

Zeitschrift:	Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie
Herausgeber:	Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft
Band:	76 (2022)
Heft:	1
Artikel:	Contemporary Chinese art on WeChat and its utilisation to promote artists and their artworks
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DOI:	https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1035017

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Contemporary Chinese art on WeChat and its utilisation to promote artists and their artworks

<https://doi.org/10.1515/asia-2021-0018>

Received June 28, 2021; accepted March 8, 2022; published online April 27, 2022

Abstract: Social media are becoming increasingly popular in China. This trend is also observable in the art world. Besides specialised websites promoting art and artists, there are also many new ways of sharing information about artists, exhibitions, publications and the art world. Almost all Chinese artists use the WeChat application as a means of communication. There are also other social media outlets, such as Weibo and TikTok. This paper focuses on the use of WeChat by Chinese artists. Apart from its primary functionality, WeChat has become a vital medium for sharing information about recent exhibitions, articles or just to share artwork. WeChat allows artists to distribute and provide a space for new creative content. Artists and galleries can post photographs, links to articles, interviews and video promotions of exhibitions. The 798 Art Zone is an example of quite advanced promotion ranging from information about artists and exhibitions to even the sale of artworks. To illustrate the wide range of content on WeChat, this paper will look at visual artists such as Gu Wenda, Zhang Yu and the art critic Xia Kejun, and compare them with the public accounts of galleries and 798 Art zone (Beijing), the most famous art district in China.

Keywords: art promotion; Chinese art; social media; WeChat

1 Introduction

In the last few years, social media have become extremely popular in China. Along with websites promoting artists and their work there are other ways of spreading information about artists, exhibitions, publications and the art world as a whole. As Facebook is blocked in China, though some artists do have their profiles there, including the well-known Central Academy of Fine Arts, it is far less

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commonly used than other social media. Instead, Chinese artists can choose from a selection of Chinese alternatives such as Weibo, TikTok, QQ or WeChat. Since almost all Chinese artists are using WeChat as a major means of communication, this paper will focus on this form of social media. According to Liu, compared to Weibo, WeChat has a larger user base and better social media characteristics. Information tends to spread more easily amongst users of on a particular platform.¹

WeChat has been described by an online commentator as a “better WhatsApp crossed with the social features of Facebook, and Instagram, mixed with Skype and a walkie-talkie”.² This application, launched by Tencent in 21 January 2011;³ is well-known to Chinese-speaking users around the world and has become a vital channel for spreading a wide range of content.⁴ The number of users is growing. In 2021, there were 360 million WeChat official account network users,⁵ and about 1.09 billion users open WeChat every day.⁶ Apart from the common functions for everyday communication, such as instant messages in written form, voice messages, pictures, direct voice calls and video calls, WeChat offers options which make it more similar to social media like Instagram or Facebook. There are public broadcast channels, or Moments,⁷ that allow users to share photo albums, or view the profiles of users nearby.⁸ In 2021, the number of Moments users reached 780 million.

This paper focuses on the activities of artists, private galleries and the 798 Art Zone, a large hub of galleries, as well as the ways in which artists and galleries use the various channels of promotion available in WeChat. There are many strategies for attracting attention in virtual space. Galleries often participate in or create online promotions, join groups and share information about art exhibitions and interviews with the artists. During my research on abstract ink art in the period 2017–2019 inclusive, I have been studying WeChat as one of the main communication channels between artists, art critics and galleries. In that period of time, I have discovered several different modes of communication. Whereas about a half of the artists were using WeChat primarily for direct communication,

1 Liu 2015.

2 Swensson 2013.

3 The name Weixin 微信 (WeChat in English) comes from Wang Xing, CEO of Tencent group. See When WeChat is in progress 2012.

4 It has been invented in 2010 by Zhang Xiaolong (Allen Zhang). See Su 2021.

5 Team, CIW 2021.

6 See Su 2021.

7 Moments are called in Chinese 朋友圈, which means “circle of friends”, which is closer in meaning to its function.

8 See Chao 2012.

preferably text or voice messages, others were exploiting the functionality of WeChat as a social medium in order to promote their artworks. All the chosen respondents are distinguished visual artists, most having been involved in contemporary abstract or semi-abstract ink art for many years, that is to say mostly paintings but also installations and happenings involving ink. Regarding their achievements they are all significant in the field of abstract ink art in mainland China. In WeChat, unlike Western social media, it is impossible to see the number of followers and so other factors became relevant, such as the quality of their artworks or their influence on Chinese non-representational ink art. The number of artists in the list is approximately thirty. In addition, there are four art galleries, several art critics and the 798 Art Zone, the official WeChat account of a famous art zone in Beijing. As the aim of this article is to detect the most common means of communication used, the variety and creativity of the creators of content and the ways in which artists, galleries and an art zone communicate with their audience, quantitative methods are not therefore essential. My study is based on daily communication over three years. The number of respondents is considered sufficient in order to be able to draw conclusions.

2 Characteristics of WeChat, previous findings and the research process

WeChat was developed in 2011, and the popularity of the app is still rising. As a result, very soon after its inception it started to attract the attention of researchers, not only on account of its large number of users but also because of its functionality and remarkable potential. WeChat became a strategic product of Tencent.⁹ WeChat was originally invented as an instant messenger app for mobile phones. The original purpose was to stay connected with friends and family. However, more elaborate functionality, similar to that offered by other social media such as WeChat Moments (*pengyou quan*), was added subsequently. Typical to WeChat is mutual following, requiring the approval of a friend request, similar to other instant messengers, such as WhatsApp and Line, but offering more privacy.¹⁰ Also, WeChat Moments for individual accounts are only visible after the approval of a friend request. On the other hand, it is impossible to detect the impact of a user by the number of their followers on WeChat. This differs from Instagram, Facebook or Chinese Weibo, another

⁹ Zhou 2012.

