**Stranger Stranger or Lonely Lonely? Young Chinese and Dating Apps between the Locational, the Mobile and the Social**

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**Introduction: Did You Get Married?**

Just around Chinese New Year in early 2014, with most Chinese families gathered around dining tables to celebrate the festivity, local TV stations aired a commercial by a matchmaking company playing on the climax of a grandmother vexing her granddaughter year after year with the nagging half-question, “you got married, right?” (*jie hun le ba*?). Eventually, thanks to the intercession of the sponsored matchmaking company, the granddaughter announces to the old relative lying on a hospital bed, “Granny, I got married!” (*waipo, wo jiehun le!*). According to observers of online discussion boards and social networking platforms, the reactions of the younger, marriage-aged audience to this advertising were not the most enthusiastic – “the perception of being held hostage by their families to get married enraged many netizens who viewed this practice as backwards.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

[Figure 1]

*Figure 1*. “You got married, right?”, screenshot of a Baihe advertisement, 2014[[3]](#footnote-3)

Around the same time, M.G., a 36 year old single heterosexual male, evidently still troubled about his desire for a stable relationship and a related fraud scheme he was recently victim of, recounts his experience with matchmaking services to one of the authors. His narration, slightly abridged, goes like:

Zhen Ai[[4]](#footnote-4) is a matchmaking website, and it provides not simply an online service for which you pay to view other people's online profile and contact them [...] but also a matchmaker who is a real person talking directly to you and sending you profiles of selected candidates according to the personal data you provide. I tried their three-month membership plan, priced at 3,000 RMB. According to the plan, the service guaranteed consistent efforts to introduce you to different women during the three months of membership. However, I realized that three months was a short period of time and it was difficult to get to know one woman, let alone many [...] so I told the matchmaker to be more selective. [...] I was introduced to a woman almost immediately, and her appearance immediately captivated me. We started talking on WeChat[[5]](#footnote-5) after the initial exchange through the matchmaker, the conversation went smoothly, and I would call her sometimes at night to talk to her on the phone. But we did not meet during the first month, so our relationship did not develop much. [...] Because I had to leave my hometown for a while and I felt the matchmaker did actually contact me very rarely, I called Zhen Ai and asked them if I could terminate the service and get a refund [...] and eventually I got part of the money back. Anyway, and here is the interesting part, the woman I got introduced to earlier continued to contact me. When our feelings escalated to a degree that I finally asked her to meet, she agreed at first, then suddenly declined claiming that she was currently not living in my hometown. After a few days, she contacted me saying she was at the opening ceremony of her new shop, and asked me if I wanted to congratulate her by sending her a wreath. I agreed, and she told me to call a specific flower shop and transfer the money to their bank account so they could take care of the delivery. I called the number she gave me, and they asked me 1,500 RMB for a wreath. At this point, I had no doubt that the entire thing was a scam. After this episode, I didn't contact her anymore, and she never called me again.

In this chapter, pitched against these two frame-setting snippets about social expectations and pressures around marriage, dating, matchmaking and relationships in general, we would like to present some observations regarding the use of locational social mobile applications in Mainland China. As it is true that China has undergone two decades of accelerated development of its communication infrastructure and IT industries, hosting by now the largest national population of Internet users,[[6]](#footnote-6) it is also the case that the fuzzy concept of "online dating" has diversified into a whole spectrum of services and practices - from traditional matchmaking intermediaries gone online to the flourishing local ecology of social networking platforms, websites and mobile applications: through which Chinese digital media users negotiate their affective needs, desires and social pressures.

These developments often make the news as bits and pieces of 'the latest weird online phenomenon in China'. We argue that there is a rift between the isolated cries of media panics, the claims regarding the revolutionary advent of new online platforms and the actual, everyday life activities of hundreds of millions of Chinese digital media users: who reinvent and deploy these arrangements of software and more or less mobile hardware into the contingencies of their daily existence, with little regard for, and often a cynical angle on, broad sociological interpretations and media crazes. This is especially true in the prurient discursive field of online dating, which often sees commentaries on technology and media practices paired with claims regarding sexual revolutions, degradation of morals or psychological well-being of society at large.

