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Researching digital communication practices among German-speaking expats in China: Study design

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Abstract. The present paper develops the study design of a linguistic analysis of digital communication practices among German-speaking expats in China using *WeChat*. Within digital communication in China, the messenger application *WeChat* is the most widely used means of communication, boasting roughly one billion users. There has not been relevant linguistic research on communication making use of this application to date. We especially lack studies addressing the communication practices with *WeChat* by native speakers of German, who form a relatively large group of expatriates in China (20,000+ Germans alone), mostly working in the automobile industry. After a short introduction (1.) which addresses the relevant research question to be tackled, the previous research on *WeChat* is summarized (2.). The attention *WeChat* has received in the media of the German language area becomes visible, but we can also see that there is no systematic scholarly discourse focusing on the application just yet. This is followed by a section on the communicative features and functionality of *WeChat* (3.): here it is pointed out that *WeChat* has multiple functions which go significantly further than messaging applications such as *WhatsApp* provide their users. These features comprise e.g. online payment, GPS tracking and navigation, money transfers, and monetary gifts. Furthermore, *WeChat* combines features of *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, and *Twitter*. A thorough description of these features provides the basis for laying out the study design of the online survey (4.). The online survey comprises more than twenty questions on the use of *WeChat* with special regard to the expatriate setting in China. The paper ends with a section on the expected results (5.).

Keywords: *WeChat*, communication, German-speaking expats, China, study design.

1. Introduction

The leading Chinese messaging application *WeChat* (*Weixin*; 微信) boasts almost one billion users (Hirn 2018, 185). China is on the forefront of digital mobile development, and *WeChat*, which is also labelled an “all-in-one mobile application” (Zhou, Hentschel, Kumar 2017, 3), is an integral part of this change, having “revolutionized” the everyday life of millions of users (Zand 2016), being the *de facto* operating system of the Chinese *iPhone* (Wurzel 2017). Digital writing changes our lives (Dürscheid, Frick 2016). It seems only justified that also linguists need to analyze the communication that is made through this omnipresent and dominating app. The present paper sets out to sketch a study that is situated

at the crossroads of cultural and language contact between China and the German-speaking countries. Ever since China opened itself to the West and the rest of the world in the end of the 1970s, the German-speaking countries, with Germany being the most prominent one, have been heavily engaged in promoting especially economic cooperation. This has led to a work-based migration of German speakers to China. According to recent figures I was provided by the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Shanghai in March 2019, there are around 20,000 officially registered Germans alone in China. This does neither include the active Austrians, Swiss, and Luxemburg native speakers of German nor the short-term residents, which would make the figure substantially bigger. Almost all of them —

many have brought their families — have one thing in common, regardless of where they reside in China: they use *WeChat*. This is partly due to the existing internet restrictions. In China, you cannot access *YouTube*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and most recently, *WhatsApp*, without the help of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs). You need to have a semi-legal piece of software installed on your smartphone to circumvent the government-imposed blocking of the mentioned sites and apps. The Chinese government is partly trying to punish foreign VPN app operators, partly it is also selling its own VPN services, knowing that otherwise international trade relations would potentially suffer severely. Naturally, many foreign users are put off by the prospect of using illegal or shady partly legal internet services to access their favorite sites. There is an easy solution on offer that practically substitutes all of the Western popular sites I mentioned, and that is *WeChat*, since it combines many of the functional aspects *Twitter* etc. have to offer. Hirn (2018, 169) uses the *Golden Firewall* to explain *WeChat*'s success, since only the separation and non-availability of (probably better?) Western alternatives enabled *WeChat* to grow rapidly and become the success story it is today.

This is where my study comes in. The German speakers form one of the major foreign groups in China. There might be larger groups of other foreigners, but in terms of trade relations the German-speaking countries constitute a major force. Now, how does this group, which consists of the business players on the one hand, but also their China-based families and children on the other hand, use *WeChat*? This is the main research question that my study is going to address. To this end, the present paper is structured as follows: after this introduction (1.), I will summarize the previous research and German media echo on *WeChat*, starting with the mass media positions before moving on to linguistic studies (2.). The third part of the paper will focus on the functional aspects of *WeChat* (3.). This in turn provides us with the information on which my study, an online survey conducted between November 2018 and April 2019, is based. I will explain the study design in detail in section (4.), which forms the main part of this paper. The final section (5.) addresses challenges concerning the interpretation and contextualization of the expected results.

