agricultural industries to support the family. Ten women were running small businesses with their husbands in the town, and four were employees working in the public or private sectors. None of the women had attended university, only three had sought continuing education beyond high school (vocational/college), and only three had completed their (three-year) high school education. The majority of the women had a middle-school qualification. Fifteen had gone to middle school but only twelve had finished, and four had gone to primary school, one withdrawing in her fifth year of schooling. The main reason for not completing school was that their families were too poor to fund their educations. Plus, in cases where there was more than one child to support, families usually favoured male children over females when making decisions about their education, as boys were regarded as having more potential to create higher educational benefits.

Becoming Literate in Rural China

'I didn't read many books.'

- Hua Chen, participant

The specific claim by interviewee Hua Chen⁴ that *'I didn't read many books'* was a candid response through which she acknowledged her low level of formal education, and also self-identified as lacking knowledge and literacy skills. Impartially, Hua Chen's answer more broadly reflects a social reality for rural Chinese as their educational level is generally much lower than urban Chinese (NBS, 2011). Rural Chinese have fewer entitlements than urbanites in education (D. Li & Tsang, 2003) due to entrenched rural (and urban) structural inequalities created by the historical household registration classification or the *hukou* system (Wu & Treiman, 2007). Although rural urbanisation and informatisation has highly improved China's rural economy and is gradually remedying some institutional inequalities, many traditional divisions remain concerning literateness. These distinctions are arguably prominent amongst elder rural Chinese women, those born in the 1960s and 1970s when equal rights for Chinese women were neglected and resources limited. As such, the statement that *'I didn't read many books'* mirrors the lived experience of a majority of elder rural Chinese females, traditionally regarded as less valuable than their rural male counterparts in terms of receiving and benefitting from education (D. Li & Tsang, 2003; J. Wang, 2009) due to social and cultural factors (Mu & van de Walle, 2011; Wallis, 2015; N. Zhang, 2014). So, what of the proposition that these poorly educated female late adopters of new media technologies struggle with literacy issues when they engage with 'born-digital' content as social media users?

The Dominant Chinese Social Media Platform: *WeChat*

'Our generation didn't read many books, don't know how to play at all.'

- Bin Dong, participant

Here the specific claim by Bin Dong that she (and others like her) 'didn't read many books' bluntly manifested the disadvantage confronted by many rural Chinese women in beginning to use digital technologies. Bin Dong's causal explanation connected her lack of schooling and lack of reading with her technical skill deficiencies. She did not know how to use, or in her words, 'play' *WeChat* on her smartphone, until her son taught her how. For many rural Chinese women like Bin Dong, using social media was recreational, an amusing pastime in their daily lives apart from their regular 'playing' of mah-jong, singing karaoke and dancing. Yet a deep exploration of the ways the women engaged with *WeChat*, and the perceptions they constructed around their online activities through their interactive communication accounted for much more than simple play.

WeChat's Subscription feature provides an explanation. It allows *WeChat* users to read multifarious content generated by official accounts that are registered by media outlets and corporations, and individuals.⁵ It is a media centre where users can subscribe to a variety of information and share it on their *WeChat Moments*. This function helps information providers to get publicity and provides them with an opportunity to approach and interact with their audiences, for as Harwit (2016) argues it is a 'one to an unlimited number of strangers' (p. 7) form of communication.

For official accounts operators, *WeChat* provides the powerful 'Official Accounts Platform' (*gongzhong pingtai*) to access multifarious affordances (Sundar & Limperos, 2013), to create and edit content, propagate information and manage relationships with audiences.⁶ The platform allows operators to create multimedia formatted and interactive content (Y. Zhang, 2015) embedding graphics, music and videos into the content, making official account articles more attractive. Through the 'push' function, a maximum of eight links to articles can be notified to subscribers as a single message (shown either in the chat box or in *WeChat's Subscription* centre), which can then be shared on *Moments*. **Figure 1** gives an example of official accounts some of the rural women in this study had subscribed to, while **Figure 2** is an example of links to continuous updates/notifications regarding articles distributed through these official accounts.

The Figures below illustrate that at the user (the women's) end, *WeChat's* official accounts and the 'pushed' public articles were characterised with rich visual elements, displayed through simple layouts, aesthetic avatars, thumbnails and cover photos to attract those reading to click through.