Our intention is to provide a focused, in-depth snapshot of the social practices deployed through a Chinese mobile dating application, presented as embedded in the context of the users' everyday life. This is a small-scale reply to certain grand sweeping statements portraying Asia as one of the main actors of a global communications revolution[[7]](#footnote-7) and Chinese netizen culture as the locus of a generalized sexual rebellion.[[8]](#footnote-8) We start from the assumptions that media in general are "a socially responsive technology"[[9]](#footnote-9) and that their situated deployment in everyday lives is much more revealing than growing percentages and statistics. Our hope is to give evidence, following Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, of how mobile media in particular "allows forms of connection and pathways of communication that are specific and essential to the young”,[[10]](#footnote-10) although we would extend this claim beyond generational barriers and show how it is users at large, rather than a specific age group, shape mobile media through the pathways carved by their pragmatic and situated practices.

What we want to illustrate is how users of a popular online dating application shape the pathways of communication of the medium through their courtship practices. The three main sections in which we present our analysis are named after the buzzwords that often describe these apps – *locational*, *social*, *mobile* – and seek to question and re-evaluate these terms in light of our findings. These three sections, providing insights into creative usage of locative media, sociality with strangers, and mobile self-presentation, are preceded by a methodological note and a general discussion of our field of inquiry in relationship to our actual site of data collection: contemporary urban China.

**Flirting with Methods**

The research presented in this chapter belongs to a tradition of ethnographic work on the use of media and technologies, and seeks to suggest a certain kind of situated and participative methodological approach as the most productive way to study courtship practices on digital media. In short, while digital ethnography has been systematized under different names as the bundle of methods useful to collect data about what people do on online platforms,[[11]](#footnote-11) we argue that in the case of mobile media, with its implications of local sociality, networking-in-transit and personal identity, an even higher degree of participation is necessary on part of the researcher: Sheller and Urry define this degree of ethnographic sensitivity to the use of mobile media and social networking in everyday life "mobile ethnography".[[12]](#footnote-12) In addition to the adoption of this sensitivity, given our focus on the affective social practices of courtship and dating, we think it is necessary to integrate a phenomenological component in the process of data collection as a precious addition to participant observation, interviews and other kinds of surveys.

In practice, the authors collected small talk, casual discussions and more or less structured interviews of digital media users online and offline while conducting ethnographic fieldwork in different Chinese cities. This contextual and discursive data is complemented by a more phenomenological, auto-ethnographic component of actual platform experience by the authors, who have used the Momo mobile app for an extended period of time inside Mainland China. Inspired by research such as Jacobs's performative auto-ethnography of AdultFriendFinder users in Hong Kong,[[13]](#footnote-13) the authors got their hands (metaphorically) dirty by actively befriending, chatting and flirting with Momo users, playing on different roles, genders and online personas, and (after the necessary ethical disclosures and clearances[[14]](#footnote-14)) even meeting some of the online contacts in real life for further discussion. To better capture the hues and shades of how research participants shared their everyday life through images, avatars and textual inventions on online platforms, the authors also collected screenshots of other users' personal profiles or image galleries, along the methodological lines of what Choi calls “shared visual ethnography”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Some of these visual materials, opportunely anonymized, are presented as supporting evidence throughout the chapter.

Our introduction to the research field has to be completed by a short technical introduction to the mobile application on which we focused our efforts. Momo (陌陌, literally "Stranger Stranger") belongs to the category of social contact mobile applications, a kind of software designed for smartphones and other consumer mobile devices. Features common to this software typology include the linkage between the user account and his/her mobile phone number, an asynchronous multimedia chat capability, friend lists and multiple-user groups, customizable profiles and image galleries. In the case of Momo, these functionalities revolve around a locational search engine through which users can find and befriend each other in function of their actual location, as mapped by the user's mobile device GPS system and network access.