2. Previous Research

As stated above, the section at hand is divided into two parts: before coming to the linguistic perspectives on *WeChat*, let us look at the (mostly) specifically German language area media echo

on this application. The first contribution that caught my attention was by the eminent news magazine *DER SPIEGEL* (Zand 2016), which characterizes *WeChat* as a network of ultimate control. *Tagesschau* news correspondent Steffen Wurzel (Wurzel 2017) focuses on the issues between *WeChat* and Apple and mentions that the Chinese basically only use but one app all the time — *WeChat*. The historian Niall Ferguson (Jungclaussen 2017) raises the point of user data such as the data collected from *WeChat* users fueling dictatorial structures in China. The German Consulate General in Shanghai (Viëtor 2017) makes their official visa information available through a *WeChat* feed. Heath (2017) writes on *Facebook*'s to date vain efforts to enter the Chinese market — *WeChat* has some features that seem modeled directly on *Facebook*'s example (cf. 3. below). Ankenbrand (2018) characterizes *WeChat* as an elaborate surveillance tool used by the Chinese government to monitor the citizens' behavior. Kirchner (2018, 60) sees a similar tendency, i.e. *WeChat*'s shift from a microblog service towards a surveillance application. Sieren (2018, 77) assesses *WeChat*'s functionality as beating *WhatsApp*. Hirn (2018, 169, 184) concurs with this by stating that the apprentice [*WeChat*] has surpassed the master [*WhatsApp*] and deems it more likely that *WeChat* will conquer the whole world rather than *Facebook* be made officially available in China (Sieren 2018, 99). Strittmatter (2018, 76–91) points out that *WeChat*, as well as the other popular messaging apps in China, faces censorship issues, in his view, though, milder ones than e.g. *Sina Weibo*. This is — in my view — to be taken with a grain of salt, since this is mere speculation and cannot be verified in any way. Hirn (2018, 195–197) mentions *WeChat* also in terms of mobile payment, it being the second major player on the Chinese market, together with *Alipay* (*Zhifubao*; 支付宝).

Let us now look at the research available on *WeChat*: Zhou, Hentschel and Kumar (2017) focus on emoji use in *WeChat* and state the following: “We find that *WeChat* is now an integral part of daily life in China and emojis/stickers are too” (Zhou, Hentschel, Kumar 2017, 1). Szurawitzki (2016) raises the question of possible cultural specifics of emojis using the example of official emojis issued by Finland for branding and image purposes (after Ljubešić, Fišer (2016) on the global usage of emojis; see also Danesi (2017) on semiotics of emoji use; Dürscheid, Siever (2017) on writing beyond the alphabet and Pappert (2017) on emoji use in *WhatsApp*). Emojis and *WeChat* in the given research context of German speakers in China thus seem highly relevant, on which basis the issue is included in my study (cf. 4. below as well as Wu, Trautsch (2015) for a comparative

study on emoticons in Germany and China, Albert (2015) on semiotics and syntax of emoticons, and Dresner, Herring (2010) on emoticons and illocutionary force). This is even more so since *WeChat* with vigor shifts the frontiers of digitization and inevitably has become a model for Western societies' patterns of digital transformations (Szurawitzki 2018, 139–140). Ge, Herring (2018) even go so far as to suggest some very far-reaching tendencies in the emoji sequences they analyzed in *Sina Weibo* communication:

“Our study largely supports the idea that emoji are developing into an independent language: they can substitute for words, and emoji sequences can resemble complete utterances with subject, verb, and object. In addition, we have shown that emoji sequences can fulfill certain communicative functions that were previously associated only with verbal utterances [...]” (Ge, Herring 2018)

This argumentation might be going even a bit too far, however, it still stresses the importance of further analyses of messenger communication such as the one proposed here, for there are vast areas of mobile communication that have not been under a linguistic magnifying lens to date.

Liu (2018) focuses on social media marketing in China with *WeChat*. He provides us with the first German language research monograph on the app, which, however, focuses more on business rather than linguistics. Günthner (2018) compares practices of nominal self-reference in SMS, *WhatsApp* and *WeChat* interactions, but does not touch the issues raised and questions addressed in our study (cf. 4. below).

In summarizing the relevant previous research, we can state that there are no such studies as the one I set out to conduct. While the studies available address certain specific communication practices, they do not focus on clear-cut peer groups and their respective patterns and habits of communicating through *WeChat*. This makes my proposed research stand out in this respect. In the following section, we are going to look at *WeChat*'s features of communication.