Themed Public Articles Favoured by Hanpu Town Women

Reading and circulating content on *WeChat* emerged as one of the most popular online activities amongst Hanpu Town’s rural women. 789 links to articles shared on their *Moments* were recorded, and the reasons as to why the women chose and distributed this information (for others to read) were explained during the in-depth interviews and online conversations. In total twenty themes were identified across the content the women linked, these included: life philosophy; fake information; nourishing of life; women; useful tips;

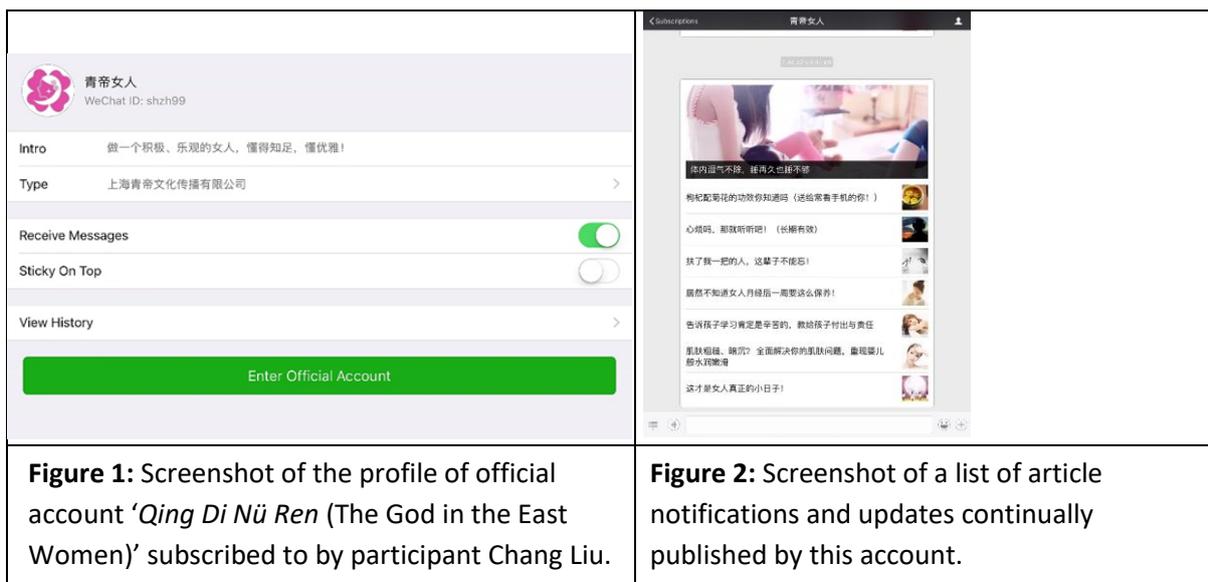


Figure 1: Screenshot of the profile of official account ‘*Qing Di Nu Ren* (The God in the East Women)’ subscribed to by participant Chang Liu.

Figure 2: Screenshot of a list of article notifications and updates continually published by this account.

public affairs; folk culture; gender relations; social relationships; wishes; jokes; anecdotes; security alerts; songs; rural culture; anti-Japanese speech; commercials; business; sexual information; and ‘other’.⁷ **Table 1** provides a condensed overview of the thematically coded categories with which the shared public links aligned.

Table 1: The scope of different categories and the numbers of shared links from official accounts by rural women

THEMES	NUMBER of SHARED LINKS ACCORDING to THEMES	SCOPE of CONTENT
Life philosophy	209	Links that talked about general reflections on life (differentiated from more specific topics about life like women, gender relations and social relationships) such as attitudes like tolerance and contentment, expressions of sentimental feelings, and thoughts of conducting oneself including traditional values like filial piety. E.g., ‘Please remember ten words when conducting yourself’, ‘Eight golden sentences in life’ and ‘Your heart is happy, you are happy.’
Fake information	76	Links that disseminated outdated news, exaggerated facts and fabricated information. E.g. ‘The US officially announces