The choice of Momo as the main focus of our inquiry was mostly based on its popularity in China during the time of fieldwork, both in media coverage[[16]](#footnote-16) and in everyday discussions between our research participants; in fact, the app crossed the milestone of one hundred million registered users[[17]](#footnote-17) right in the middle of our investigation. Creatively hailed as the “one-night stand mystical device”[[18]](#footnote-18) (*yuepao shenqi*), Momo is often described as the best choice to “have fun with girls” (*wan meizi / ba mei*). Yet its use is more often topic for hearsay and speculative stigmatization rather than direct user experiences. While much press presents the application as the “China's sexual revolution”[[19]](#footnote-19) offering Chinese people a “path to the forbidden”,[[20]](#footnote-20) the local corporate explanations are more insightful. Tang Yan, the CEO and founder of Beijing Momo Technology Company, describes the app as "a more open platform" for users who have

a lot of needs that cannot be satisfied by their current social networks [...] Momo provides them with unlimited possibilities and imaginary spaces - for example, the life[styles] that many young users are trying to present in their profiles are not the lives they are living but the lives they dream of[[21]](#footnote-21).

[Figure 2]

*Figure 2*. "Momo at one hundred million users, thanks to you for being with us!", smartphone screenshot by the authors, 7 February 2014.

**Locating Mobile Sociality: Online Dating and the Chinese City**

The story of affective interaction through computer-mediated communication dates back to the early days of the medium, to the little chronicled phenomena of mailing-list flirting, multi-user dungeon (MUD) flings, steamy private chat-room conversations, and discussion board romances.[[22]](#footnote-22) It is only in the late nineties, though, that attention begins to be given to the corporate developments of online affective practices, with commercial platforms designed specifically for the increasing numbers of users looking at the Internet as a new opportunity for desire and romance.[[23]](#footnote-23) As Orr recognizes, online courtship has never been a straightforward issue, its different aspects and individual preferences weaving "a story that was far more complex than I'd imagined. Internet dating [...] had started changing the way in which people socialized in some pretty profound ways”.[[24]](#footnote-24) These social shifts involved "multiple dates with different people in a single week" and "searching on your cell phone for someone near the coffee shop you were in", practices that were supposedly "starting to upset traditional notions of courtship".[[25]](#footnote-25)

The efforts to understand why people prefer mediated interaction to actual encounters have been often grounded on the larger theorization of the media in question.[[26]](#footnote-26) It is thus under the looming presence of the concept of cyberspace, portrayed as seductive, seemingly imaginary, egalitarian and risky, that Ben-Ze'ev frames his question, “At any moment, millions of people across the globe are surfing that space, socializing with each other or having romantic affairs. The number is growing by the minute. What is the lure of the Net?”[[27]](#footnote-27) Different approaches have often rested on similar assumptions of a fundamental separation between online and offline lives, and of the defective nature of a mostly asynchronous, anonymous and textual computer-mediated communication. In the case of online affective practices, this has led to inquiries about the relational implications of new media and the ways in which “online relationships substitute for, complement, conflict with, amplify, or innovate new types of relationships”.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In reviewing the relevant literature, our impression is that online dating research has yet to catch up, methodologically and theoretically, with leading edge of media studies in general, remaining wedded to early debates "dominated by the image of a Gibsonian cyberspace in which users would lose consciousness of the real world and lose themselves in a universe of abstract forms and disembodied perspectives".[[29]](#footnote-29) It is not surprising, for this kind of research, to espouse portrayals of online dating as inherently positive (revolutionary or liberating) or negative (addictive or vilifying). In opposition to this, by ditching rigid separations between the online and the offline, and by rejecting conceptions of technologically-mediated communication as defective or lacking in significant ways, we postulate the embedding of digital media into everyday life as a move towards "the contemporary debate [which] has shifted onto the terrain of globalizations".[[30]](#footnote-30) Ten years after Terranova's invigorating portrayal of media studies,[[31]](#footnote-31) we would take one step forward and shift our inquiry towards the terrain of *localizations*.