3. WeChat: Features and Functionality

I have presented the first German language study of the functionality and communicational possibilities of the *WeChat* app (Szurawitzki 2019). I will subsequently briefly summarize the main features of the application with the help of screenshots (German language version) and thus provide the base for understanding the study design, which is elaborated on in the following section (4.).

When opening *WeChat*, one sees the general interface:



Fig. 1. *WeChat*'s general interface

What one can see here is the relative similarity to *WhatsApp*'s starting page. However, there are more features to be used in *WeChat* than in *WhatsApp*. In the lower part of the image one can see four icons: on the far left, there is the *Chats* icon, followed by the icon for contacts (*Kontakte*). Clicking the *Entdecken* (*Discover*) icon provides one of the core differences to *WhatsApp*, it namely opens up a page on which you can post as in *Facebook*. The fact that *Facebook* bought *WhatsApp* should thus not surprise anyone any longer. The contacts page looks very similar to the one in *WhatsApp*, thus I will not provide a screenshot here. What is, once again, different, is the page for newsfeeds, which can be accessed through the contacts page, and which resembles the one in *Twitter*. This is what the newsfeeds page looks like:

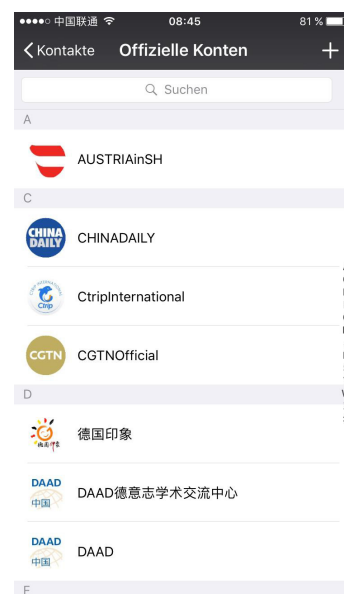


Fig. 2. *WeChat*'s newsfeeds page

The aforementioned discovery function (posting; Momente) can be accessed through a starting page which looks like this:

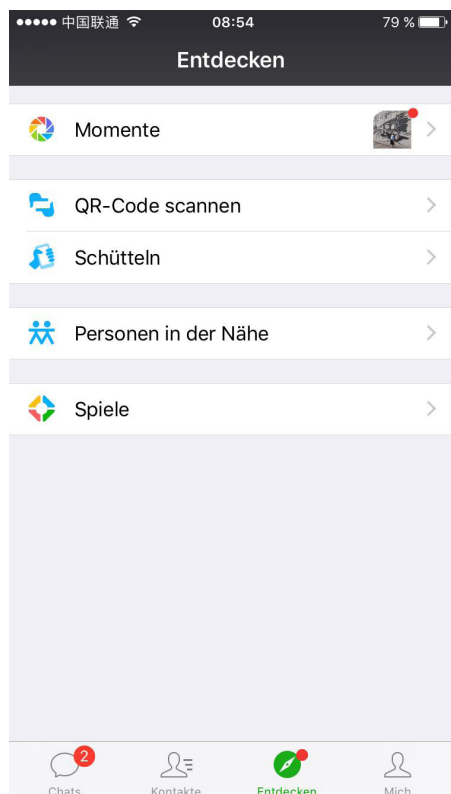


Fig. 3. Starting page of the *Discover* feature

The *Momente* link (see fig. 4 below) contains the posting function. Below this feature, we see a link which enables us to connect with other *WeChat* users by scanning the respective QR code digital *WeChat* ID cards; subsequently, even digital business cards (paper business cards have long been a must-have in China) have been introduced. Below this, we find a *Schütteln* (*Shaking*) feature which suggests us random *WeChat* users to connect with should we fancy this (a bit like *Tinder*, if you will). People who are physically close to you can be contacted through the *Personen in der Nähe* feature. I will not discuss the (vast) possibilities to play online games within *WeChat* here, since this would lead us away from our focus.

Next, we can look at the *Momente* feature, the one equivalent to *Facebook*, similarly structured with title and profile pictures on top of the page and your contacts' postings below. There is an automatic translation feature which is especially handy for those not proficient enough in Chinese (however, the translation quality very often leaves room for improvement). This is what the feature looks like:



Fig. 4. *Momente* posting feature

Concerning postings, the factory settings seem to imply one has to choose a multimodal form of posting, i.e. using pictures and text (possibly hyperlinks), by pressing the camera icon in the upper right-hand corner (see fig. 5). However, if you keep the respective link pressed for a couple of seconds, text-only input is possible. One can mention one's location as well.

