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WeChat and the Chinese Queer Diaspora

Cai CHEN*

PhD student at the Laboratory of Anthropology of Contemporary Worlds (LAMC), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Belgium. Email: cai.chen@ulb.be

Abstract:

“In the ethnographic study of Cai Chen about the interrelationship between migration and sexuality amongst Chinese gay students in France, he finds out that WeChat enables Chinese queer diaspora to construct an Internet-based community across borders, embed transnational identity beyond geographic distance and express queerness in online and offline worlds. He also presents some methodological reflections on benefits and challenges of using WeChat as a digital tool to research Chinese queer diaspora. He argues that researchers should constantly navigate between physical and virtual social worlds to critically account for the ongoing, increasingly digitally mediated, social interactions and practices amongst the Chinese queer diaspora.” (P. Bugnon & Y. Chen, 2024)

Keywords: WeChat, Chinese diaspora, queer Chinese, virtual ethnography

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WeChat, functioning both as a digital media platform and an infrastructure (Plantin & de Seta, 2019), transcends national borders and has gained widespread usage among Chinese diasporas (Sun & Yu, 2022), including the queer¹ community. Chinese queer individuals, whether sojourners (e.g., international students) or settled residents in Western countries (e.g., immigrants or long-term residents), may have different migration motives and pathways, but they share a common intrinsic migration aspiration. That is, the yearning for sexual freedom (as discussed in Kam, 2020; Ponce & Chen, 2023 among others). Despite the relatively liberal and tolerant societal environment in Western countries, the Chinese queer diaspora in countries like France has been confronted not only with the marginalisation as a racial minority within predominantly white societies—like their heterosexual counterparts (see Chuang, 2021; Wang et al., 2023)—but also with the multi-layered discrimination as queer migrants of colour (see C. Chen, 2023b). As social norms and cultural values migrate with individuals, Chinese queer migrants find themselves in a dual predicament. On the one hand, they embrace the freedom to be “truly themselves” within the liberal French society, and on the other hand, many continue to conceal their homosexuality from their families in China or their immediate social networks within the Chinese diaspora community (C. Chen, 2023a). This dual minority status places Chinese queer migrants in a unique position, and WeChat plays a pivotal role in their “in-between” social lives.

My prior research drew on an extensive “virtual ethnography” (Hine, 2000)—with WeChat ethnography as an important component—to research the intricate interplay between migration and sexuality among Chinese gay (ex-)students in France (see C. Chen, 2021). Within this research context, WeChat, as an assemblage of group chats, subscription accounts, and Moments (*pengyou quan*), emerged as the primary site of observation. In conducting participant observations, I actively engaged with five group chats dedicated to Chinese queer migrants—encompassing more than just gay men—in France and across Europe. Additionally, I followed the subscription account of *Collectif Sésame F (zhima she)*, an association based in Paris, and kept track of the Moments updates from key informants. Notably, Chinese diasporic LGBT+ associations in Europe² favour WeChat’s subscription account, despite the harsh censorship (see Ni & Davidson, 2021), as their primary communication channel with members and their target audience to facilitate the campaigning for the events that they organise (e.g., participating in the local Gay Pride and online events amid the Covid-19 pandemic).

These grassroots associations play a pivotal role in forming discussion groups for Chinese queer migrants, facilitating connections among individuals from the same homeland who share common cultural backgrounds and face similar social conditions as migrants and sexual minorities. Within these groups which constitute both an ethnic niche and a safe queer space, members can seek or provide both informational and emotional support, enhancing their sense of belonging and solidarity (as demonstrated in [Figure 1](#)). Unlike local associations, Chinese diasporic LGBT+ associations predominantly emphasize cultural activities over sexual health promotion. Nevertheless, WeChat serves as a transnational virtual space for fostering queer sociality and solidarity, nurturing cross-border digital queer activism (Ayoub & Bauman, 2019), albeit on a limited scale, among (aspirant) migrants, returnees, and Chinese queer activists both within and beyond China.

¹ The term ‘queer’ is employed here as an academic shorthand rather than an identity label. It encompasses all non-normative gender identities and sexualities and can be used in this article interchangeably with LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other).

² For instance, aforementioned *Collectif Sésame F* (Paris), Happy Togayther (Paris), Queer China UK (London), Out&Abroad (Amsterdam), Queer Squad (Frankfurt am Main), and *Shanfeng Dianhuo* (Madrid).

Being part of the multiple sites of virtual ethnography, the use of WeChat as a research tool and an observation site presents both advantages and challenges. WeChat enables researchers to transcend the constraints of time and space, granting access to the inner social world of the Chinese queer diaspora and providing insights into their ways of being and doing queer in an ethnic virtual space. However, it's crucial to recognize that WeChat represents just one facet of the social lives of Chinese LGBT+ migrants. These individuals frequently utilize other digital platforms (see also Yu & Blain, 2019), including Grindr and Romeo for online dating, X (formerly Twitter) for homoerotic content (see Song, 2022), and forums for sociality and information (particularly during the 2000s and 2010s). In light of this multifaceted digital landscape, adopting a “multi-sited” perspective (Marcus, 1995) becomes essential to comprehensively understand the diverse identities and complex lived experiences of the Chinese queer diaspora.

Research participants, such as queer migrants, incorporate multiple identities and display various social roles within a single application, WeChat. This digital platform serves not only as a barrier for concealing one's “true” identity but also as a bridge connecting online and offline social spaces. Ethnographers utilizing WeChat must therefore possess a critical understanding of the offline context surrounding the online world, the nodes and connections that bridge online and offline realms, and constantly switch between these two interacting settings through self-adjustment (see Zani, 2021). Furthermore, researchers must prioritize ethical considerations to protect the privacy and confidentiality of research participants. In my study, I employed covert observation to prevent any undue influence on the atmosphere within the discussion groups. However, I ensured that at least the group administrators were aware of the researcher's identity and the purpose of the project. Moreover, I emphasize the importance of exercising caution and compassion when collecting and presenting data from the social space of marginalized and vulnerable social groups. I chose to employ self-made mock-ups (as presented above) rather than screenshots of group chats to fully respect the anonymity of all participants. Any photographs used in my publications or presentations related to this research were authorized by their owners and subjected to complete anonymization prior to use. Lastly, I recommend that researchers maintain an appropriate social distance from their informants and continually negotiate their own identity, subjectivity, emotionality, and positionality, even within the context of online environments.



Figure 1: WeChat discussion group for gay Chinese in France (screenshot mock-up by Cai Chen with anonymized data).

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