¹⁰ Zhang 2018: 146.

popular Chinese social media. Wang Xinyuan claims that WeChat in comparison with Weibo is more smartphone-based and more visually oriented. Its low degree of anonymity and high degree of privacy makes it more suitable to communicate within closed communities, such as friends or family members.¹¹ Due to its privacy policy, it is possible to communicate only with people from the user's friend list. For communication with unknown people, it is possible to use group accounts, which post the content in a closed or open group. In addition, there are also public accounts allowing people to discuss or like content.

A considerable amount of the investigation of Chinese social media takes place for other subjects or topics, for example *Social Media in Industrial China*, in which the authors describe WeChat as an important means for migrant workers living apart from their families and who use WeChat to remain in touch with their families. These authors compare its features with other messaging social networks (MSN), widely used in China, such as Weibo.¹² Most of the research centres on the development of the application, its functionality, communication patterns,¹³ building civil communities and creating social interactions; including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) strengthened by daily communication,¹⁴ the psychological characteristics of people preferring WeChat to Weibo and vice versa.¹⁵ Or even as a protocol for a study using WeChat as a support for breastfeeding in remote rural areas of China.¹⁶ In terms of the arts, a thorough analysis of Internet-based literature by Hockx examines literature before the era of WeChat.¹⁷ Nguyen et al. present an extensive analysis of social media and society as a whole, covering various aspects of society, including politics, as well as medical and social issues, e.g. cyber-bullying.¹⁸ Gonçalves developed the idea of a huge data collection and the creation of a digital archive consisting not only of literature, but also images as part of the collective memory.¹⁹ During the Covid epidemic, WeChat became an important tool for staying connected and in the US there was a project called the "Museum in the Cloud", in which WeChat, in cooperation with eleven museums, including

¹¹ Wang 2016: 38.

¹² Wang 2016.

¹³ Harwit 2017: 316–317.

¹⁴ Tu 2016.

¹⁵ Hou 2018.

¹⁶ Wu 2019.

¹⁷ Hockx 2015.

¹⁸ Nguyen et al. 2020.

¹⁹ Gonçalves 2020.

MoMa, offered visitors a virtual experience of visiting their museums at home.²⁰ However, the above-mentioned books and studies did not cover the impact of the social media on the artists and their presence in virtual space in order to promote their art.

According to Regina Chen, WeChat is a vital channel in marketing strategies, allowing brands to increase interaction with their business consumers that can positively affect business consumers' purchase intention.²¹ Tan Min analyses WeChat as an important means in marketing strategies, from searching for customers to building up trust in and loyalty to brands and enterprises.²² Apart from promoting big brands WeChat provides a platform for online businesses of every size, enabling people to work from home.²³ The promotion of artists up to a certain point is similar to marketing, although there is a distinction to be drawn between profit-focused business strategies and art promotion; which allows artists to build up their communities online, have mutually inspiring interactions and share information about exhibitions.

Visual art and its promotion via social media is a new topic that has not been sufficiently explored. Instead of talking about marketing in MSN, there are theories with respect to marketing related not only to science, but also to art. Baumgarth et al. highlight the experiences not only of artists like Beuys, Warhol but also of others, and uses ideas of artists in business branding.²⁴ The impact of social media and their importance for self-branding²⁵ make it possible to apply them not only to top managers but also to visual artists.

Regarding the above-mentioned studies there is currently insufficient research on visual artists' activities on social media, including their communication, self-promotion and other aspects of their online activities. Budge in her study describes a virtual studio on Twitter and Instagram for six years, in which she shared her experiences as a printmaker. In her opinion, social media can offer an interaction hardly possible offline, but the feedback from other artists increases her, and their creativity, although WeChat could never replace face-to-face interactions.²⁶ Previous analysis on artists' self-promotion concentrated on websites and was examined in a paper discussing the presentation and self-promotion of Chinese visual artists using various Internet portals and blogs.²⁷ Despite artists'

²⁰ WeChat (2020).

²¹ Chen 2017: 945–954.

²² Tang 2014.

²³ Ling 2019: 2.

²⁴ Baumgarth et al. 2014.

²⁵ Karaduman 2013.

²⁶ Budge 2013: 19.

²⁷ Zhang 2013.

presentation of their art and use of social media, WeChat in particular has not been sufficiently explored as a means for such self-promotion. Very Private Gallery introduced WeChat to Western artists on You Tube as a powerful medium and means for communicating directly with their audience, for sharing projects, promoting artworks and events, and even for selling books or tickets to exhibitions or artworks themselves.²⁸ WeChat was used by artists during the pandemic in 2020. Several exhibitions in different formats were published on public accounts, mostly concerned with the pandemic.²⁹ Nevertheless, the pandemic of 2020 will not be discussed here.

This paper is partially based on my personal experiences of virtual communication with Chinese friends and colleagues for a period approaching ten years, and frequent communication with Chinese artists over the last three of those. After using WeChat to keep in touch with visual artists, usually on a daily basis, sometimes less often but at least several times per month, I had an opportunity to observe their activities on WeChat.³⁰ The artists sent me their artworks and articles about them via direct messages, but more recently I have noticed they also published their work, articles, information about upcoming exhibitions, videos from opening ceremonies from exhibitions and other materials along with some personal content in their diaries.

In order to show the whole range of interventions on WeChat, and all the methods of communication and art promotion, I have focused on the individual accounts of more than thirty artists, such as the famous avant-garde artist, currently residing in New York, Gu Wenda 谷文達 (1955);³¹ the distinguished artist and art critic and a founder of the movement of Experimental Ink and Wash in the late 1980s Zhang Yu 張羽 (1959),³² the art critic Xia Kejun 夏可君 (1969) and others; the public accounts of four small galleries and the official WeChat account of the most famous art zone in China, the 798 Art Zone. The aim was to evaluate the artists' practice on WeChat, the frequency accessing the app, the main purpose in using it, plus any additional objectives. After several months of communication using WeChat with over thirty artists on my friend list, I sent a questionnaire to

²⁸ Very Private Gallery 2019.

²⁹ Feng 2020: 2.

³⁰ An access to artist's private accounts allowed me to see their content, otherwise unavailable.

