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# **WECHAT'S IMPACT ON TRANSLOCAL CHINESE FAMILIES' RELATIONSHIPS**

Valentine Milliard



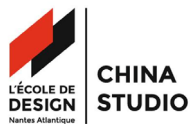
# **WECHAT'S IMPACT ON TRANSLOCAL CHINESE FAMILIES' RELATIONSHIPS**

by

Valentine Milliand

[v.milliandroux@lecolededesign.com](mailto:v.milliandroux@lecolededesign.com)

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## **1. CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW : WECHAT AND CHINESE FAMILIES.....8-25**

### **1.1. The Chinese family : current structure, values and communication patterns**

- Traditional and current structure
- Values and expected communication behaviors

### **1.2. How WeChat became the n°1 communication medium for Chinese families : socio-economical context**

- The rise of the translocal family
- “有空再会” : Until we meet again

### **1.3. Analysis of WeChat's success among families**

- An intergenerational app
- Underlying cultural values in WeChat's design
- Digitalization of real-life family rituals

### **1.4. WeChat's limitations for family communication**

- “Not-so-lucky money”
- WeChat etiquette
- The case for Chinese delocated students

<b>2. METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>26-29</b>
2.1. The participants	
2.2. The process	
2.3. Limitations of the study	
<b>3. FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>30-41</b>
3.1. New family rituals with a precise schedule	
3.2. More communication, few changes in the relationship	
3.3. Difficulties with intergenerational communication and other inequalities among family members	
3.4. One single limiting language	
3.5. Lack of a common context	
<b>4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>42-47</b>
4.1. WeChat as a virtual 家	
4.2. “From each according to his ability, to each according to his language”	
<b>5. CONCLUSION + ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>48-51</b>
<b>6. REFERENCES AND APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>52-64</b>

# INTRO DUCTION

**A**s an interaction designer, I am deeply interested in understanding how the technology we build can affect human relationships. We live in an era where most of our communications rely on social networks owned by a few private companies, therefore I feel like it is our duty to question how much of our interpersonal connections (including family) are used for profit. The current situation of monopoly in the tech industry highlights how important it is to dissect these apps' design to understand why they have become inescapable in our daily lives, how they shape our social interactions, and their impact on the fabric of society.

As Google and Facebook's unregulated expansion in the West is of growing concern on both sides of the political spectrum, sparking ideas of government intervention in the market, China's tech giants enjoy a peaceful situation of quasi-monopoly, subsidized and regulated by the government. One of the telling examples is Tencent's Wechat, an app so entwined in Chinese people's lives it has become increasingly difficult to live without it.

In Chinese 微信 (pinyin : Weixin), WeChat is a multi functional messaging platform created by a small team lead by Zhang Xiaolong and launched in 2011. Conceptualized in the Tencent Guangzhou Research and Project Center in Guangdong province, it gained quick success with innovative functions such as the vocal message, a practical answer to the time-consuming input methods of Mandarin.

Gathering more than 1 billion daily active users as of January 2019 (90% of which are Chinese), it has permeated every aspect of life : payment, news, work, flight tickets, news, shopping, insurance, bills, and most importantly: relationships.

With a 83%<sup>1</sup> penetration rate in China and 93% in tier 1 cities (compared to a 51%<sup>2</sup> rate for Facebook Messenger, the most popular messaging app in USA), WeChat acts as the invisible web linking Chinese people together. Unlike its Western counterparts, the app has successfully reached senior users: over 63 million accounts were registered as 55 years old and above<sup>3</sup>, allowing it to bridge the age gap and become the n°1 communication medium between families. With features such as the Red Packet echoing real-life family rituals, it managed to tap into Chinese culture to encourage the adoption of new services and become more profitable.

Studies have already shown how Chinese values have influenced WeChat's design and interaction mechanisms, but none of them have explored how the app could in return shape the family relationships, especially in the context of translocal families.

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1 Insider, Rayna Hollander, Business. « WeChat has hit 1 billion monthly active users ». Business Insider Deutschland, <https://www.businessinsider.de/wechat-has-hit-1-billion-monthly-active-users-2018-3> Read on the 10th september 2019.

2 We Are Social. Digital in 2018 in the United States. <https://fr.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-the-united-states-86861659>. Read on the 10th september 2019.

3 « 40 WeChat Statistics to Understand the Chinese Threat to Facebook ». 99firms.Com, <https://99firms.com/blog/wechat-statistics/> Read on the 10th september 2019.



What happens when tech giants co-opt cultural rituals to expand their influence : does it create new dynamics or habits ? Bathing in a culture that traditionally places family above all, it is important to ask whether WeChat really is a “neutral” mediator, or an influence on the way Chinese families interact.

To answer these questions, this dissertation will first present the general context : an overview of the Chinese family, its structure and interaction dynamics, as well as the socio-economical context that favored the growth of WeChat as a family mediator. Its success will also be analyzed through the lens of design, with a focus on the app’s limits for intergenerational and translocal communication.

Then, using surveys targeting Chinese users as well as semi-structured interviews with delocated Chinese family members, this study will examine whether or not the use of WeChat can have an impact on translocal family relationships, and what is the nature of this impact.

Finally, I will introduce opportunities for designing alternative communication mediums that acknowledge the complexity of family relationships and are more inclusive.

1

# CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW :

WeChat and Chinese families



## 1.1 The Chinese family : current structure, values and communication patterns

### TRADITIONAL AND CURRENT STRUCTURE

To understand how WeChat has managed to permeate the Chinese family, we must first learn about its roots, structure and values. In Mandarin, 家 (pinyin : jiā) refers to both family and home. The original character depicts a pig inside a home : back in the Shang Dynasty, domesticated pigs were kept indoors, therefore, a house with a pig was a house where people lived, a place for the family.<sup>4</sup>



Source: [theworldofchinese.com](http://theworldofchinese.com)

Like the character 家, the Chinese family structure has undergone a lot of changes over the past centuries. The traditional structure is a patriarchal one, with older men having most power, and women being considered as members of their husband's family. Intergenerational living was the norm, and having four generations living under the same roof was seen as a pride.

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<sup>4</sup> Why the character for « family » has a pig inside a house | Life | chinadaily.com.cn. [https://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2011-10/07/content\\_13843121.htm](https://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/weekly/2011-10/07/content_13843121.htm) . Read on the 13th october 2019.

Nowadays, families are still close-knit units, but their structure has evolved. The one-child policy, enforced from 1980 to 2015, combined with a rapidly growing economy has molded the 4-2-1 family : Four grandparents (maternal and paternal), two parents and their child. Contrary to the traditional structure, it does not require the actual cohabitation of all family members in the same household. (Jiang et al. 2011)<sup>5</sup>

### VALUES AND EXPECTED COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS

Despite the structural changes, the Chinese family values rooted in Confucianism have withstood the test of time. Filial piety (mandarin : 孝, xiào), which demands respect and care for one's parents and grandparents, still has a strong influence on intergenerational communication.

In a study by Zhang et al. (2001)<sup>6</sup>, young and old Chinese explain what they expect from each other in terms of interactions. While older interviewees state that “intergenerational communication is inherently hierarchical, with older people holding a higher status than young people”, the latter seek an equal standing with their seniors and often dislike their intrusiveness.