		genetically modified food is poisonous.'
Women	70	Articles that reflected women's social roles- wife, mother, daughter and housewife, and discussed standards to be a woman or qualities a woman should have such as independence and cultivation. E.g., 'Women's right lifestyle', 'The ridge of family is man, the soul of family is woman.'
Nourishing of life	69	Links that introduced how to maintain good health. E.g., 'Ten healthy foods for women.'
Public affairs	62	Articles concerned about public affairs and social issues in China such as food safety, inequality and corruption. E.g., 'Watermelon injection affair unfolded finally, the truth is...'
Useful tips	58	Links that introduced instructions such as traditional Chinese prescriptions and other useful tips that could be used in daily life. E.g., 'What to do if clothes are not dry on cloudy days?'
Folk culture	51	Links that advocated superstition such as reposting to gain good luck and fortune. E.g. '2015 folk prophecy, accurate to terror!!!'
Gender relationships	47	Articles that talked about the relationship between women and men, and wives and husbands as to love as well as marriage. E.g., 'Love, marriage and happiness.'
Social relationships	45	Articles that talked about the reality of <i>guanxi</i> (social relationships) in Chinese society especially the relationship between friends. E.g., 'What is friend? It writes too well!'
Wishes	41	Links that sent wishes to people. E.g., 'Wish you happy lantern festival.'
Jokes	40	Links about jokes including mockeries. E.g., 'Don't laugh after reading, group posting, let everybody relax.'
Sexual information	30	Articles that contained sexual information such as nude photos, sexual connotations and sex products. E.g., 'Girl fucks with dog every day, got pregnant, bore this...'
Anecdotes	30	Links about unusual stories. E.g., 'He was jailed in 71, had fortune of over one hundred million in 85, too shocking!'
Security alerts	22	Links that sent alert information. E.g., 'New type of drugs! must watch out, must share it when you read it!'
Songs	15	Links of songs shared from third party music applications.
Rural culture	14	Links that talked about rural people and rural life. E.g., 'Rural people satirise urban people, classic!'
Anti-Japanese speech	12	Links that disseminated anti-Japanese speech. E.g., 'Japan is screwed this time. The US is insidious enough, Chinese all share it!'
Commercials	11	Links of promotion of commercial products. E.g., 'Various gift sets for you to pick. No need to worry about sending gifts.'
Business	4	Articles that talked about managing business. E.g., 'Don't wait until market is well-developed, because there will be no opportunity for you!'

It is well beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on each of the thematic categories listed in **Table 1** in more detail. Rather, when combined with the interview data, the Hanpu

Town women's self-reflexive comments about their reading, reception and re-circulations show that these themes overlap, particularly in respect of *WeChat* articles that offered functional or instructional information, were emotionally-charged, and in some cases, sensationalised and commercially motivated.

Self-reflexive 'Readings' of WeChat Article Selections

'I Didn't Read Many Books': Learning of Functional Information on WeChat

52-year-old Hua Chen, a high school graduate, credited 'educational significance to life' to *WeChat's* official accounts. She had subscribed to accounts such as 'Know-how' (*qiaomen*), 'Secrets of Health' (*jiankang miji*), 'Functional Mini Encyclopaedia' (*shiyong xiaobaike*), and 'Happy Life' (*xingfu rensheng*), and explained her reasons for doing so:

I read them every day. No matter what, I read them. Some are quite interesting. Some, (I) have learnt a lot of things. After all, it is beneficial to myself. Once it pushes (a notification), I would have a look. Today here pushes one, there pushes one, sometimes two, sometimes three, I would all have a look. I would read what is useful, in the 'Secrets of Health', like, say, the grapes, how to wash grapes in the right way. There is something like this in it. Sometimes you follow, you follow and learn if you think it useful.

Hua Chen adopted tips such as which food would be good for blood lipid, for losing weight, for the skin, liver or brain, and experimented with them in her actual offline life. In addition, she considered that she also gained advice from articles concerned with marriage and family. She talked about the influence of articles themed around spousal relationships:

Sometimes I learn from it if I think it's right. Or sometimes, as to woman, as to man, be humble. Like my husband who has bad temper, sometimes if you modestly decline (*qian rang*), things will pass. If you argue with him, sometimes you will quarrel and fight. Sometimes (I) can learn a little bit.

Articles telling spouses to be tolerant of each other obviously had a positive effect on Hua Chen, reminding her about how to maintain a good relationship with her husband. Objective information and instructions, as well as articles containing women's subjective reactions to societal principles and values, also gripped other study participants, who re-distributed them as functional, pragmatic advice. Articles regarding nourishing of life provided methods of keeping healthy and improving well-being; useful tips gave details on how to apply practical skills in daily life, such as how to dry clothes faster and how to prepare a traditional Chinese prescription; links discussing public affairs presented 'news' about food safety, inequality and corruption; security alerts reminded people to remain vigilant of diseases,

drugs or frauds. And although some of these messages were inauthentic, through their reactions and responses the rural women considered them as having currency, as valuable resources that could (possibly) make a difference to their lives. The starting position of ‘*I didn’t read many books*’, the *de facto* low educational level of rural Chinese women like Hua Chen and Bin Dong, enabled *WeChat* (as an informational source) to be engaged with as a learning tool, for them to obtain or receive knowledge they were unlikely to ‘receive’ from other channels. Reading articles generated by official accounts was therefore an educational process for these women to supplement their everyday shortage of important knowledge.