³¹ Gu Wenda attracted attention during the '85 New Wave. He participated in the exhibition China Avant-garde in 1989 in National Gallery, Beijing. In his works, he plays with the Chinese language and the art of calligraphy, often using intentionally wrong Chinese characters. His achievements include a fifteen-year ongoing global art project for the United Nations using human hair, which started in 1993, as well as many other international art exhibitions and installations.

³² Zhang Yu is well-known for his ink paintings, sculptures, installations and performance art. He has exhibited many times in China and abroad.

thirty-three of them, including the art critics,³³ and to the four small galleries. The questions covered the activities of artists on WeChat and how they used social media, their preferred method of communication, how much time they usually spent on WeChat and whether they found WeChat useful to promote their art. For some, the dialogue continued with detailed explanations and additional conversations specific to my research, sometimes in writing, sometimes via voice messages and in a few cases with direct calls. As to the 798 Art Zone, I only had access to their public account, for the purposes of comparison.

In this study, beside of qualitative methods quantitative were used as well. The aim was not to obtain statistically relevant data particularly, but rather to focus on a detailed observation of their profiles, including reading and analysing the content of their Moments, and also, we maintained almost daily communication with respect to their art, which would have been impossible with a larger number of artists. In Figure 1, I use data obtained from the observation of artists' accounts (34 artists' private accounts and 4 galleries). I received messages from more respondents, but not all of them answered my specific queries. Twenty-three artists and two galleries answered the questionnaire. Some answers were very detailed and extensive, some were short, some of them did not answer all the questions. After collating the data, I proceeded to the next phase, namely the analysis of the data obtained. Only five women artists were included, the result of previous contact with their art. The ages of the artists questioned ranged from 34 to 78, but the majority of them were aged between 50 and 60 inclusive. It should be noted that they may use WeChat differently from the younger generation. Given the mechanics of WeChat, it is impossible to

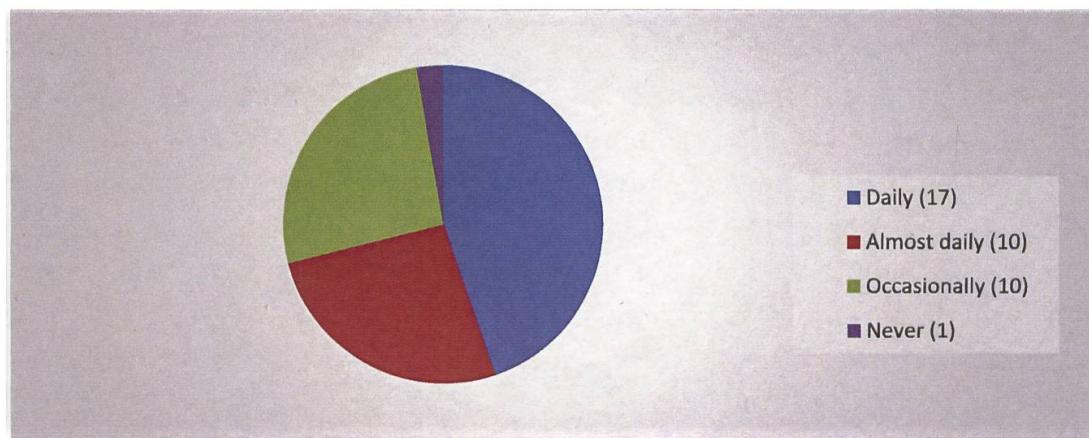


Figure 1: Periodicity of posting on WeChat diaries.

³³ One of the artists I was in contact with, Sun Baijun (1961–2020), has sadly passed away, one of them was introduced later by Liu Xuguang (born 1962) as his graduate student who is actively involved in art-related interventions on WeChat. He is the youngest of all of them.

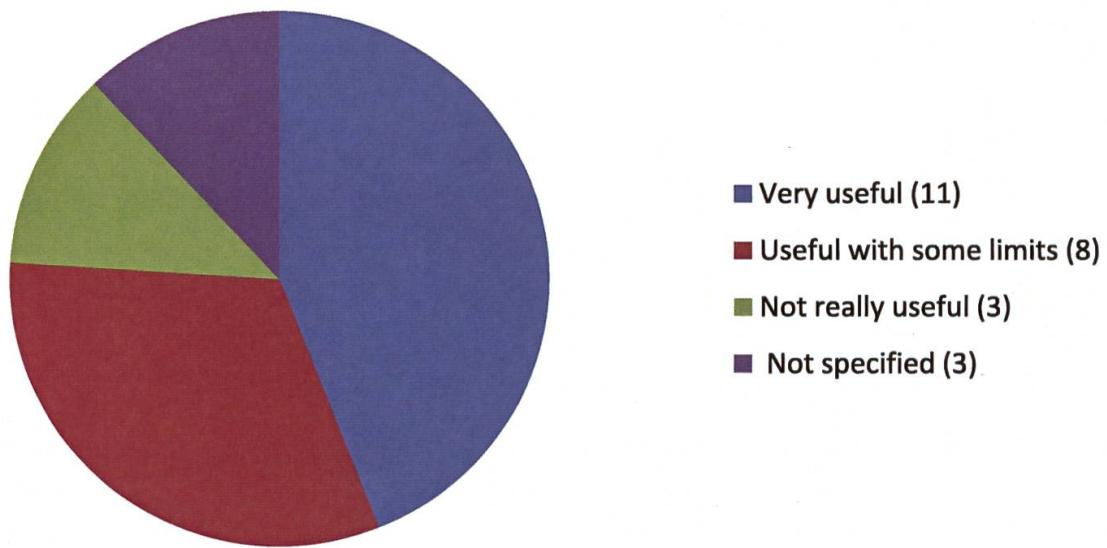


Figure 2: WeChat as a mean of art promotion or communication between artists (data from the artists via WeChat – slices correspond to the proportion of the respondents; one artist chose only one option, or did not answer).

deliver questionnaires anonymously. Therefore, some sensitive questions, such as privacy and surveillance of the platform by the authorities, could not be asked. I have shown the data in pie charts. This was not possible in the case of Figure 3, as some respondents replied with more than one option, and therefore a different format was needed. In addition, I am using photographic material from the art performance made by Liu Xuguang 劉旭光 (1962), a prominent contemporary artist and art performer involved in digital media and teaching at CAFA,³⁴ and Diane Willow (Weissman Art Museum, Minneapolis) (Figures 4 and 5).