Nevertheless, they still agree that they should be the ones

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5 Jiang, Quanbao, et Jesús J. Sánchez-Barricarte. « The 4-2-1 Family Structure in China: A Survival Analysis Based on Life Tables ». *European Journal of Ageing*, vol. 8, no 2, june 2011, p. 119-27. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1007/s10433-011-0189-1.

6 Zhang, Yan Bing, et Mary Lee Hummert. « Harmonies and Tensions in Chinese Intergenerational Communication: Younger and Older Adults' Accounts ». *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, vol. 11, no 2, december 2001, p. 203-30. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1075/japc.11.2.06zha.

finding common topics and accommodate them while practicing Ke Qi (客气 : «politeness»). We can wonder if these expectations only apply to real-life communication, or if they change in an online context. Though, the Confucius doctrine is not the only influence on Chinese families' communication patterns. As China has a collectivist culture that emphasizes “group harmony rather than individual gratification or identity” (Xu et al. 2007), family members will tend to 克己复礼 (pinyin : kè jǐ fù lǐ) “subdue the self and follow the rites” in order to avoid conflicts.

However, these expectations are set in a real-life context, where both parts can directly interact with each other in a language they are both familiar with. There is still a lack of research on what happens to these prescribed behaviors when communicating through a third party like WeChat. It would be interesting to see if these roles are fulfilled in the same way, and if so, how.



## 1.2 How WeChat became the n°1 communication medium for Chinese families : socio-economical context

### THE RISE OF THE TRANSLOCAL FAMILY

As stated earlier, Chinese families do not necessarily live under the same roof. Therefore, the concept of 家 no longer relies on the physical space, and exists beyond geographical boundaries. With the modernisation and rapid economic growth of the country, young adults tend to leave rural areas to work or study in bigger cities, leaving behind their aging parents and sometimes children.

Despite the government's efforts to revitalize the countryside, the traditional family bond of Chinese agricultural society is slowly disappearing.

This practice of “split household” (Fan et al. 2011)<sup>7</sup> does not only occur at a national scale: in 2017, nearly 610 000<sup>8</sup> young Chinese left their families and flew overseas to attend schools or universities. As a result of the country's internationalization, Chinese students abroad are now the world's largest floating student population.



The numbers are expected to keep growing thanks to new policies such as Xi Jinping's Belt and Road initiative, which has led to the creation of 45 new educational agreements<sup>9</sup> facilitating the exchange of students between signatory countries. In a society where investing in a child's education has become a social status symbol, parents are more and more eager to send their kids abroad and embrace the

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7 Fan, C. Cindy. “Settlement Intention and Split Households: Findings from a Survey of Migrants in Beijing's Urban Villages.” China Review, vol. 11, no. 2, 2011, pp. 11–41. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23462343](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23462343).

8 郭凯. More Chinese students study abroad - Chinadaily.com.cn. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201803/30/WS5abe02d6a3105c-dcf65156e2.html>. Read on the 13th september 2019.

9 « Is China Both a Source and Hub for International Students? » ChinaPower Project, 26 september 2017, <https://chinapower.csis.org/china-international-students/>. Read on the 15th september 2019.

translocal family lifestyle. For wealthy families, the average age of these students has fallen from 18 to 16 years old<sup>10</sup>, a relatively young age to leave the familial nest and encounter radically different cultures. In these situations, WeChat becomes a crucial element of a family that can no longer rely on face-to-face interaction or subtle encounters : it is the only communication channel between generations.

### **‘有空再会’ : UNTIL WE MEET AGAIN**

In both migration phenomenons : the rural-urban migrants within China, and the young Chinese studying abroad, we can notice a tendency to view this “split household” situation as temporary.

For the workers living in metropolitan areas, studies have shown that they do not intend to settle permanently (Fan et al. 2011). For the students abroad, a large majority of them come back to their home country after graduation, as their experience offer perks and better professional opportunities.

Although their return is encouraged by government programs such as the Thousand Talents Plan (Chinese: 千人计划; pinyin: Qiān rén jìhuà), the main motives are emotional ones : as cited in the CCG’s 2017 report on employment & entrepreneurship of chinese returnees<sup>11</sup>, family reunion and cultural bonds are the two main reasons why young Chinese come home.

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10 « Are Chinese Elites Going Abroad Too Young? » Jing Daily, 18th january 2018, <https://jingdaily.com/are-chinese-elites-going-abroad-too-young/>. Read on the 15th september 2019.

11 CCG (Center for China & Globalization), et Zhaopin.org. Report on Employment & Entrepreneurship of Chinese Returnees. 2017.

As the size of the “floating population” (Chinese : 流动人口; pinyin : Liúdòng rénkǒu) increases both nationally and internationally, it is becoming pressing to address the experiences and needs of these “split households” in terms of communication. Since their relationships are sustained exclusively via WeChat, it is legitimate to ask whether or not the app has an impact on them.



### 1.3 Analysis of WeChat's success among Chinese families

#### AN INTERGENERATIONAL APP

While Western MIM (Mobile Instant Messaging) and social media only reach a certain part of the population, WeChat has been adopted by every generation, including elders. Because of the low mortality combined with the decline of intergenerational co-residence, half of China's 145 million elders live on their own (Yun, 2015)<sup>12</sup>.

With cheap smartphones and fast internet, WeChat has become a way to relieve loneliness. According to Stephen Wang, WeChat user growth and engagement director, “Senior users aged 55 years old or older are the fastest-

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12 Yun Ke « Ageing on WeChat: The Impact of Social Media on Elders in Urban China ». Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology, Vol. 1 No. 1, 2015, pp. 8-21. Published by the Research Area Visual and Media Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin.



growing age group on WeChat”<sup>13</sup> (2017), and most of them learn how to use it through their children.

In other cases, like in Beijing’s Huabeidong Community Service Centre, the local government has launched training classes<sup>14</sup> for elders where students from a nearby university teach them about the app’s functions, from WeChat Wallet to utilities and medical services. Besides reinforcing the seniors’ autonomy, these classes show how technology can shift power dynamics, especially in a society that traditionally considers elders as a source of wisdom whose authority should be followed unquestioningly.

In addition to its elderly users, WeChat has also reached other specific targets within families, such as busy parents and their young kids. Mon-mon (Chinese: 么么)<sup>15</sup> is a good example of WeChat’s versatility. Developed by the Chinese toy company Dan Dan Man, it is a stuffed animal toy designed for parents to communicate with their young children while they are at work.



Source: dandanman.com

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13 Sixth Tone. « Chinese Seniors Slowly Catch Up to WeChat ». Sixth Tone, 22nd september 2017, <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1000889/chinese-seniors-slowly-catch-up-to-wechat>.

14 Fullerton, Jamie. « Smartphone Classes Are Reconnecting Beijing Seniors With Society ». Vice, 23rd june 2016, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/bmv7z5/smartphone-classes-are-reconnecting-beijing-seniors-with-society](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bmv7z5/smartphone-classes-are-reconnecting-beijing-seniors-with-society). Read on the 10th october 2019.