This shift is in keeping with a general "mobility turn" in the social sciences,[[32]](#footnote-32) precious in a historical moment in which "the notion of the city has become wedded to concepts like mobility, networks and mediated interaction," and useful to "capture some of the new complexity characterising contemporary urban everyday life".[[33]](#footnote-33) Our theoretical assumption follows the idea that "the presence of GPSs (global positioning systems), mediated surfaces, RFID (radio frequency identification) and other technologies that all relate to contemporary mobility practices adds a new dimension to the notion of movement and constitutes new arenas and tools for identity-construction and social interaction (as well, of course, for commercial exploitation and state control)".[[34]](#footnote-34) Although we will not focus on the implications of commerce and control, our interpretation of the “mobility turn” links mobile technologies to identity-construction, social interaction and locational practices. Moreover, as Jensen specifies, denouncing accusations of isolationism and asociality, "a fair amount of these technologies not only work as pass-time devices or artifacts that we may 'hide' behind, but they are networked and linked into the many other layers of communication and interaction that make up the contemporary network city".[[35]](#footnote-35)

Aiming at treating the uses of a mobile social contact application as a node in contemporary layered urban networks, embedded in the everyday lives of its users, and enabling individual affective practices, we cultivate “a beginning awareness of the importance of the location, the placement and the situated technologies”[[36]](#footnote-36) and we follow the steps of similar endeavours in the field. For example, in her study of the use of mobile phones use by young rural-to-urban migrant women in China, Wallis shows how the device, integrated into socio-technical practices and norms, provides “immobile mobility”, which she defines as “socio-techno means of surpassing spatial, temporal, physical and structural boundaries [...] situated in the everyday experience”,[[37]](#footnote-37) while also functioning a stabile access point to one's own (existing and potential) social connections. Similarly, Choi propounds the idea of a city understood as a “urban network” criss-crossed by individuals making use of ubiquitous technologies, in which it becomes crucial to study “not only the macro-level design of the city as a network [...] but also its micro-level construction at the intersection of people, place and technology”.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Predictably, the theoretical arguments proposed in this section appear familiar to Wang Li, chief operating officer of Momo Technology, illustrates the social context of the success of his app with admirable corporate brevity. He says,

Over these past two years particularly, social changes have been so incredibly fast as people move to cities and towns [...] Chinese people are fairly introverted [and in a new environment] they tend not to make friends with their neighbours. [Moreover,] Chinese people didn’t have choices before and people are getting to middle age and realizing they don’t actually get on with their spouse, because they got married for reasons other than love.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**The Mobile: Self-presentation on Portable Façades**

Since their inception on the Chinese market, online dating platforms had to deal with local social mores and strategies of mediated self-presentation. Ten years ago, Sina's vice-president Jack Hong reportedly explained the difficulties faced by his company's dating service in terms of ethnic and cultural factors: “Ethnic Chinese in general have a tendency to be more passive in terms of selling themselves [...] the result is page after page of single people who are hard to distinguish from one another. They have answered all the questions about their basic characteristics, but offered no additional information. Although some people do, the majority of Chinese on Sina's Club Love provide no photos”.[[40]](#footnote-40) With the popularization of mobile communication devices such as smartphones and tablets, often offering personal imaging capabilities, online social platforms have become the stage for a variety of visual self-presentation strategies that easily disproves hypotheses of culturally rooted preferences for passivity and anonymity.