‘Feeling Like (it’s) the Same with Me!’: Emotional Reading on WeChat

When asked to speak of her thoughts about her shared articles on *Moments*, Hui Li took out her mobile phone and started searching. She scrolled the screen and presented her favourite article for viewing:

This is the article that I love reading most. (Music started playing featuring the emotional song ‘Red Bean’ by a famous Chinese female singer Faye Wong). With every swipe, it will show a line of words. Sometimes I am really, really, like what’s written inside this! Feeling like (it’s) the same with me!

The content shared by Hui Li was titled ‘Sometimes, I really want’. It was in HTML format and consisted of thirteen pages. Every page was embedded with an artistic background image and the music soundtrack flowed in rhythm with the page view (see **Figures 3 & 4**).



Figures 3 & 4: Screenshot of a page of the article ‘Sometimes, I really want’ shared by Hui Li

Some of the featured lines of text in the original link were:

Sometimes, I really want to get drunk, because of too much helplessness.

Sometimes, just want a good cry, because of inner grievance.

Sometimes, just want to let off, because of unpleasant moods.

Sometimes, just want to be quiet, because (I am) really very tired.

Sometimes, hearing an old song, then suddenly think of, desire for others' solicitude, desire for a simple happiness.

When asked if she felt lonely, bored, tired and upset as depicted in this article's textual content. Hui Li responded:

Yes. People... Maybe not just me, most people would have too much helplessness. Sometimes when tired I want to have some drinks and get drunk. I am thinking like that in my mind, but I won't drink.

Hui Li sighed deeply and tears shimmered in her eyes. For this woman the article seemed to empathise with, and parallel, her fragile affections and real-life situations, expressing her desires (and more generally other women's) for love and care from an intimate partner and family members. Another participant Min Wang responded along similar lines, offering her thoughts on *WeChat's* public articles that appealed to her for similar reasons:

Because many times those articles are written, I think, sometimes suited to my state of mind very much! I really feel that, my thoughts at that moment, what I wanted to say was, 'it quite makes sense. It is indeed like this.' I very much agree with what is said. Sometimes it is indeed like that. When you are upset, it says in a way that can get to the bottom of your heart. It speaks out all that you want to say.

Emotional expressions were prominent in articles that talked about women, gender relations and social relationships. For example, an article called 'Nobody lives very easily' talked through stories about the normality in a marriage and the difficulty for women to maintain good relationships with their husbands because affairs, divorce and disease could all happen to a happy couple. Min Wang commented in one of her posts, 'these are the microcosm of reality, but they reflex much helplessness of life' She also left comments, 'It quite makes sense. I agree very much.' regarding a post describing how sad a woman feels when her husband offers no consolation when she is in need, and how women in similar situations could get strong enough to need no more help from their husbands. These articles often contoured women's real-life situations and roles, in a marriage, in the family, and at work, and used affective images featuring women. They empathised with women's

frustrations towards their roles and associated social responsibilities as a wife, a mother and a daughter. Living in a patriarchal society, Chinese women's roles are always demeaned and constrained by traditional gender norms (Leung, 2003). Their emotions therefore are also devalued. It is also an intangible norm in hierarchical familial relationships that women should keep their negative emotions about marriage and family from the public, as these kinds of emotions are regarded as family secrets (Pik-chu, 2012), which, if disclosed, could damage their face and bring shame to the family (H. Wang, 2011). Importantly, reading and sharing *WeChat* articles opened up a collective channel, an outlet, for implicit feelings towards their own social roles, which rural women routinely suppressed, to be expressed.

'Something Good-looking and Positive Energy': Sharing of Sensational Information on WeChat