15 “么么” by Dan Dan Man <http://www.dandanman.com/aidm.aspx?id=50>

Parents can record voice messages, send them to the Mon-Mon official account, and the toy will play them back to the child. The child can then answer back and also listen to pre-recorded English courses or bedtime stories. In that case, when the user target is too young to handle a smartphone, the interface between them and their parents can be a tangible one.

This kind of project shows that instances of “WeChat-powered virtual families” already exist in Chinese society. We might then wonder about the characteristics of family bonds when the communication relies on technology at such a young age.

### UNDERLYING CULTURAL VALUES IN WECHAT'S DESIGN

WeChat's success among different family generations is a direct consequence of its design. While we often see the websites or apps we use as neutral, they are actually influenced by cultural values.

On the app, the “Shake” (chatting with random users who shake their phone at the same time), “People Nearby”, and Red Packet features demonstrate the cultural value of Guanxi (Chinese: 关系; pinyin : guānxi) : it allows users to create ties with strangers or strengthen them with acquaintances.



The Red Packet (Chinese : 红包; pinyin : hongbao) is a good example of a “cultural meme” (Chan. 2016)<sup>16</sup> being used to bring more users to sign up for a function of the app : in this case WeChat Wallet. Launched in 2014, it is the virtual version of an ancient tradition that consists in wrapping money in a red paper and gifting it to others during various occasions (family reunions, festivals, marriages, or simply between friends).

Drawn by the gamified interface, users filled in their payment credentials into the app and sent more than 1 billion hongbaos on the Spring Festival Eve only (Liu et al.)<sup>17</sup>. WeChat has managed to modernize a well-known ritual and its successful adoption shows the app’s potential as a “vehicle for reinforcement of traditional Chinese collectivist culture.” (Holmes et al. 2015)<sup>18</sup>. China’s collectivist cultural influence can also be found in the Split Bill or Group Buy functions (Vodanovich et al. 2017)<sup>19</sup>.

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16 Chan, Connie. « Money as Message ». Andreessen Horowitz, 24th July 2016, <https://a16z.com/2016/07/24/money-as-message/>.

17 Liu, Wei, et al. « Application of Red Envelopes –New Weapon of WeChat Payment ». Proceedings of the 2015 International Conference on Education, Management, Information and Medicine, Atlantis Press, 2015. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.2991/emim-15.2015.139.

18 Holmes, Kyle & Balnaves, Mark & Wang, Yini. (2015). Red Bags and WeChat (Wēixin): Online collectivism during massive Chinese cultural events. *Global Media Journal*. 9. 12.

19 Vodanovich, Shahper, et al. « Cultural Values Inherent in the Design of Social Media Platforms: A Case Study of WeChat ». *Digital Transformation – From Connecting Things to Transforming Our Lives*, University of Maribor Press, 2017. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.18690/978-961-286-043-1.43.

## DIGITALIZATION OF REAL-LIFE FAMILY RITUALS

Beyond these specific “original” functions, the wide range of action allowed by WeChat is also used to reinforce each family member’s role and therefore sustain the familial structure. For example, in the context of a translocal family, the daughter would post on WeChat Moments to reassure her parents, while they would later ask in a phone call about the pictures posted, as a way to express the care for their daughter and recreate the parent-child relationship (Wang et al. 2016)<sup>20</sup>.

Meanwhile, a simple “like” or a comment on a post can mean that you acknowledge what the other family member is doing, without having to start a conversation. This interaction pattern is characterized as “connected”, which can be defined as “short and frequent communicative gestures [...] at irregular times”, as opposed to “conversational” interaction, that requires “open and relatively long conversations in which people ask about each other, at a time often set aside for that purpose” (Licoppe, 2004)<sup>21</sup>.

While it has been shown that its functionalities reinforce traditional Chinese culture and support existing practices, there is still a lack of research on new rituals performed

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20 Wang, Yang, Li, Yao, Semaan, Bryan, AND Tang, Jian. «Space Collapse: Reinforcing, Reconfiguring and Enhancing Chinese Social Practices through WeChat» International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media (2016)

21 Licoppe, Christian. « ‘Connected’ Presence: The Emergence of a New Repertoire for Managing Social Relationships in a Changing Communication Technoscape ». *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 22, no 1, february 2004, p. 135-56. DOI.org (Cross-ref), doi:10.1068/d323t.

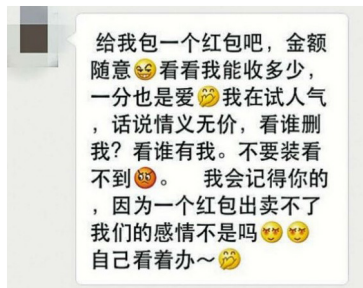
solely on the app. Furthermore, since features like the Red Packet are often cited as a marketing success (viral growth and zero customer acquisition cost), we might ask to what extent can a cultural ritual be used to generate profit, and if it impacts its original meaning, especially when the latter is linked to family values.



## 1.4 WeChat's limitations for family communication

### 'NOT-SO-LUCKY MONEY'

Although the Red Packet feature is a synonym for festivity and luck, it has also developed its own culture and set of practices, with some ending up far away from the original meaning.



Typical message of a «WeChat beggar»  
Source: Taizhou evening news

While some complain about “WeChat beggars” (Chinese : 微信乞丐; pinyin : wēixìn qǐgài) referring to those who ask other people for red packets but never send any<sup>22</sup>, others note that the feature often impacts the normal atmosphere of the conversation (Liu et al. 2015)<sup>23</sup>.

22 微信乞丐 : definition on Baike [baike.baidu.com/item/微信乞丐](http://baike.baidu.com/item/微信乞丐)

23 Liu, Wei, et al. « Application of Red Envelopes –New Weapon of WeChat Payment ». Proceedings of the 2015 International Conference on Education, Management, Information and Medicine, 2015.

Users have also turned the feature into a lucrative business by creating group chats dedicated to red packet gambling<sup>24</sup>, in which you pay everyone a certain sum if you get the red packet with the lowest value.

Despite the fact that these behaviors are less likely to happen among relatives, Chinese families have also encountered serious problems due to a misuse of the functionality. In Guangzhou, a father was ordered by the court to return to his son 3000 RMB he had given in red packets over a year. After arguing that his ex-wife, the mother, was going to use the son's money for herself, the court finally ruled that “hongbao money belongs to the recipient, regardless of his or her age.”<sup>25</sup>

This story shows how WeChat's features, no matter how playful and harmless they might seem, can lead to trouble for family relationships.



24 « WeChat “Red Packet” Gambling Rings Busted by Police in Shenzhen ». That’s Online, <https://www.thatmags.com/china/post/24377/wechat-red-packet-gambling-rings-busted-by-police>. Read on the 12th october 2019.

25 赵思远. Warning: Red packets may not be so lucky - China-daily.com.cn. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201902/19/WS5c-6b4084a3106c65c34e9fc3.html>. Read on the 12th october 2019.

Moreover, red packets imply a range of unspoken expectations that can put less fortunate family members in a delicate situation. Since reciprocation is key in Chinese culture (Holmes et al. 2015)<sup>26</sup>, if you send a hongbao back, it is badly-seen not to match the amount you received in the first place.