The posting feature can be accessed through the following page:

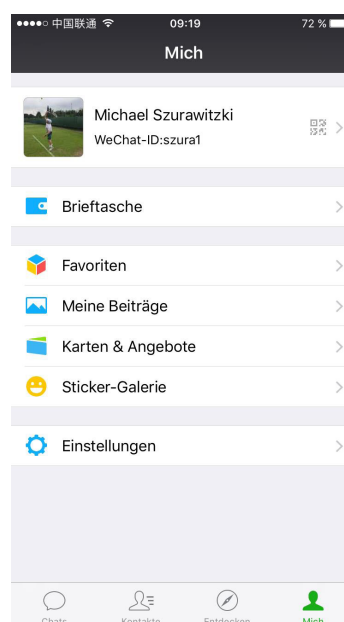


Fig. 5. Personal area

The most elaborate features leading to further use beyond core communication can be accessed through the *Wallet* link (*Brieftasche*).

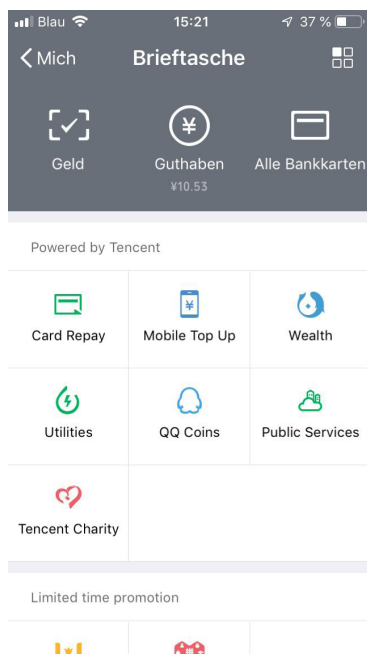


Fig. 6. Wallet

Not only does this option comprise mobile payment and bank transfer features (by which you practically can circumvent banks and directly send money to other phone numbers), but it also lets you access a very large number of other applications (Ankenbrand (2018) claims there are as many as 580,000) ranging from ride-hailing apps such as the highly popular *Didi Chuxing* (滴滴出行; *Uber* is blocked in China), to bike-sharing with *Mobike*, and *Dazhong Dianping* (大众点评) for ordering cinema tickets and food etc. The feature page letting you access these micro apps looks like this:

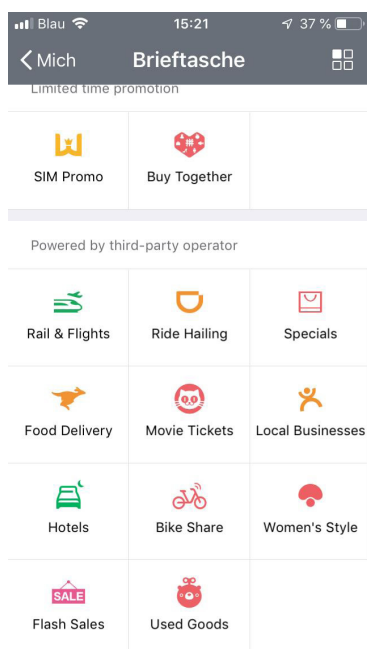


Fig. 7. Micro apps

Please refer to Szurawitzki (2019) for a more elaborate description of *WeChat*'s features. In the following section on the design of my study of the use of *WeChat* by German speakers in China, I will focus on the survey questions in detail. These questions partly also entail more information on the app's features (see below).

4. Study Design

Since I am based in Germany, there were a number of questions that arose around conducting a survey among expatriates in China. The first impulse (in order to avoid censorship) was to dismiss an electronic survey and use paper forms. This, however, would have meant high costs, people helping me in China (some members of the German language Christian parish in Shanghai even volunteered to assist) and problems making the results of the survey available electronically, plus myself traveling to China to promote the project. The paper surveys subsequently had taken a fairly elaborate form and even underwent the necessary pretesting. Then I came across a more elegant way of conducting the survey, namely using a piece of software called www.socisurvey.de, which helped me make an impact with a professionally designed online survey with mobile and desktop versions. Thus, the paper forms needed to be radically edited and put into electronic format. Together with the necessary pretesting and modifications that arose during the process the final version was conceived in mid-November 2018, after a total of 38 modifications and optimizing steps, especially with regard to smartphone use. The core problem here was that within the web-based design application, one could only use *one* text input window the content of which was modified layout-wise depending on your device, either a smartphone or a desktop computer. The editing was mainly comprised of shortening the questions and answering options. On November 16, 2018, the survey was uploaded and put online. It was online until April 30, 2019. I used my contact network to inform potential survey-takers about my study; here the German language Christian parish in Shanghai www.dcg.net was of helpful assistance. In the following, I will explain what data exactly was collected in the survey.