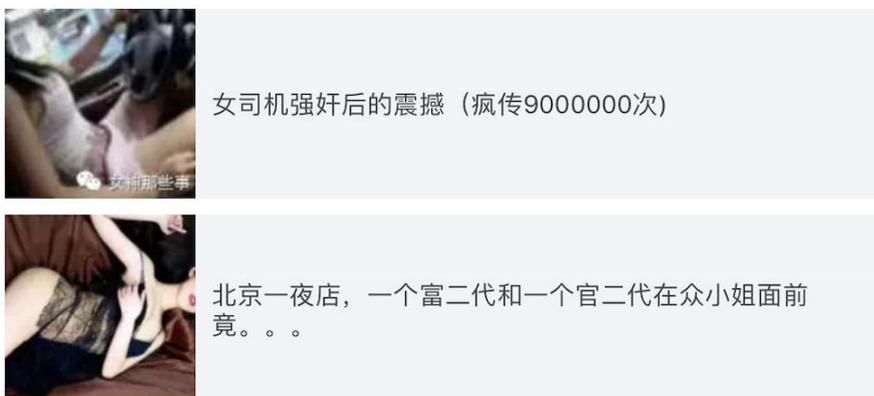
Content in the shared articles also had multi-sensory effects, designed with artistically-styled photographs that were static or dynamic, included background music and videos, and were very easy to navigate. Jianhua Wang shared many of these types of articles on her *WeChat Moments* and confirmed that what she read and passed on was 'good-looking' and promoted 'positive energy' (*zhengnengliang*):

Some are reposted from friends. Sometimes from that 'Happy Life'. Anyhow it's something good-looking, positive energy, having positive energy... Those pornographic, I don't look at it anyway. I won't look at it even if I am asked to click.

Indeed, Jianhua shared some visually appealing articles that broadcasted music, displayed colourful flowers, told funny jokes, offered sincere festival wishes, and provided social life skills, which all communicated a positive sensibility. However, other posts uploaded to her *Moments* were incongruent with her earlier comments because they blatantly re-appropriated negatively charged, sexually motivated information. For example, the thumbnail imagery and specific language featuring sexual content in the two headlines 'Shock from the female driver after being raped (900,000 viral reposts)' and 'In a nightclub in Beijing, a rich second generation and an official second generation in front of many mistresses unexpectedly...' (**Figures 5 & 6**, below) connoted a sex crime and adulterous scandal.

Another link to a video gratuitously titled, 'Girl fucks with her dog every day, got pregnant, bore this...' when combined with a thumbnail image of a woman hugging a dog, created a misleading and vulgar conception that a girl had sexual intercourse with her pet canine. The actual video footage was not of a sexual nature, yet hyperlinks embedded in it were also pornographically named. During a second-round interview Jianhua asserted she had not closely read any of the provocative (potentially) sexually explicit links. Even so, while claiming ignorance about these layered encodings, she had inadvertently or otherwise, recirculated them. Jianhua also acknowledged that she had seen other people

sharing sexual information on *WeChat*, so one point was clear: sensational and scandal-making headlines were trending in the rural women's online reading community.



Figures 5 & 6: Jianhua Wang's shared headlines

Clearly digital affordances facilitate the creation of sensationalism on *WeChat*. For Chen (2016), a reporter from the *Global Times*, tagging sensational headlines is a necessary strategy to attract news audiences in the new media context. In this study tagging was applied widely by official account editors to headlines, and to the main body text of the variously themed articles. Imperatives and exclamation marks were used in the headlines and additional written content, to create a sense of urgency and novelty and to frighten readers with exaggerated or distorted 'facts'. Some of the Hanpu Town women, who lacked digital literacy skills and the critical knowledge to distinguish certain types of information, were unaware that these stylistic tactics perpetuated false rumours, so they 'clicked in' and shared them on *WeChat*. This does not mean the women were ignorant readers with little capacity to evaluate content, for many of them also questioned the authenticity of the information and tried with the limited skillset they had, to verify it. But socio-cultural norms played a more important role in shaping their reception and distribution practices.

Reasons for Sharing What Rural Women Have Read on WeChat

Like Jianhua, Min Wang also considered that what she shared on *WeChat* was mostly 'positive energy' and 'beneficial to others'. Yet, amongst the life philosophy, women, nourishing of life, public affairs, and security alert-themed content she spread, was also misrepresentative or embellished information. For instance, an article intended to advise people to not drive in between two big trucks for safety reasons was given a title 'How many girls are buried alive in a wink, too scary! Brutal, brutal, reading it is saving a life!' Although the actual content the link connected to was not fake, the graphic title used a thumbnail image showing a busy scene and exaggerated the severity of traffic accidents, visually misleading novice *WeChat* readers like Min Wang to click through. When Min Wang read through the safety advice the link navigated to and found it less sensational than the visual imagery suggested, she still continued to share it so that others in her network could

experience this piece of ‘useful’ information. And indeed, another participant who was also one of Min Wang’s contacts noticed it and shared the same link shortly thereafter.