### WECHAT ETIQUETTE

Despite WeChat's success among every generation, it can still have limitations for intergenerational communication. In a family group chat, the use of slang and innuendos can exclude older users. As late adopters, they might not be aware of the WeChat etiquette, and their use of the app to interact with their younger relatives can trigger incomprehension or annoyance (Yun. 2015)<sup>27</sup>.

Studies have shown that the “lack of confidence and the fear of embarrass oneself” is a common obstacle for elders who want to use ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) such as WeChat (Antonio et al. 2015)<sup>28</sup>. Since intergenerational solidarity can only be built and maintained

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26 Holmes, Kyle & Balnaves, Mark & Wang, Yini. (2015). Red Bags and WeChat (Wēixin): Online collectivism during massive Chinese cultural events. *Global Media Journal*. 9. 12.

27 Yun Ke « Ageing on WeChat: The Impact of Social Media on Elders in Urban China ». *Journal of Visual and Media Anthropology*, Vol. 1 No. 1, 2015, pp. 8-21. Published by the Research Area Visual and Media Anthropology, Freie Universität Berlin.

28 Antonio, Amy, et David Tuffley. « Bridging the Age-Based Digital Divide »: *International Journal of Digital Literacy and Digital Competence*, vol. 6, no 3, july 2015, p. 1-15. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.4018/IJDLDC.2015070101.

through regular communication (Lam, 2013)<sup>29</sup>, it seems important for each generation to learn the etiquette and use a common language in order to avoid misunderstandings, friction, and avoid feeling excluded.

### THE CASE FOR CHINESE DELOCATED STUDENTS

As mentioned previously, more and more young Chinese go abroad to study, and therefore rely on WeChat to sustain their relationships with family members. The absence of face-to-face interaction and the dependance on one single communication channel can have an impact on the family bonds.

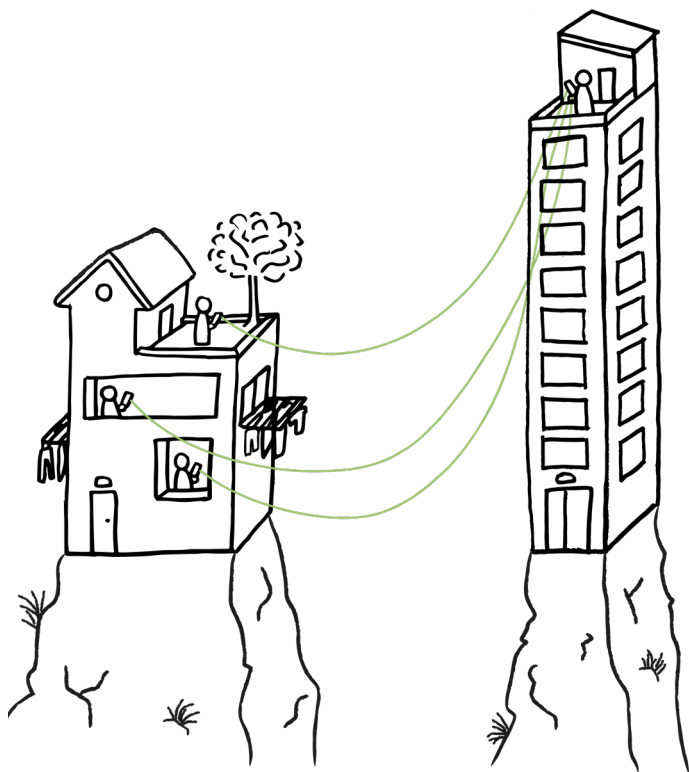
In some cases, the hierarchy imposed by the practice of filial piety is reversed, with the younger one having more decision power. For example, since parents are not familiar about their child's new life and schedule, they are the ones accommodating them by asking about their availability when planning a video call. (Yu et. al 2017)<sup>30</sup>. Though this is a telling example of family dynamics being affected in an online messaging context, it is difficult to assess whether it is a positive or a negative impact.

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29 Lam, Sunny S. K. « ICT's Impact on Family Solidarity and Upward Mobility in Translocal China ». *Asian Journal of Communication*, vol. 23, no 3, june 2013, p. 322-40. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1080/01292986.2012.739186.

30 Yu, Qian, et al. « From "Connected Presence" to "Panoptic Presence": Reframing the Parent-Child Relationship on Mobile Instant Messaging Uses in the Chinese Translocal Context ». *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 5, no 2, may 2017, p. 123-38. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1177/2050157916688348.





As reported earlier, young Chinese seek a more egalitarian structure while older adults are still attached to their higher status (Zhang et al. 2001)<sup>31</sup>, thus it is expected that both generations would have different opinions.

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31 Zhang, Yan Bing, et Mary Lee Hummert. « Harmonies and Tensions in Chinese Intergenerational Communication: Younger and Older Adults' Accounts ». *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, vol. 11, no 2, december 2001, p. 203-30. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1075/japc.11.2.06zha.

Additionally, the WeChat Moments functionality has shown its limits. Since it offers a panoptic view of one's life, Chinese students abroad are using the feature to craft a positive, hard-working and healthy image in order to reassure their distant family members. (Yu et al. 2017)<sup>32</sup>.

Although these performative interactions are meant to preserve the family harmony, they could potentially cause harm since parents or grandparents cannot know or help if their child is facing any trouble.

This could widen the gap between translocal family members and further complicate the student's return to China. Studies have already shown that the nicknamed 海归 (pinyin: hǎiguī; English : sea turtle/returnee) face alienation and difficulties with interpersonal relationships when coming home after having studied abroad (Gill et al. 2010)<sup>33</sup>.

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32 Yu, Qian, et al. « From “Connected Presence” to “Panoptic Presence”: Reframing the Parent–Child Relationship on Mobile Instant Messaging Uses in the Chinese Translocal Context ». *Mobile Media Communication*, vol. 5, no 2, may 2017, p. 123-38. DOI.org (Cross-ref), doi:10.1177/2050157916688348.

33 Gill, Scherto. « The Homecoming: An Investigation into the Effect That Studying Overseas Had on Chinese Postgraduates' Life and Work on Their Return to China ». *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, vol. 40, no 3, may 2010, p. 359-76. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1080/03057920903464555



2

# METHO DOLOGY



## 2.1 The participants

This study focuses on the communication practices of translocal families via WeChat, precisely between Chinese students living abroad and their parents in China.

The goal is to examine their communication habits, the obstacles they encounter when interacting with their relatives, and find out whether or not WeChat impacts their relationship with home. I have recruited Chinese participants who are currently studying or have recently finished their studies in a foreign country, mostly in France.

I have invited participants from my circle of acquaintances, and expanded the sample through referrals. Most of them come from the same private design school where I am studying, and others have followed studies in a public university. The names of the interviewees were changed for privacy reasons.



## 2.2 The process

I started my research by interviewing 4 students via text-messages, with a set of 6 questions. Once I knew more about the topic, I did 2 semi-structured interviews, one over the phone with a visual support shown to the interviewee, and one on WeChat with a set of 10 questions. During the process, I have occasionally asked interviewees to elaborate on some of their answers.