In WeChat, there are two types of communication. The basic functionality being called direct messages, which may consist of text or voice messages, and there is also an option to make an audio or video call. Direct messages allow users to send stickers, virtual greetings and wish cards between friends. The difference between other messengers and WeChat is in the discover tab, which includes the functionality of Moments. In Moments, users see the content shared by friends and channels they have followed in their diaries. WeChat diaries were created to show the private memories of people's lives. Individuals, galleries or hubs of galleries, such as the art zones, constantly share the contents of their diaries, which are then displayed in the Moments of their friends. This is the most frequently used method of self-promotion employed by individual artists. Apart from communication and spreading content, it is possible to search for articles or media on public accounts, and subscribe to them.

³⁴ Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, one of most influential art universities in China.

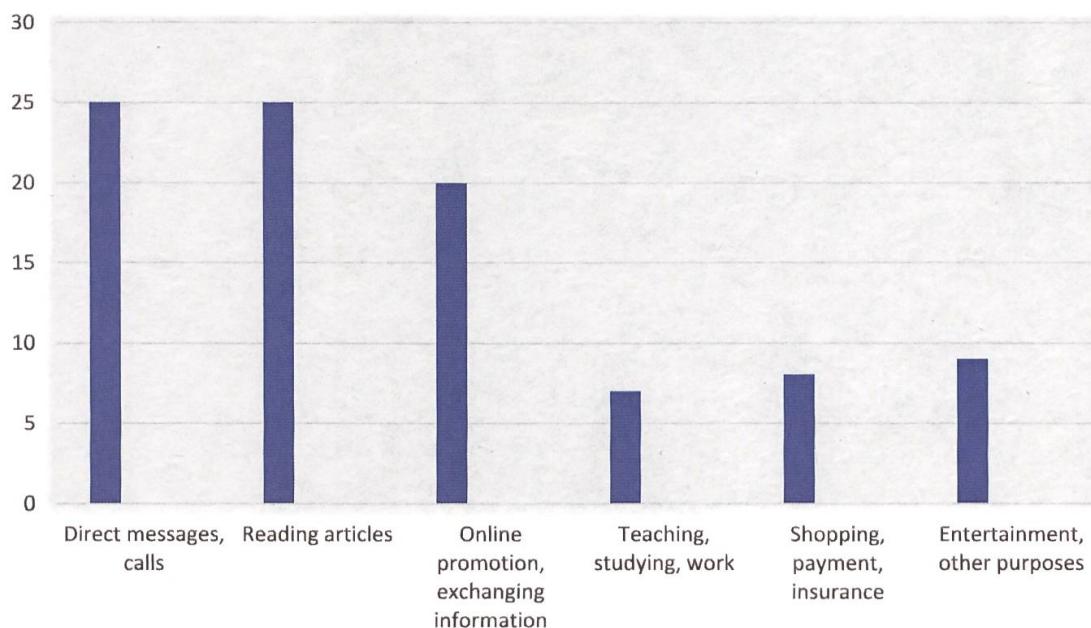


Figure 3: Activities of artists and small galleries on WeChat (the vertical axis shows the numbers of the artists who prefer a certain feature. Some of them made more than one choice). Online promotion and exchanging of information mean disseminating their artwork and obtaining feedback from other artists, as well as exchanging news concerning the activities of other artists from the friend list, such as private invitations to openings of exhibitions, calls for participation in exhibitions or workshops etc.

The content in Moments can be visible to all friends in the friend list (basic setting), or it is possible to create smaller groups and share within circles determined in the preferences. There is also an option to exclude someone from seeing specific content, and according to Chen-Cheung, some users actively apply such functions.³⁵ WeChat offers an option to limit the time of visibility of the posts, this being a minimum of three days. A higher degree of privacy is an advertised function of the app. Even the likes (hearts) are visible only if a person who liked someone's content are common friends. This means only the publisher of the content in such diaries knows the exact number of likes.

During the ten years of its existence, the ways in which WeChat may be used have expanded. From 2013, some companies began to offer payment options, which gradually expanded and in 2015 it became more common place.³⁶ Despite Very Private Gallery introducing WeChat to Western artists as a powerful means to

³⁵ Chen-Cheung 2018: 283.

³⁶ In 2013, the possibility of paying via WeChat appeared in a travel centre. Since the Chinese New Year in 2015, many companies have started to offer WePay services. See cardcn.com. 2018. In 2016, the number of users was 300 million (Sun 2016) and up to 600 million in 2019 (Cimple marketing 2019).