Metadata

In the online survey, I collect the following metadata: first, I ask about the sex of the person answering. After that, the age group is determined, the preset alternatives being younger than 15 years of age, 15–19, 20–24, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, 40–44, 45–49, 50–54, 55–59, 60–64, and 65 years and above.

The third question addresses language skills and determines whether the person speaks other languages apart from German on the native level. The alternatives given here are “No”, “Chinese” (as the alternative most likely to be given), and “Other. Please specify”.

After that, the length of the individual’s stay in China is determined. The answering options I provided are pre-2015, since 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019. I chose pre-2015 as the broadest category modelled on my own first arrival in China in pre-2015 (i.e. 2014). Given the nature of quick change in the job sector in China, this seemed appropriate. For analytical reasons, this setup will enable us to look at a data set of *WeChat* communication by the so-called “Old China Hands”, i.e. people with a substantial amount of time spent in China, even though some four to five years do not seem very long (however, those staying in China for more than four years stay longer than most).

Then I want to know where exactly in China the person was/is based. I deliberately opened the survey also for China alumni who have left the Middle Kingdom and might have experience using *WeChat*, which was first introduced in 2010. The alternative options I provide are Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong, as the three major cities, and “Other. Please specify”. The further specification makes sense for a number of different reasons. Even though there is a focus on German/Austrian/Swiss activities in the major hubs in China, it is evident from the geographical distribution of well-known business firms that there are also other specifically “German” hubs, which one might not take into account at first glance, such as Changchun in northern China, being the home of a major *Volkswagen* plant.

The following and last metadata question in the survey concerns the professional status of the person completing it in his/her China time. The alternative options for answering are “employee”, “self-employed”, “student of a German school in China”, “university student”, “accompanying person”, or “Other. Please specify”.

WeChat Communication

The first question that is directly related to *WeChat* is whether it was known to the person prior to coming to China. Obviously, this is a yes-no question. Subsequently, the background of the use of *WeChat* is explored. The following question addresses the way one first learnt about the app. The answering options are “internet”, “press / radio / TV”, “friends / acquaintances”, “colleagues”, or “Other source. Please specify”. In addition to *WeChat*, people frequently use other messaging applications. Thus, I ask next whether they actually do that (yes-no options). If the answer is

in the affirmative, I then ask which messengers specifically are used: the offered options are “WhatsApp”, “Facebook Messenger”, “Telegram”, “Viber”, or “Other. Please specify”. After that, the survey is concerned with the frequency of *WeChat* usage. Informants are asked to provide their assessment on how often they use *WeChat* a) generally, b) in their jobs, and c) in private contexts on a five-point rating scale that entails the options “never”, “seldom”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, “very frequently”. This scale is subsequently applied also to communicative feature usage within *WeChat*.

These communicative features are next up in the survey. The usage frequency (“never”, “seldom”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, “very frequently”) of the following features is asked of the informants:

1. Chats
2. Group chats
3. Moments (posting)
4. Moments (reading)
5. Moments (liking/commenting)
6. Voice messages
7. Taking photographs
8. Taking selfies
9. Sending photographs
10. Sending selfies
11. Taping videos
12. Sending videos
13. Voice calls
14. Video calls
15. Sending one’s location
16. Real-time location
17. Sending red packets (Hongbao money presents)
18. Receiving red packets (Hongbao money presents)
19. Making money transfers
20. Receiving money transfers
21. WeChat Pay mobile payment
22. Sending/receiving contact cards/contact information
23. Looking up people/users

After this, the preferred language within (group) chats is addressed. Here the options “German”, “Chinese (Mandarin)”, “English”, and “Other. Please specify” are given. In addition, code-switching practices are mentioned next. The first part of the relevant question is a yes-no inquiry whether code-switching is used at all within (group) chats, and if so, one is to specify which languages are mixed (“German”, “Chinese (Mandarin)”, “English”, and “Other. Please specify”). Using the same scale, the following question is about whether languages are mixed within a single message.