As these interviews also helped me for my end-of-studies project, they include questions that are not directly linked with the topic of this dissertation, with some parts focusing more on the students' feelings surrounding expatriation and their vision of home/family.

After these interviews, I have surveyed another group of 15 Chinese students abroad about their use of WeChat to communicate with their relatives (referred to as Survey A). Finally, I did one last survey answered by 10 participants in order to learn more about the limitations of WeChat for translocal families (referred to as Survey B). Both Survey A and Survey B were anonymous. The interviews were conducted both in French and English, and the surveys were written in English and Chinese.



## 2.3 Limitations of the study

Due to time limits, I have only interviewed a small number of participants, and most of them come from the same background. This study is more of a qualitative one, but it still lacks quantitative research done on a larger sample of people, as it would have helped me get a more objective stance on the topic.

One of the interviews was not recorded, therefore some of the quotes cited in this research are taken from my notes and might not have the exact same structure as when they were spoken by the participant. Other quotes from the surveys have been rewritten for a clearer understanding. Screenshots of the conversations could have helped me get

a better visualization of the students' communication habits. I also acknowledge it can be delicate to talk to a stranger about potential communication issues with family members. After consideration, I should have asked participants to comment on translocal communication via WeChat in general, rather than on their own experience.

Lastly, I chose to focus on the students' perspectives because I found it easier to communicate with them since we both were expatriates and could speak the same language. Since my Chinese skills are limited, I did not interview nor survey their parents and grandparents, which could have provided a more complete answer to my research questions.

3

# FINDINGS





### 3.1 New family rituals with a precise schedule

In the translocal context, the family life relies almost exclusively on WeChat, since it is one of the only common apps available in both countries. Therefore, the family members create new “communication rituals” that follow a rather precise schedule.



Zhang Min, a student who arrived in France in 2013, describes her daily routine :

*“Every morning when I walk to the bus stop I call my mom, it makes me feel like I’m still at home.”*

Due to the different time zones, these interactions do not happen spontaneously but more on a regular basis. Like Li Jie, 25 years old :

*“I will call them [my parents] on video every 2 weeks, if I’m too busy I will send a vocal message on WeChat everyday.”*

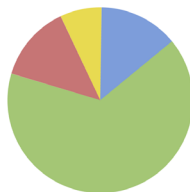
and Wang Jing :

*“Every week I plan a moment to call them on video, to discuss about everything that happened during the week.”*

When families living under the same roof rarely plan a moment in the week to exchange, translocal ones have to rely on a specific time to gather everyone for an oral conversation.

1/ What is your favorite way to stay in touch with your family when you are abroad?

● Send texts on the family group chat	2
● Video call with family	10
● Audio call with the family	2
● Posting on WeChat moments for your family / commenting / liking	0
● Other	1



According to the first question of survey A, this type of interaction (scheduled audio/video call) is by far the most popular among Chinese students, despite the precise planning it requires. Other rituals include sending a picture to the family group chat and waiting for a reaction from the members :

*“My parents will often send me pictures such as food, my dog, and photos at home.”*

- Li Jie, 25

Unlike the calls or the vocal messages, these interactions happen randomly throughout the day and serve as an “awareness system” (Pettigrew 2009)<sup>34</sup>.

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34 Pettigrew, Jonathan. « Text Messaging and Connectedness Within Close Interpersonal Relationships ». *Marriage & Family Review*, vol. 45, no 6-8, august 2009, p. 697-716. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1080/01494920903224269.

The content or the answer to it does not matter, it is the interaction itself that proves that the student is alive and still willing to communicate.

Here, WeChat replaces the visual presence of someone in a household by the act of sending a picture, that will in turn trigger an answer, confirming that everyone is still “there”.



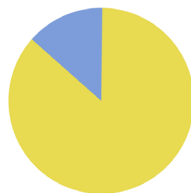
### 3.2 More communication, few changes in the relationship

In survey A, to the 3rd question “Do you communicate more frequently with your family since you left China?”, the large majority of students answered yes. This result can be explained by the need to share their experiences abroad, the obligation to reassure parents, the compensation for homesickness, or a lack of face-to-face interaction.

According to the answers from the second question, most participants interact with their family members around 3 times a week.

3/ Do you communicate more frequently with your family since you left China ?

- Yes, I communicate more frequently 13
- No, I communicate less frequently 2



Although the frequency of the communication has intensified, the relationships between family members have not necessarily changed a lot.

To the question 9 “Since you have gone abroad, do you feel like your relationship with your family has evolved ? (in a good or bad way)” from survey A, 8 participants do not notice any change, while the rest (7), declare an overall positive evolution. When asked about the nature of this progression, Zhang Wei writes :

*“Because I am far away from my family, and we cannot take care of each other in real life, my parents are more concerned about their physical health and daily activities than before. [...]”*

*“When I cannot make a decision, I still seek advice from them. It [the current relationship] is more intimate/close than the previous one.”*

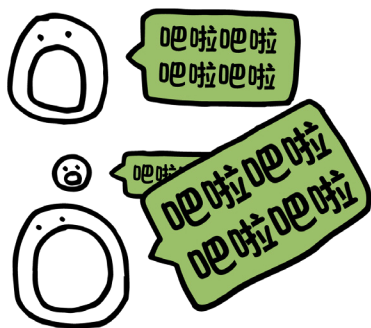
Even with a busy schedule that impacts the frequency of the communication, Liu Yang also thinks the relationship has improved :

*“At first, we contacted more frequently than before, however now when I’m really busy, buried myself in daily work, we contact less. But the relationship is better than before overall.”*

Another participant explains how, regardless of small arguments, the new family bonds have *“made the distance more beautiful”*.



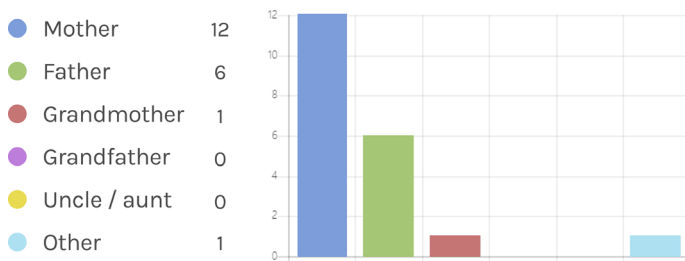
### 3.3 Difficulties with intergenerational communication and other inequalities among family members



While the communication frequency has increased on WeChat since the students' departure, its distribution between family members is uneven.

To the 6th question "With who do you communicate the most frequently?" in survey A, the answer "**with my mother**" is at the top of the rankings.

6/ With who do you communicate more frequently?



Though it would have been interesting to ask the same question to the students before they left their home country, it still shows a notable gap between the family members.

When asked about the reasons for talking to a family member rather than another, some of the answers are as follows :

*“My mom is more easy-going and talkative”*

*“There are more topics of discussion”*

*“My mother talks more”*

*“It’s less burdensome to talk with my parents.  
I talk with my other relatives once or twice a month.”*

Wang Li, another interviewee who talks most often with their father, says it is because he is the only one in the family who uses WeChat.