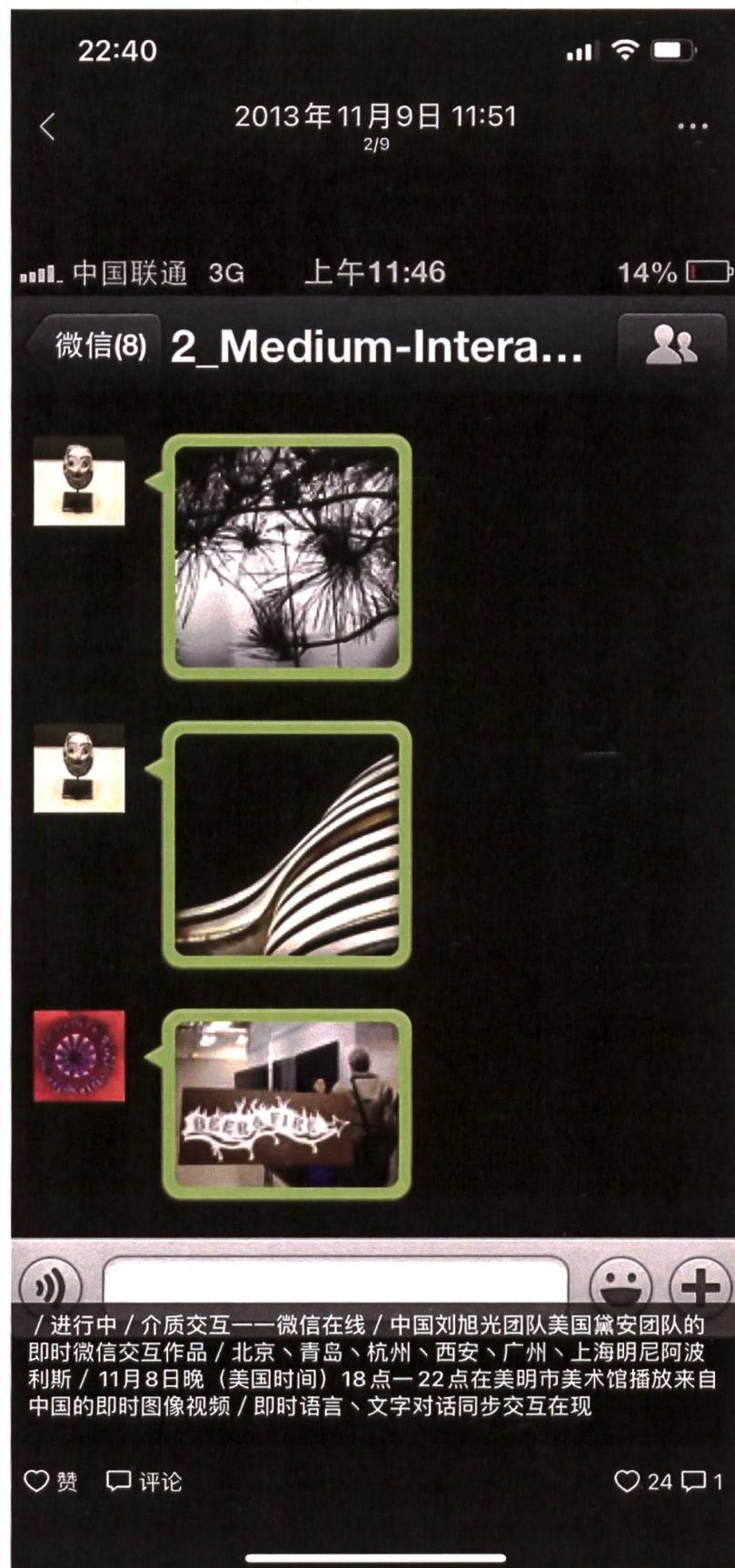


Figure 4: Photo documentation from Medium – Interactive: WeChat Urban, between Liu Xuguang's group, Peking Film Academy and Diane Willow's group, Weissman Art Museum, Minneapolis, on 9th November 2013, screenshot of a groupchat by Liu Xuguang.



Figure 5: Photo documentation from Medium – Interactive: WeChat Urban, between Liu Xuguang's group, Peking Film Academy and Diane Willow's group, Weissman Art Museum, Minneapolis, on 9th November 2013, a chat presented on a big screen, Peking Film Academy.

promote their art to the Chinese market the possibility of selling books, tickets and even artworks,³⁷ selling art directly via such personal WeChat accounts is widely considered by Chinese artists as unacceptable.³⁸ Therefore, all commercial activities are the responsibility of galleries, whereas all those artists can do is to promote their art and create their personal brand.

3 Different ways of using WeChat for visual artists

Apart from this fundamental purpose, WeChat has become a vital channel for sharing information about recent exhibitions, for disseminating articles or just spreading art. WeChat allows artists to share a variety of content. Artists and galleries share photographs, links to articles, interviews or video promotions of exhibitions. Art Zone, in particular uses quite advanced means of promotion in order to give information about artists, exhibitions and offering art for sale.

Depending on the amount of time devoted to the WeChat promotion, there is a method using different channels. Besides the most basic method, such as sharing the artworks in the diary, there are other channels that attract more attention. Galleries often participate in online promotions; they join groups and share information about art exhibitions, interviews with the artists occasionally on the opening of exhibitions, but also articles on art, and information about books

³⁷ Very Private Gallery 2019.

³⁸ It was mentioned many times by various Chinese artists I contacted during my research. According to most of them, selling artwork directly is done by “artisans”, and not by artists.

that have just been published. From my observation of artists, scholars and the galleries, the preferred option with respect to the period of visibility of the content was the basic setting (unlimited access), followed by the option that limited the visibility of their diaries to 30 days. This was used by three artists. Two artists set the shortest possible time for viewing their content, limiting it to just three days. One of them, the contemporary abstract ink artist Hou Shanhу 候珊瑚 (1962), strongly influenced by Chan Buddhist philosophy, explained that she considers diaries as a kind of a personal visual diary, a space in which to record her daily mood and talk about herself, especially using photos she created with her phone.³⁹ According to my observations, most of the artists and private galleries studied post content to their diaries, which appear in the Moments of their friends, fairly often, most of them publishing new content daily or almost every day, some of them and two galleries posting only several times a month. Some artists use their diaries very occasionally, that is to say less than monthly, only several times per year.⁴⁰ Only one of all the artists did not use the diaries at all. That was Liu Yiyuan 劉一原 (1942), a contemporary ink artist and calligrapher, active in the movement of Experimental Ink Art, professor in the Department of Chinese Painting at the Hubei Academy of Fine Arts.⁴¹

The differences in their methods of self-presentation mostly concern the amount of content, but also the variability of the posts. These are more private and less formal. Sometimes the lack of formality becomes a feature used by the authors, allowing them to address their audience by not only spreading strictly professional content, but also expressing their views or even showing and sharing the details of their personal lives. However, the authors are usually quite aware of what they post. When it comes to the individual accounts, which belong to artists or art theorists, the main difference is the time and an effort any individual spends on the account. Some of the authors are followed by more people than others, who can like or comment on the content but, as already mentioned, the number of followers is not visible on WeChat accounts.