A different article shared by Min Wang, ‘The dirtiest fish in the world! One bite contains 3000 cancer cells!’, functioned as a food safety alert. By relating eating the fish to developing cancer, the title was provocative, demonstrated scare-mongering and generated fear. The written narration was formatted as a news piece and conveyed that the Hainan Fishery Department was investigating the dirty living environments of the catfish in Haikou city. Photos embedded in the article showed the catfish’s filthy habitat and were watermarked with official media logos ‘Xinhua Net’ and ‘Hainan News’. However, this ‘news’ article was proven to be fake by the independent science media Guokr.com.⁸ By using a sensational headline, this public link aroused panic and click-baited (Blom & Hansen, 2015) Min Wang (and others). Directives about food safety and health warnings were topics Min Wang was already apprehensive about in her everyday life:

Food safety, I think no matter who, all pay much attention. Because it concerns us, very close to our lives. (It’s) an issue we have to face every day.

Interestingly, the misappropriation of official materials and unreferenced statistics actually had the effect of enhancing her trust in the veracity of the publicised information when she was in doubt:

Sometimes I have questions in my mind, but, sometimes there are images, which depict it in such detail! I then trust this matter.

In general, if Min Wang had suspicions or doubts about the credibility of information the most she would do would be to try and clarify with the *WeChat* user who had passed it on, illustrating strong critical media literacy. If that person could not verify the quality of the information, Min Wang would make her own decision based on her knowledge and experiences, and of course her values in regard to recirculating on *WeChat*, to spread positive energy, assist others, according to her self-described standards for sharing:

(I share) aspects that are useful, beneficial to friends. I don’t share some contents. It’s up to myself at that moment. If I think it’s helpful to others, or it can... like what I said just now, it is very close to life, very reasonable, I’ll share it like this.

In the case of sharing risks about food issues, Min Wang intended to remind her *WeChat* friends to not eat catfish. Taking a solely transmission view of the original links read and imparted by Jianhua Wang and Min Wang, we can assume that they were typically passive, rural female online readers fooled by sensationalised public articles. But, from getting close to them and understanding their nuanced receptions and perceptions, we see that this

cohort were not at all passive or easily deceived. They had their own judgement principles despite being unscientific due to their limited education and literacies.

Participant Chang Liu's words '*Weixin Weixin weiweixin*' could best epitomise the types of interpretive decodings the women made of particular *WeChat* articles. '*Weixin*' is the Chinese name of *WeChat*, composed by the word '*wei*', meaning 'micro' and the word '*xin*', meaning 'message', which highlights the technological characteristic of *WeChat* as an instant messaging application. However, the Chinese word '*xin*' can also denote 'trust' or 'believe'. Here it was the latter meaning that Chang Liu was indicating, so that in her view '*Weixin Weixin weiweixin*' translated to '*WeChat WeChat micro-trust*' in English. Chang Liu actually insinuated that information circulated on *WeChat* could not be fully relied upon. She explained:

I sense it's not that true, those food. Some posted things like dead chicken and ducks. But I think they are not that much true. If it's indeed like that, the [government] needs to (do something)... They say this, *Weixin Weixin weiweixin*, like half true half fake. It's bored people looking for entertainment.

Consequently, Chang Liu disclosed that she did not fully believe every linked article simply because it came from an official account. In terms of content she suspected, she also sought verification from whoever had shared it with her, but no more follow-up searching would occur beyond that. In the end, she made value judgements based on her own knowledge. For example, although she had doubts about a *WeChat* article that provided tips for relieving peri-arthritis of the shoulder, she chose to experiment with the recommendations. She adopted one tip that instructed her to use a hair dryer to blow the back of her head whenever she felt pain in her shoulder. Chang Liu claimed relief after doing that and formed the opinion that although the remedy was on a micro-trust level, it would not cost anything to share it so others could make their own decisions about its usefulness. More importantly, Chang Liu also considered these specific kinds of uploads were beneficial to her friends:

In this friends circle, people don't know this, so I share it to friends. (We) enjoy together... for example some food is edible, some is not. Some food is good for women. Especially for some of my friends who are fat, I would tell them when I see something about losing weight. But I don't know if they are true or not.

Being asked what expectations she had after sharing these public articles, she explained:

Hoping to see others click 'like' and [for them to] feel well enough.

Chang Liu expected recognition from her networks of the content she redistributed on *WeChat*. Articles about health and keeping fit would be very functional and helpful to her friends (even if the content's accuracy was questionable), and subsequently communicate a good impression of herself for her friends. Significantly, sharing *WeChat* public articles

therefore became a way of positive self-presentation (Papacharissi, 2011) for many of these rural Chinese women.