For older generations, the gap can be even bigger. During the interview, Zhang Min described how she communicates with her grandparents :

*“I think it’s difficult for them because they’re not comfortable with phones. When I first started video calling them, they put their phones to their ear instead of showing their faces. [...]”*

*When I was visiting them in Qinhuangdao, my grandma used to share recipes or cooking tips with me, now she can’t do it anymore since I’m abroad. [...]*

*My grandpa likes to draw, he wants to show me his drawings on camera while we’re calling but it’s difficult, the camera quality is bad, so he ends up not showing them.”*

Despite the popularity of WeChat among Chinese elders, they are not as comfortable with the app as the younger generation is. Nevertheless, students like Liu Yang, a respondent to survey A, are aware of the digital divide and try to accommodate their seniors by adapting their communication habits : texts on WeChat for the parents, phone call for the grandmother.



### 3.4 One single limiting language

Closely linked with the generation gap is the issue of language. It is not about the dialects or the slang used among the family, but rather how the members express their love and affection through WeChat. As said previously, participants stated they connected more with their mother because she was the most talkative.

From this finding, it seems like WeChat prioritizes one specific type of communication : verbal (spoken or written). The “ideal user” is the one who has discussion topics and is comfortable enough with technology to lead expressive discussions via a text or a phone call. Other members, who were used to show their affection in a different way in a real life context (eg: Zhang Min’s grandmother teaching her recipes), can feel restricted by the medium.

For the question n°10 of survey A “Choose the adjectives that describe best the communication you have on WeChat with your family” Wang Li picked the adjectives “**boring**”, “**distant**”, “**artificial**”, “**non-spontaneous**”. She explains it is only regarding her father :

*“The relationship with my father isn’t friendly. To be honest, there’s a lot of distance. It’s because, when I have a problem, I will tell him that he’s too far away, that he has no idea of solving it or comforting me, like expected in a father-daughter relationship. It’s very painful. I know he loves me, but he doesn’t really understand me. However, my grandma was very comprehensive but she got sick, so now I never confide anything in the family.”*

Although other existing problems can complicate a relationship, WeChat’s rather “limiting” interaction mechanisms can further widen the gap between translocal family members. Not everyone is good at using words to express their feelings and translate their affection into a text message. During the interview, Li Jie explains how restricting video calls can be :

*“I can’t communicate well with different members of my family at the same time. For example, my parents will have to take turns to talk to me. Whereas in the real home, we would prepare meals together and chat while doing housework.”*

In this case, WeChat fails to recreate the natural flow of real-life group discussions or activities.



Other interviewees like Li Na and Wang Wei note the “*lack of tactile feeling*” and the “*familiar smell of home*” as something they miss when communicating with their relatives.

This shows how the meaning of 家 for Chinese translocal families encompasses much more than whatever the members have to say in the group chat : it is about their presence and the feeling of togetherness.



### 3.5 Lack of common context

As explained earlier, a lot of the interactions in the family group chat happen after a user sends something that will cause a reaction from the others. The content shared is often linked to either the family or the student’s “context”: news from the hometown, an article about the city where the student is living, a photo of the family’s cat or a local dish.

When taking the situation of an average translocal family in which the child is studying abroad, there are 2 people (or 3/4 if the grandparents are included in the group chat) sharing the same “context” against 1, who is experiencing a radically different environment on its own.

This distance can sometimes trigger a feeling of exclusion, as described by Zhang Min :

*“I like getting pictures from home, but I wish I could catch up with the news in Beijing and know what’s going on. I kind of feel left out when I talk with my family or my friends there.”*

Later in the interview, she explains how this difference of context affects the communication with her grandparents :

*“Both of them kind of don’t understand my life here in France, and it’s too difficult for me to explain how I’m living.”*

A comparable experience is recounted by Li Na :

*“When I talk with my parents, I talk about daily life, rumors, international news. But with my grandparents I don’t have much to share. It’s more about specific moments like Chinese New Year, birthdays, wishes, etc. We don’t have much in common.”*

and Li Jie :

*“If I don’t talk in the group chat in advance, I usually don’t know what to say during the call.”*

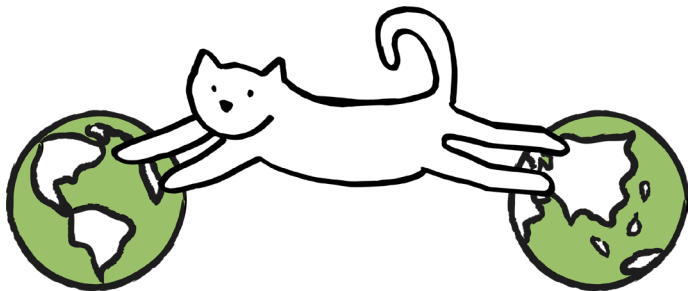
It seems like WeChat can be “too” neutral by not providing a shared context as a base for conversation, leaving the members without conversation topics.

Although there is plenty of things going on in the student’s new life, telling one anecdote requires a lot of background explanation, which can be discouraging if it has to be

repeated to other family members. Zhang Min points out a similar situation :

*“At my grandparents’ house there is a cat, and since I don’t know what to talk about with my grandparents we will always talk about the cat. But the fact that I can’t touch it makes me feel far away from home.”*

Here, the cat acts as a bridge between two different worlds : it elicits small talk and allows family members to experience a moment of togetherness.



This divide between the family and the student could also justify the results of survey B, in which the majority of interviewees ranked **“When I call or text my family, it sometimes makes me feel homesick and makes me want to go home.”** and **“Sometimes I feel that the interactions I have with my family on WeChat are not very meaningful and a bit futile compared to real-life interactions.”** as 2 difficulties they encounter the most when communicating with their family members on WeChat.

4

# DISCUSSION AND RECOM MENDATIONS



#### 4.1 WeChat as a virtual 家 (jiā = home, family)

Even though the app has not had a major impact on the family structure or communication dynamics, it has still created some new practices of family life.

In “Home beyond the house: the meaning of home for people living in Yanxia Village, Zhejiang Province, China” (2015)<sup>35</sup>, the author Wei Zhao confronts different meanings of home, in particular, architect Tomas Wikström’s approach.

Wikström describes home as the result of “continuous human action” within a space : routines, rituals, going and coming back. Although he is referring to the spatial/architectural aspect of it, this logic can be applied to WeChat.

By opening the app everyday, checking the Moments, sending a picture on the family group chat, calling their parents at the scheduled time each week, the students recreate a sense of home. Later, Zhao cites Westman (1995)<sup>36</sup>, who explains how these repetitive actions turn into rituals, that over time, influence the culture. Following this approach, we can expect these new virtual habitus to become part of the Chinese family culture.