The content of the diaries varies: a majority of artists intentionally combine in some way personalised content, such as photos of nature, shared articles, photos reflecting their life, but not too private, along with photos of their art. The intention is to make the “diary” livelier and more informal. Some artists create specific content; they share articles written by themselves or about their work. Some share random articles, videos or posts from public accounts. For example, artists like Gu Wenda or Zhang Yu usually create their own, original content. Gu Wenda along

³⁹ Hou Shanhу via WeChat, 20 May 2021.

⁴⁰ See Figure 1 for details.

⁴¹ Liu Yiyuan via WeChat, 20 May 2021.

with his art often posts essays sharing his views on life, in which he switches from cooking, to art and expressing his opinions. Zhang Yu in his diaries presents his art, and his writings about his own art. In October 2020, he wrote an article about a huge international exhibition in which he participated, *Longing for Nature*, at the Rietberg Museum, Zurich. The article starts with a short description of the exhibition of Chinese landscape art, including paintings, photographs and statues, and then the author continues with a description of his own work.⁴² This switch of topic is often used in WeChat communication, the intention being to attract attention to his art.

The articles posted are usually presented to public accounts as well. In addition to articles and photographs of his works, Zhang Yu also uses WeChat video broadcasting, another important function of WeChat. Short videos present some of his art; for example in October 2020 he originated the outdoor concept of “ink mountains”. This is a beautiful example of applying social media to introduce an open-air exhibition to a larger audience, especially during the pandemic, when the possibility of actual participation in public exhibitions was limited. The art critic Xia Kejun often offers his articles on the exhibitions he organises as well as other articles disseminating his ideas. Creating personal content is challenging and time-consuming. Therefore many artists write less text, merely posting their artworks; sometimes self-portraits, e.g. the contemporary ink artist and calligrapher, now living in Australia and Beijing, Zhang Dawo 張大我 (1943), or they post photos created by the authors of the content or ones discovered online.

An artist's self-presentation looks simple and relaxed, but it is usually an illusion. People presenting their lives online tend to show their lives in the most advantageous light, as Chen-Cheung observed in groups of young adults. Self-presentation in the online social world tends to result in more controlling strategies, such as considering each word and modifying the text repeatedly when posting to Moments.⁴³ This careful consideration of the content has been verified in interviews with the artists. Questions relating to the possible consequences of using WeChat were not included, as the questionnaire was distributed via WeChat. Two artists admitted that they were aware of being watched by the authorities, or government institutions, and one of them expressed concern about the danger of being blocked or having his account deleted whilst using WeChat.

The online space of the famous 798 Art Zone is an example of highly professional content which defines its own virtual life. The 798 Art Zone is a

⁴² Zhang, Yu (2020, October 13).

⁴³ Chen-Cheung 2018: 285–286.

famous hub of art galleries in Beijing. Its history began in the late 1980s, when an abandoned factory for military production built by East Germany in Bauhaus style became the residence and asylum for artists, who opened their studios there. In 2004 it was in danger of demolition but thanks to huge protests by the artists, including the professors of the CAFA, the plan for a new residential area was cancelled and the 798 Art Zone was left as an art district. Because of gentrification, artists left as they could not afford the rising prices for rent. Nowadays the 798 Art Zone is full of galleries, boutiques, design, shops, restaurants. Many large-scale events take place there several times a year.⁴⁴ The 798 Art zone shares all information in its WeChat application, which is also available for everyone physically visiting the 798 Art Zone by using their wi-fi. Everyone who uses WeChat, whilst visiting the 798 Art Zone, after obtaining access to 798 Art Zone's wi-fi, is accepted as a friend or a follower of the "798 EParty". With respect to the WeChat account of the 798 Art Zone, a large number of participants keep the account interesting as they are much more active in promoting art than any individual gallery. Unlike these individuals or some smaller galleries who post a huge amount of content every day to their diaries, the 798 Art Zone account was not very active during the first and second waves of Covid, but has been more so recently. It used to deliver new content to its followers; sending announcements of all events to everyone in their lists as direct messages several times per month. Public accounts provide news on a daily basis, and therefore are much more active than personal accounts or the accounts of the smaller private galleries included in the friend list. Such was the case before the pandemic and this remained true even in the first months of 2020. During the pandemic, although they were still active in their diaries, the number of the posts has declined from several per day to only several per month, and they have stopped sending direct messages to their followers. Content now consists of announcements of exhibitions, usually articles featuring the artists included in the exhibition, and sometimes containing a video of an exhibition or a performance. In their WeChat account there is also an option to purchase books or art online.

Most of the artists mentioned have exhibited several times in one or several galleries in the 798 Art Zone. Gu Wenda exhibited in the opening exhibition of the UCCA Center for Contemporary Art. Zhang Yu has participated in many group exhibitions, and he had two solo exhibitions. Liu Xuguang had a solo exhibition in 2010; Liu Yiyuan in 2018 and Hou Shanhu had two solo exhibitions, in 2013 and 2014. Lan Chunlei 藍春雷 (1971), a contemporary artist involved in abstract ink art

⁴⁴ For more information see Ying 2005; Waibel-Zielke 2012.

for some years, had two solo exhibitions in the famous art zone.⁴⁵ Therefore, there are links between the artists and the galleries, and also some similarities in the use of WeChat, but the utilisation by the artists differs, being much more limited in comparison to the art zone.

All artists and private galleries appreciated the importance of direct messages in WeChat, and a majority of them also acknowledged using diaries for the promotion of their art and enjoyed seeing feedback from others. Zhang Yu argued that the effect of using WeChat to promote art is minimal, as everyone does it and he pointed out the superficial nature of social media and the ephemeral nature of all online likes. The contemporary ink artist and abstract ink painter Chen Jiu 陳九 (1957) mentioned the limitations of seeing art on the small screen of a phone, the inability to enjoy texture and details, and claimed that WeChat was only useful for a basic understanding of the art. Nevertheless, he considers WeChat to be an important source of information for upcoming events, books and exhibitions. All artist respondents admitted reading related articles shared on WeChat, but some of them found reading long texts on the phone tiring on the eyes. Some artists use WeChat for online purchasing, payment and even for listening to music and meditation.⁴⁶ This means that, some artists claimed that WeChat had become an important part of their lives.