Bin Dong, Hua Chen, Hui Li, Jianhua Wang, Min Wang and Chang Liu's reading and sharing practices on *WeChat* seemed to support Y. Wang and Balnaves' (2017) viewpoint that positive energy observed in Chinese online communities is a form of self-presentation. It also reflects ingrained Confucian values of culture-benevolence and reciprocity, for these women used the platform regularly for reading currency, and sought to inform family, relatives, friends, neighbours and sometimes even strangers. Digital content incorporating multimedia elements and visually appealing features attracted them by combining multisensory effects with explanatory resources. The articles were 'good-looking', pleasurable, worthwhile, constructive and inviting to read, and sharing them on a daily basis entertained and assisted the women, together with their social contacts. Even when they questioned the accuracy of certain content or public messages, the aim of alerting others by providing their information 'service' through *WeChat* conquered their ambivalence.

'I Share What it Wants You to Share': Circulating Commercialised Content on WeChat

Sensationalist hyperlinks can be sexually imbued by virtue of the visual affordances used and the play of language. Being click-baited by these types of headlines the rural women in Hanpu Town inadvertently participated in the commercialisation of *WeChat's* Official Account Platform. For example, Bin Dong shared a link captioned 'Live shot: Man and beast (exciting)'. The thumbnail image shown in this link displayed a horse and a naked body (see **Figure 7**) so sexual cues were applied.



Figure 7: Screenshot of the headline 'Live shot: Man and beast (exciting)' which Bin Dong circulated using *WeChat's Moments* feature.

Yet the video footage one navigated to showed nothing about nudity or sexual behaviour implied by the thumbnail and headline. Rather, the video broadcasted a bullfight performance (see **Figure 8**).

In the page (below) that hosted the video content, the written text appearing below the title instructed readers to 'click blue fonts, easy subscription' and a decorative red arrow pointed to the author's name - the name of the official account that generated the content. As the author's name was hyperlinked to the account's subscription page, a technical feature of the Official Account Platform, viewers/readers would then reach the subscription stage automatically, simply by accessing the embedded original hyperlink. From the layout, design and construction of this page, and the shocking title developed to entice readers to 'enter', the official account owner's malicious strategies to motivate readers to 'click',

thereby generating subscriptions, were effective. Quantifiably, the screenshot (**Figure 8**) indicates that the number of page views for the link had already reached over 100,000.

实拍：人与兽（刺激）

2015-03-06 符克晨



Figure 8: Screenshot of the video page ‘Live shot: Man and beast (exciting)’.

Xiaoyu Zheng’s experience presented a much darker side of these types of algorithms. On a single day Xiaoyu shared two links, both with shocking titles: one claiming that the ‘real murderer’ responsible for the demise of the Malaysian Airline MH 370 had been uncovered; the other claiming that ‘they’ – the source, had top-secret post-mortem photos of a celebrity that explained her death. However, when the hyperlinked titles were accessed, the content for follow-up reading was not fully displayed. It was covered by a graphic shape (similar to a speech bubble) with highlighted words instructing readers to ‘share to *Moments*’, since ‘the texts [would] pop up automatically after being shared’ and serve a valuable purpose by ‘exposing shady deals’ (see **Figure 9**, below).

Xiaoyu explained her reasons for reading and recirculating these links:

I read it. I shared it because it said what the truth would be like. So I had a look, had a look. It could only be seen after you share it to *Moments*. I wanted to see, see exactly why...

Xiaoyu Zheng got full access to the analysis of the secrets behind the MH370 incident once she’d shared the link and was able to satisfy her curiosity in terms of finding out more, although her understanding of the expanded content was limited:



Figure 9: Screenshot of the page about Malaysian Airline MH370 shared by Xiaoyu Zheng

It analyses the Malaysian Airline such that, that we can't understand. It has this kind of information, that kind of information, this spy, that spy, you can't understand. Normal people can't write this.