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35 Wei, Zhao. Home beyond the house: the meaning of home for people living in Yanxia village, Zhejiang Province, China. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/78753>

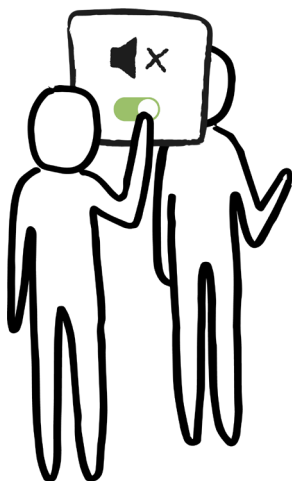
36 Westman, B. (1995). The home and homes. In D. N. Benjamin, D. Stea & E. Arén (Eds.), *The home: Words, interpretations, meanings and environments*. Aldershot; Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury.

While the students cannot physically be in the household with their parents and grandparents, their routines contribute to the construction of a new “virtual 家” that exists beyond geographical boundaries.

Here, we can draw parallels between architecture and interaction design : the ideal family home is warm, inclusive, fosters interaction and reflects our moods or the ideas we respect (De Botton, 2006)<sup>37</sup>, it is only logical that apps that also support family relationships should be built with the same consideration.

An architect would not plaster advertisements in the living room, soundproof every space, or build an office in the house, even for the sake of efficiency.

Though, WeChat allows official accounts to send ads, we can mute a contact if they are bothering us, and we have pinned our company’s group chat right under a conversation with a relative.



Since we live in an increasingly mobile world, families will rely more and more on ICT to exist, therefore, we should treat their designs with care and anticipate how they affect relationships.

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37 De Botton, Alain. The architecture of happiness. 1st American ed, Pantheon Books, 2006.



#### 4.2 “From each according to his ability, to each according his language”

According to the findings, most family members have found new alternatives to fulfill their role and express their affection. Nevertheless, some of them still face difficulties channeling their emotions through text or video calls, which can be problematic when there is no more face-to-face interaction.

There is a risk that the “rigidity” of WeChat (priority for verbal communication, importance of discussion topics) can end up frustrating and driving user bases like seniors off the platform. In the case of translocal families, it is a phenomenon to watch out for, since it can sever ties between the members (eg: Wang Li’s relationship with her father). Although the quotes used to demonstrate these problems cannot be considered as representative of every students’ experience, they can help identify the potential uses and limitations of messaging apps.

In the same way the vocal message feature allows dialect speakers to exchange small talk in a more expressive way (Yu et al. 2017)<sup>38</sup>, WeChat should accommodate the users’ abilities and give them a choice as to how they want to express themselves.

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38 Yu, Qian, et al. « From “Connected Presence” to “Panoptic Presence”: Reframing the Parent–Child Relationship on Mobile Instant Messaging Uses in the Chinese Translocal Context ». *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 5, no 2, may 2017, p. 123-38. DOI.org (Cross-ref), doi:10.1177/2050157916688348.

The use of a visual language like stickers is also a good example, because it is capable of communicating a wide array of thoughts, sometimes more nuanced than a text or a speech. (Chan, 2016)<sup>39</sup>.

Even further, interactions within a game could be a next step in conveying the users' emotions and sustaining translocal families' relationships (Wen et al. 2011)<sup>40</sup>. Given the past success of social games like Happy Farm (Chinese : 开心农场; pinyin : Kāixīn nóngchǎng) among Chinese families, it is an interesting path to explore. Besides, it would solve the issue of the lack of common context by creating a shared experience all members could relate to and comment on.



QQ 农场, a popular game among Chinese translocal families  
Source: Sohu.com

39 Chan, Connie. « The Elements of Stickers ». Andreessen Horowitz, 18 june 2016, <https://a16z.com/2016/06/17/stickers/>.

40 Wen, Jing, et al. « Online Games and Family Ties: Influences of Social Networking Game on Family Relationship ». Human-Computer Interaction – INTERACT 2011, édité par Pedro Campos et al., vol. 6948, Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2011, p. 250-64. DOI.org (Cross-ref), doi:10.1007/978-3-642-23765-2\_18.



The findings highlight that there is not one good way of communicating via ICTs. Quick answers in the group chat, conversation topics, appropriate use of stickers, good knowledge of the etiquette, perfect camera angle, all of these skills enhance the experience, but they are not accessible to all users.

When designing communication tools that support family relationships, it is important not to take the users' "digital fluency" for granted and think about how we can offer a bigger diversity of means of expression.

It may be time to start designing for the shy users, the father who does not have anything to say but would like to show he is there for you, the grandmother who puts her phone to her ear during a video call, or the mother who thought about you but struggled to express it a text message.

5

# CONCLUSION

This study explored the impact of WeChat in the context of Chinese translocal families, from the point of view of students living abroad. It shed light on how the family members recreate a virtual home by adopting new rituals, but struggle to find a common ground as a conversation topic and can be restricted by the rigid interaction mechanisms. Since these findings were based on a small sample of students, future research should be done on a larger scale and include in-depth interviews with parents or grandparents.

As an interaction designer, this process of researching the reasons for WeChat's success among Chinese families allowed me to better understand how culture influences UI and UX design. I no longer see messaging apps or social media as neutral, but rather as a reflection of our values. In an era of monopoly, I am more convinced than ever about the need for alternative, user-centered communication tools. Though, I am aware that WeChat, WhatsApp or Messenger (even if one of them is rightfully regulated by the government) remain profit-driven services and therefore cannot achieve that goal. Despite the founder Allen Zhang's pledge to put the user needs above all<sup>41</sup>, the company still has to deal with stakeholders pushing for the platform's monetization.

Supporting the complexity of human relationships is not compatible with profit because corporate social media prioritizes selling data to advertisers at the expense of user experience. Treating ICT as public utilities and regulating them would be a step in the right direction, and would enable designers to focus on augmenting family bonds rather than restricting them.

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41 Tencent, IBG. « What Is WeChat's Dream? ». [blog.wechat.com/2019/03/18/what-is-wechats-dream-wechat-founder-allen-zhang-explains/](https://blog.wechat.com/2019/03/18/what-is-wechats-dream-wechat-founder-allen-zhang-explains/) Read on the 10th october 2019.



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## CONCLUSION

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## APPENDIX

### Survey A



## 微信和家庭关系 WeChat + family relationships

您好，我叫Valentine Milliard，我是在上海美术学院攻读硕士学位的设计专业学生。本调查问卷适用于目前在国外生活或在国外生活的中国年轻人。我的论文主题是关于他们与中国家庭的关系，以及他们对微信的使用。谢谢你的帮助！（如果有任何翻译错误，我道歉。）😊

Hello, my name is Valentine Milliard, I'm a design student at the Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts. This questionnaire is intended for young Chinese people who live or have lived abroad during their studies. My thesis topic is about the relationship between them and their family in China, as well as their use of Wechat to communicate. Thank you for your time! 😊

1. 您最喜欢与家人保持联系的方式是什么？What is your favorite way to stay in touch with your family when you are abroad? \*

- ☐ 在家庭聊天中发送短信 Send texts on the family group chat
- ☐ 与家人的视频通话 Video call with family
- ☐ 打电话给家人 Audio call with the family
- ☐ 发布微信时刻，让您的家人看到/评论他们的微信时刻 Posting on WeChat moments for your family to see / commenting on their Wechat moments
- ☐

2. 无论是短信，电话还是微信时刻，您多久与家人沟通（在国外时）？Whether it is texting, calling or WeChat moment, how often do you communicate with your family? \*