Almost all the artists use WeChat for reading articles. Some claimed they read a lot on public channels to which they subscribed, or read information about books and then bought them directly online. Several artists actively write and publish their art-related content online. Two participants acknowledged using the advanced functionality of posting some content to selected groups. Xu Zhonglei 徐忠磊 (1983), the youngest participant, active in several multimedia and WeChat projects, explained his intentions this way: "When I share pictures connected to my personal life, I make them visible only to a limited circle of people who might be interested, in order not to upset other users. I also use WeChat to create various other platforms, and sometimes I post the content to public accounts."⁴⁷ Many of them appreciated voice messaging as a good way to stay in touch, hear their friends, students and family, but not to overly disturb them. The ability to make audio calls or video calls was also highly praised, as many of them asserted that WeChat had basically replaced phone calls.

Most artists look at Moments daily or almost daily. They see the content of channels to which they subscribe, as well as the diaries of their friends. They do find it time-consuming and therefore try not to spend too much time on WeChat,

⁴⁵ Information provided by the artists.

⁴⁶ Figure 1.

⁴⁷ Xu Zhonglei via WeChat, 20 May 2021.

but the contemporary abstract ink artist Zhang Hao 張浩 (1962) admitted to watching it several times a day.⁴⁸ Opinions on using WeChat Moments as a successful means of self-promotion were divided, as is shown at Figure 2. Some of them found it useful, like Hu Quanchun 胡泉純 (1977), who teaches at CAFA, Department of Sculpture and was positive in his attitude: “WeChat is really convenient for the promotion of art and art activities. It may be said that personal art and art-related activities delivered through WeChat, are very effective. WeChat is also very practical for communicating with other artists or for obtaining information about other artists’ activities. Overall WeChat is now the main consultation and communication tool for art groups, and it is far more suitable to disseminating information than traditional media.”⁴⁹ His attitude to WeChat as an effective social medium is also rather positive: “WeChat is very effective and significant for the promotion and dissemination of art. The way that WeChat promotes art has yet to be developed, but it has great potential. The use of WeChat for artistic creation and the development of artistic events is definitely a question worthy of discussion.” Sun Dahu’s 孫大壺 (1962), an avant-garde ink artist and calligrapher, believes that “WeChat is currently the easiest and most effective tool for getting information and communicating with friends, and as such I consider it a necessity”.⁵⁰ Similarly one of the first artists who started to practise abstract ink painting in the late 1970s, Hang Faji 杭法基 (1945), finds WeChat very convenient for communicating with other artists, explaining his view on art, listening to the ideas of his colleagues and promoting his art.⁵¹ Lao He 老赫 (1957), active in ink art and calligraphy, including performance, since the late 1980s⁵² noted that the possibility of sharing his artworks immediately with all his friends was rather exciting: “There are only a few hundred people who may go to an exhibition, but if you do it well on WeChat, there may be thousands who can appreciate your new work at the same time.” He believes that communication via WeChat boosts his creativity but he pointed out that this is not only true of WeChat, but that all social media can make artists’ lives richer and more meaningful. According to Cai Guangbin 蔡廣斌 (1963), a contemporary ink artist practising ink art in photographic style and professor in the Department of Chinese Painting and Calligraphy at the College of Fine Arts of the East China Normal University in Shanghai, “WeChat has changed the whole of China”. He admitted that the work he has done in the last ten years is all related in some way to such new media.⁵³

⁴⁸ Zhang Hao said precisely 几乎不离手 [it hardly leaves my hands], via WeChat, 21 May 2021.

⁴⁹ Hu Quanchun via WeChat, 21 May 2021.

⁵⁰ Sun Dahu via WeChat, 21 May 2021.

⁵¹ Hang Faji via WeChat, 20 May 2021.

⁵² His official name is Wu Guoquan 吳國全.

⁵³ Cai Guanbin via WeChat, 20 May 2021.

On the other hand, some artists are quite sceptical as to the efficacy of presenting their artistic achievements in their diaries. Lan Chunlei considers a personal account on WeChat as a not very effective tool for art promotion: “In the digital age, there is too much information. No one is interested in you, but sometimes, when I post my current status to my circle of friends, there are occasionally some new people who comment on my work. So, I can’t say it’s completely useless.”⁵⁴ He uses WeChat mostly for communication with other artists he already knows in person. Sang Huoyao 桑火堯 (1963), a semi-abstract ink painter, believes it has a certain impact on art promotion but the effect is not that great and there are definitely limits to such an effect.⁵⁵ Hou Shanhu claims that “the work or promotional articles of artists is generally distributed through WeChat official accounts of art institutions, which play a role in the promotion of particular artists.”⁵⁶

Liu Yiyuan, the only artist on my list who did not use diaries, believes that WeChat could be useful for communicating but that: “it is not suitable for deeper discussion on art.” He admitted that his assistant sometimes promotes his art and videos from his exhibitions on public accounts and also in group chats, but he claimed he tends to avoid it and there are very few friend requests that he has approved.⁵⁷ Zhang Yu’s opinion is the most critical. In his words “WeChat basically fails to promote true artistic achievements. Because everyone is trying to promote themselves, the messages cancel each other out. In fact, most people are only brushing up on their sense of existence, which is mostly determined by human nature.” Zhang Yu compares WeChat and social media to a fast-food culture: “Most people don’t want to see what others throw out. Because you do not care what you are throwing out, you can post online whatever you want. On the other hand, Internet communication provides a platform for mutual plagiarism, and therefore independent thinking is rarely seen.”⁵⁸ Despite such a doubting attitude, Zhang Yu keeps posting his achievements in his diaries and he is one of most active of the artists observed here. In addition to his personal WeChat account, he has also a public account called Zhang Yu Studio, where he presents his art, mostly by video. Upon examination, there were fewer posts there than in his personal account, which leads to the tentative conclusion that they were made recently. A “minishop” was also available but had no content.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Lan Chunlei via WeChat, 21 May 2021.