Xiaoyu was also unaware of the strategic intent of the account operator who had created the link. She thought the information it offered was of a high standard because in her view, it was impossible that normal people could write in these ways, which somewhat fostered the notion that the content was professional and authentic. After she had added the links to her *WeChat Moments*, technically, they still required further sharing techniques if other readers connected to Xiaoyu wanted full access to the explanatory material. In addition, this navigational infrastructure also embedded hyperlinks of advertisements about sex products, both in the sharing page and the expanded content page. These extra hyperlinks were presented as short sentences to describe and promote the effective functionality of those products. Hence, the real purpose of this official account was to sell sex-health medication by boosting the numbers of online readers and new subscribers. Similar to Jianhua Wang, Xiaoyu Zhang denied seeing sexual information in the links she accessed and passed on. It could be the case that these women really did fail to pay close attention to these strategically positioned encodings, or, alternatively, that they were ashamed to admit their interest, as sex is a very private and sensitive topic in China (S. Li, Zhang, Yang, & Attané, 2010). One thing is clear though, by sharing these types of links rural women like Xiaoyu enabled further exposure of this official account, and by extension, the propagation of information about the sex-health products it was promoting. Their attentions were obviously exploited by official account operators who endeavoured to promote their

businesses using clicks and subscription data to enhance their commercial profiles. For rural women like Xiaoyu Zheng who were less susceptible to identifying strategically-encoded digital messages, malevolent strategies like sensationalism and click-baiting were effective on them, encouraging them on *WeChat*, to 'share what it wants you to share.' While it could be argued that some rural women fell victim to these digital affordances and algorithms, official account owners obviously advanced themselves economically by taking advantage of them.

Conclusion

The discussion presented here sheds new insights as to the online reading activities of a unique sample of late digital readers, providing perspectives on rural women's reading reception (Ott & Mack, 2014) in a distinctly Chinese social media context. A most significant finding is the women's appreciation for reading and sharing *WeChat* articles with a community of *other women* online. For them, *WeChat* provided a distribution network for deep-seated emotional responses about their social and family standing, which rural women constantly stifle, to be communicated. Societal principles and values concerned with marriage, family and friends prompted empathy, and the respectful attitudes underpinning them affected the women's choices about the types of information sources and 'new' knowledge they passed on. This was especially so in terms of relatively objective-type content, for example food safety warnings, and functional instructions for practical application such as diet and health treatment options. Many of the Hanpu Town women adopted these tips and experimented with them also, yet their overwhelming desire to make other readers in their *WeChat* networks aware of any potential benefits or pitfalls, is what motivated their actions. For similar reasons, and, combined with ideas about their own educational backgrounds and digital literacy skills uptake, several of the women were drawn to visually engaging, and/or provocative 'quality' official accounts. Interestingly, their culturally embedded willingness to share information of value, to 'educate' themselves and others, overrode any qualms they may have had about its accuracy. As well, although some of the women were starting to be aware of the commercially systematised technical traps set in their *WeChat* official account reading, on the whole, their naivety as readers of 'born digital' content was revealed.

Biographical Notes:

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Notes:

¹ Social constructionism proposes that we make sense of our world subjectively with a stock of knowledge, patterns and structures of social actions shaped by our social and cultural contexts. Using a social constructionist theoretical framework, the ethnographer interpreted how rural women make sense of their mundane social media practices within their social and cultural contexts. The ethnographer observed the subjective knowledge and experiences of rural women through social media, the first-degree constructs in a Schutzian (1962) sense. Inductive analysis identified the researcher's second-degree constructs, which were crystallised in the forms of memes, patterns and theoretical conceptualisation.

² *Hukou* is a unique system of managing the population in China initiated in 1955 by the Chinese government. *Hu* means door, denoting a household and *kou* means mouth, representing people. In this sense, *hukou* represents an individual's civil identity.

³ Urbanisation in China takes two forms: state-sponsored urbanisation involving people with a *hukou* status who are a non-agricultural population, and spontaneous urbanisation, involving people with a *hukou* status who constitute an agricultural population (Shen, 2006). The latter indicates that urban and industrial development can happen in rural areas. It also explains why a rural region like Hanpu Town is under the administrative jurisdiction of Changsha City.

⁴ Pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity.

⁵ By 2017 over 10 million official accounts had been established on *WeChat* and these remain one of the main sources of information for *WeChat* subscribers (CAICT, 2018). Older Chinese, men and women, urban and rural are also an emerging user group (Tencent, 2017; Tencent & CAICT, 2015).

⁶ See the introduction of *WeChat* Official Accounts Platform from its official website:
https://mp.weixin.qq.com/?lang=en_US.

⁷ The links were coded into twenty thematic categories with some overlap between them. For example, links coded in the category "nourishing of life" could also be coded in the category 'fake information'. The category of 'other' has not been listed in the itemised Tables because the content had little significance to the study.

⁸ The counter-rumour community on Guokr.com clarified in 2017 that the message about 'catfish is the dirtiest fish in the world' was fake. Retrieved from:

<https://www.guokr.com/post/790850/focus/0753198149/>