After that, the informants are asked to name the dominant language they use for voice messages (options: “German”, “Chinese (Mandarin)”,

“English”, and “Other. Please specify”). The following question is about whether the informants care about using correct language when communicating via *WeChat*: Here the languages “German”, “Chinese”, “English”, and “Other. Please specify” are provided as options, together with the rating scale “never”, “seldom”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, and “very frequently”.

The next set of questions is included in the survey because of the special German-Chinese intercultural communication setting. It is about whether the informants use German while communicating with Chinese people, or whether they use Chinese when communicating with Germans. In addition, it is asked whether the translation function that *WeChat* provides is used to understand chats and postings. The assessment is made using the scale “never”, “seldom”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, and “very frequently”.

Subsequently, the focus of the survey shifts towards specifics of internet language use. Survey-takers are asked to assess the frequency of their use of abbreviations such as *lol* [*laughing out loud*] etc., and whether they use emojis or stickers. The assessment is once again made using the scale “never”, “seldom”, “occasionally”, “frequently”, and “very frequently”. If the informants never use emojis or stickers, they can leave out the two following questions, which address the functions of the use of emojis and stickers. The answering options provided for these two questions are “Positive commentary”, “Negative commentary”, “Visual embroidery”, “Irony”, and “Other. Please specify”. Concerning the language used while chatting, the next question is on whether the informants’ style of writing is more similar to the way they speak (oral) or the way they write (literal). The answer is given on a five-point assessment scale, the extremes of which are marked “like I speak” and “like I write”.

The survey is concluded with three optional commentary boxes as answering possibilities to the following questions: “Have you noticed any problems while communicating through *WeChat*, e.g. data security?”; “Which additional features within *WeChat* would you like to have?”; “Do you have any further comments on *WeChat*?”

5. Expected Results

The results and data collected via www.sosci-survey.de are available after the survey’s completion in the shape of Microsoft Excel charts and various other formats, such as SPSS. These are comfortably annotated so that the analysis can be conducted swiftly and elegantly, making the most of the software features and exporting data — where applicable and useful — as diagrams.

At the time of writing this article (mid-March 2019), already more than 170 individuals had completed the online survey (208 completed questionnaires

were received in total), which makes it the most comprehensive study of digital communication practices by a German expatriate group. I am not aware of such studies altogether, although it can be expected that in the near future, there will be more research of this or a similar kind. This has to do with the key role mobile communication, especially through messaging apps like *WeChat*, and globally certainly more eminent *WhatsApp*, has in connecting expatriates and ethnic minorities, such as speakers of German in South America (in this context I first heard about the vast use of *WhatsApp* when brushing up one’s German skills¹) with their native countries.

My expectations concerning the results are that most people answering the survey will come from either Shanghai or Beijing, and there will be fewer people from more remote areas. I expect the use of *WeChat* to significantly differ between the sexes, since it is mostly men that are employed in China among the German-speaking expatriates, whereas most women lead the life of a “non-working” partner, to use a phrase by an Old China Hand I once met in Shanghai. It will be interesting to see as to how the younger age groups (especially students) will assess their own use of *WeChat* versus the expats in their prime (30s and 40s) and the elder users. It can also be expected that there is a wide variety of features used, if not all of them. However, there certainly will be focal points, most likely direct chat communication. While the data is yet to be analyzed, it is a complex but interesting question whether emergent forms of mobile aspects of communication such as emojis and stickers as used in *WeChat* are popular enough to be mentioned as actively used here². Apart from the answers to the survey questions, there is the option of commenting on other relevant aspects towards the end of the questionnaire by filling in a commentary box. I expect such issues as data security, censorship, and the Golden Firewall to surface in these comments.

The comprehensive results of the study will eventually be published in a German language monograph with publisher Gunter Narr, Tübingen (contracted). However, there will also be article publications in English focusing on certain main aspects of the German-speaking expatriates’ *WeChat* communication practices. The analyses of the data gathered will show which aspects will be significant enough to include in separate article publications.

¹ I am indebted to Patrick Wolf-Farré for bringing this to my attention during the 2018 *German Abroad* conference at the University of Erfurt.

² My doctoral student Gu Wei from Zurich University analyses sticker use in *WhatsApp* and *WeChat* (co-supervised dissertation with Christa Dürscheid, whom I thank for bringing to my attention the study of Ge, Herring (2018)).

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