- ☐ 每周一次 Once a week
- ☐ <每周3次 Less than 3 times a week
- ☐ >每周3次 More than 3 times a week
- ☐ 一天一次 Once a day
- ☐ 一天不止一次 More than once a day
- ☐

3. 自从你离开中国以来，你是否更频繁地与家人沟通？ Do you communicate more frequently with your family since you left China ? \*

- ☐ 不，自从我离开中国以来，我与他们的沟通较少 No
- ☐ 是的，自从我离开中国后，我与他们进行了更多的沟通 Yes

4. 在白天，您何时更愿意与家人沟通？ During the day, when do you prefer communicating with your family ? \*

- ☐ 上学前/上班前 Before school/work
- ☐ 在上下班途中 On the way to work
- ☐ 在休息时间 During break time
- ☐ 在午餐时间 During lunch time
- ☐ 放学后/上班的时候我在家 When I'm home after school/work
- ☐ 在晚餐期间 During dinner
- ☐ 晚饭后，晚上 After dinner, during the evening
- ☐

5. 你喜欢在家庭聊天中进行交流还是分别与每个家庭成员交流？ Do you prefer talking in your family groupchat, or to a family member in an individual conversation ? \*

- ☐ 家群聊 Family groupchat
- ☐ 私聊 Individual discussion

6. 与谁更频繁地沟通？ With who do you communicate more frequently ? \*

- ☐ 妈妈 Mother
- ☐ 爸爸 Father
- ☐ 奶奶 Grandmother
- ☐ 爷爷 Grandfather
- ☐ 叔叔/阿姨 Uncle/aunt
- ☐

7. 关于上一个问题，为什么与他们沟通的次数多于与其他家人的沟通？ Regarding the previous question, why do you communicate more with them than with other family members ?

Entrez votre réponse

8. 你在微信上与家人沟通的主要原因是什么？ (你可以选择多个答案) What are the main reasons you communicate with a family member on WeChat? (you can pick multiple answers) \*

- ☐ 它们是可用的讨论 They are more available to talk / more likely to answer
- ☐ 获得实用信息 To get practical information
- ☐ 你觉得有义务 You feel obligated to
- ☐ 感情 Affection
- ☐ 您通常同意/持相同观点 You usually agree and have the same views
- ☐ Autre

9. 既然你出国了，你觉得你和家人的关系发生了变化吗？（正面或负面的变化） Since you've gone abroad, do you feel like your relationship with your family has evolved ? (in a good or bad way) \*

Entrez votre réponse

10. 挑选最能说明与家人沟通的形容词 Choose the adjectives that describe best the communication you have on WeChat with your family : \*

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 亲热 Warm                   | <input type="checkbox"/> 扑朔迷离 Confusing                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 冷漠 Cold                   | <input type="checkbox"/> 良好的相互理解 Good mutual understanding    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 超脱 Distant                | <input type="checkbox"/> 人为/不自发的 Artificial / not spontaneous |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 宽心 Reassuring, comforting | <input type="checkbox"/> 自发 Spontaneous                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 焦虑 Anxiety-inducing       | <input type="checkbox"/> 有趣 Interesting                       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 轻松/自然 Easy, smooth        | <input type="checkbox"/> 无聊 Boring                            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 扑朔迷离 Confusing            | <input type="checkbox"/> 侵入的 Intrusive                        |

## Survey B



### WeChat's limits for communication within delocated families - 微信在跨地域语境中进行家庭交流的弊端

Hello! This short survey is for Chinese people living or studying abroad. I'm currently working on designing a conceptual medium of communication between Chinese families split in different countries, a sort of "anti-WeChat" that would focus more on sensible interactions.

After conducting some interviews and surveys with Chinese students abroad, I listed some of WeChat's flaws and limits. Since they are problems encountered by individuals, I am trying to know which ones are the most important to focus on for my project. If you know other Chinese friends who are abroad (or have studied abroad before), please share this survey with them, it would help me a lot! Thank you in advance for your help !

你好，这个简短的调查是针对在国外生活或学习的中国人。我正在为在不同国家分裂的中国家庭建立另一种沟通媒介。我想在微信的反面建立一些东西，更专注于明智的互动。在与中国学生进行了一些访谈和调查后，我列出了不同的微信漏洞。虽然它们是个人的问题，但我正在努力查看哪些是最重要的，并且应该为我的项目修复。如果你认识其他在国外的中国朋友（或以前曾在国外留学），请与他们分享这个调查，这对我有很大帮助！预先感谢你的帮助！

#### 1. 请排名你最常遇到的困难（哪一个对你来说最麻烦） - Please rank the difficulties you encounter most often (which one is the most troublesome for you)

当我打电话或发短信给我的家人时，它有时让我感到想家，让我希望自己回家 - When I call or text my family, it sometimes makes me feel homesick and makes me want to go home.

有时我觉得我与家人在微信上的互动毫无意义，与现实生活互动相比有点徒劳 - Sometimes I feel that the interactions I have with my family on WeChat are not very meaningful and a bit futile compared to real-life interactions.

我与一些家庭成员失去联系，因为我不再在现实生活中看到它们了。我希望我能与他们进行更多沟通。 - I lost contact with some family members because I no longer see them in real life. I wish I could communicate more with them.

我很难通过短信或视频聊天来表达自己的情感。例如，我希望我可以告诉我的家人，我想念他们 - I sometimes have trouble expressing my emotions via text message or video chat. For example I wish I could tell them I miss them.

有时我觉得我的家人对我在国外的生活过于好奇。分享一切我感到有点不舒服。我认为这是侵入性的。 - Sometimes I feel like my family is too curious about my life abroad. I feel a little uncomfortable sharing everything. I think this is intrusive.



有时候，我总是不断收到家人的通知，这让我感到很恼火，这对我来说太侵入了。 - Sometimes it annoys me to receive constant notifications from my family on Wechat. It's a bit intrusive.

有时我觉得自己被排除在家庭集体聊天之外了 - Sometimes I feel a bit left out of the family groupchat

有时我不知道与家人谈什么，因为我们没有太多共同之处。 - Sometimes I don't know what to talk about with my family because we don't have much in common.

## Visual support for the in-depth interviews

**1/ Where is your 老家 ?**

**2/ Is it important for you to keep a link with your home / hometown / family ?**

**3/ What is your relationship with your 老家 ?**

What do you like about your 老家 ?



What do you dislike about your 老家 ?



#### 4/ Picture yourself in your 老家, with your family



What do you see ?



What do you taste ?



What do you hear ?



What do you touch ?



What do you smell ?

#### 5/ When you leave 老家 do you bring something with you (food, object, anything) ?

#### 6/ When you miss 老家 what do you do ?



REMEMBERING



COMMUNICATING

BOTH



## **Abstract**

This study examines the impact of WeChat on translocal families' relationships, from the point of view of Chinese students living abroad.

It first analyzes the socio-economical context that favored the growth of WeChat as a family mediator. Then, it dissects the app's underlying cultural values as well as its limitations.

Finally, it explores how its use has created new rituals among translocal families while also restricting the communication with rigid interaction mechanisms.