⁵⁵ Sang Huoyao via WeChat, 21 May 2021.

⁵⁶ Hou Shanhu via WeChat, 20 May 2021.

⁵⁷ Liu Yiyuan via WeChat, 20 May 2021.

⁵⁸ Zhang Yu via WeChat 20 May 2021.

⁵⁹ 张羽 工作室, it is possible to find it in WeChat, but no link is available, 26 May 2021.

As expected, the attitude of small galleries was much more optimistic. They all see WeChat as an effective tool to promote their exhibitions as well as their artists. There is a difference between private accounts, where everyone is keenly aware of their image, and the attitude of galleries, who are just doing what is expected of them, in that they are using every means to promote their artists, exhibitions and other events. Although they use WeChat daily, not all of them add new content every day, usually just when openings or other events approach, and sometimes they share articles about the artists involved. They usually publish the new content in their diaries, but sometimes they send it as direct messages to people in the friend list that they know are interested. The WeChat accounts of small galleries are usually exactly the same as the individual accounts of the artists, in that there is no option to purchase art or other items online; this being typical of the accounts of small businesses as a whole.⁶⁰

Apart from public accounts and galleries, group chats provide other options for artists to reach a larger audience for communication, or even art promotion. Everyone can create a group of participants on his or her account and it is possible to invite people from outside to join the group. Each post within the group then appears in the direct messages of all members of that group and they can also react to those posts. The content of this group chat can include invitations to events, practical information, but also people can share anything that interests them. As a member of several such group chats created by artists, then in all cases, I was provided with information about book publishing, workshops and conferences. I consider them as a very effective method of disseminating information. Many artists also find group chats an effective way to communicate with their students and colleagues.

Lastly but most interestingly and also a little unexpectedly there was the art project Medium – Interactive: WeChat Urban, between Liu Xuguang's group, from the Peking Film Academy and Diane Willow's group, from the Weissman Art Museum, Minneapolis, on 9th November 2013, Peking time 11.00–12.00, 8 November 2013, US time 22.00–23.00. This was a live performance art event. Participants in both cities shared photos of their cities taken at that moment and posted online, also including short videos (see Figure 4). All content as well as the reactions of all participants were shown on two big screens, visible not only to the people included in the groups, but also to the public (One of the big screens is visible at Figure 5). As such, photos and reactions to the screens represented an interactive project.

⁶⁰ See Figure 2 for the attitude of the artists.

4 Conclusion

The goal of my paper was to show how Chinese artists, galleries and the 798 Art zone use WeChat in art promotion, communication, mutual interaction or how they present art events and artists. Whilst WeChat was originally created mostly for communication within groups of friends or family members, it has become an efficient medium for self-promotion. It has some limits, arising directly from its original purpose, that is to say WeChat emphasises privacy issues, more so than some Western social media, such as Instagram or the Chinese TikTok. However, WeChat is still considered an important channel, mostly for sharing interesting content within large groups of friends or followers. WeChat has revealed new ways for artists to cooperate, and they can use it to promote artworks. Besides traditional media, such as articles and interviews, there are video presentations, featuring an artist's work. All methods are employed to reach the widest audience. Despite a majority of artists considering the use of individual WeChat accounts for direct art promotion, it is not very effective, as it does not appeal to galleries, who only consider it as useful in art promotion. This was explained by several artists, as there being a fine line between self-branding and putting artworks online all the time. This is one reason why their communication is often indirect and why they occasionally post other content apart from information about art and exhibitions (see Figure 3).

From the observation and interviews it is clear that WeChat has become an important way to promote art, artists and artistic life in Mainland China. Even though WeChat is much less direct than Western social media, and the participants cannot see the number of followers or the total number of likes of the content shared in Moments, as the feedback is only visible to the author of the content, there are strategies to get the most from its functionality, and it is possible to create good publicity. The major difference is between public accounts and individual accounts. Individual accounts are considered by many artists as not really useful for art promotion. More effective are group chats or, even better, the public accounts of galleries or other art promoters. Although many artists do not see individual WeChat accounts as an ideal way to promote their artworks, they keep posting new content, as is observed in the case of Zhang Yu. The same applies to Zhang Dawo, who posts in his diaries on an almost daily basis, whilst claiming he was using WeChat basically for communication, making calls and sending messages. He established a small group including me, and a few friends, for making our contacts during my stay in China easier. Nevertheless, despite their doubts about the efficacy of self-promotion, the majority of them are quite active and they post content on their Moments daily, or several times a month.

It is questionable as to whether it is possible to achieve the desirable effect of self-promotion using a social medium which considers privacy so important and therefore the function of multiplying “likes” (hearts) visible to anybody is missing, but given the number of users it can make some effect both in terms of art promotion as well as receiving feedback from friends. Most of the artists believe it is not really about art promotion, but about communication, receiving feedback from friends, which is similar to the experience of Budge.⁶¹ For artists, as for anyone who wants to promote their products via the social media it is essential to stay connected. After all, the artists are looking to be recognised and appreciated for what they are doing, and that is the point of social media.

Whilst some artists tend to make their posts rather more personal, many of them restrict content to professional art circles. Only two artists admitted they manage the visibility of their posts to such people, but it is possible that others are also using the method of private groups as well.

As expected, the most direct use of WeChat and the one easiest to understand is the promotion of the big hub of galleries represented here by the 798 Art Zone. Small galleries and individuals are also quite actively communicating and post their art in order to obtain feedback, maintain contacts with the artistic community, their friends, students and colleagues, or to promote themselves. There are no essential differences between the posts of artists and those of small galleries. Of course, due to the small size of mobile phones or tablets (even in the event of using WeChat on computers, which is possible with a Chinese phone number only), online presentation can never be as satisfying as seeing artworks in galleries. In addition, online communication cannot replace face-to-face contacts but, as has been shown, WeChat, as a social medium has a considerable impact if used on a professional level.

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⁶¹ Budge 2013.

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