To give some examples of how mobile social apps like Momo as used as a portable façade for platform-specific strategies of self-presentation, we will focus on male-female interaction, and in particular on the role of the face and the body in this process. This choice is part of our general orientation towards the continuity between online and offline lives. “Rather than focusing on a ‘body less’ self online, new theories must focus on how the body is presented in cyberspace - even if it’s not one's ‘actual’ body”.[[41]](#footnote-41) How do Momo users present their bodies to other users, and how do they interpret other users' façades? Z.B., one female Momo early user, explained how in her opinion the first principle of interacting with strangers on Momo was “image management”. Other female informants, interrogated regarding the principal criteria for selecting among unknown guys’ contact requests, emphasized the term *kan lian* (‘to look at the face’). Z.B. recounted of receiving ten to fifty friend requests from (presumably nearby) strangers on Momo, and ignoring most of them after a quick glance at their personal pictures.

To better understand this process of selection operating at the first stages of interaction, it is necessary to go back to the workings of Momo's messaging interface. The sender of a message can check its successful delivery it through a colour indicator (yellow if not yet opened, green if opened and thus supposedly read). In our experiences of sending large numbers of friend requests to people in the vicinity, most of our introductory messages remained forever ‘unread’: we later understood that this was due to the “unappealing” nature of our profiles. As a matter of fact, as Z.B. explained, our messages were received, but the counterpart decided to ignore them without opening them, just by a look at our personal image. “I just have to slide down the notification bar, like this,” she shows, “and give a look at the resized profile picture and the preview of the message. Most of the times, I just decide based on this”. By lacking this situated knowledge and choosing a profile picture that did not show our face, we doomed our early attempts of initiating conversations on the platform. Moreover, by being judged only according to the message preview, we were completely unaware of the successful transmission of our requests - a strategy that, in fact, functions as a perfect defence against spam and insistent users. Being chosen among scores of other contacts does really depend on one's face as it is encoded in a small 50x50 pixel square, in a radicalization of classical understandings of infatuation and flirting, according to which “face is the principal determinant in the perception of our individual beauty or ugliness”.[[42]](#footnote-42) On Momo, 'face' (as a clear, well-framed profile picture or *touxiang* (literally 'head-image') is the first and most important factor determining further interaction.

Besides this initial selection process, how does this *touxiang* work as a façade? Having one is the basic requirement to hope to even get a single, dismissive reply, but the deployment of profile pictures reveals more subtle strategies of self-presentation that are also inextricably linked to geographical contexts. In fact, most of the informants met on Momo were not permanent urban residents but the sort of liminal population floating between urban outskirts and rural areas surrounding the city - a population that, according to Momo's CEO, makes up the largest part of the application user base.[[43]](#footnote-43) Many of the young female users we chatted with recalled features of the country girls moving to the city described by Bourdieu in *The Bachelor’s Ball*: “more open to urban ideals, and rendered particularly attentive and sensitive by all their cultural training to gestures and attitudes, clothing and a person’s whole demeanor, readier to deduce deep personality from external appearance”.[[44]](#footnote-44)

This impression was reinforced by the personal profiles of our contacts, on which we observed many different examples of bodily techniques including gestures and facial expressions belonging to the tropes of urban fashionable women as portrayed in the media and advertising: pale faces, long and silky hair, red and pouted lips, long lashes, cute poses (Figure 3). These features were often paired to specific objects tied to distinction and taste: handbags, fashionable accessories, trendy food and drinks, items of clothing. Indeed, this does not imply uniformity of banality, as alternative images of femininity were portrayed as well by a segment of our informants: short hair, minimal make-up, rebellious gestures and tomboyish looks tallying to the stereotypes of ‘progressive urban woman’ or ‘boyish girl’ (*nühanzi*). On the whole, and quite expectedly, Momo personal profiles were used as the “imaginary spaces”[[45]](#footnote-45) described by Tang Yan, the company's CEO, on which users inscribed visual experimentations enacting their dream lives rather than just present themselves in the fashion of matchmaking services. When a postage stamp-sized picture functions at the same time as the determinant factor for new interactions and as a site for complicated semiotic strategies, it is not surprising that, following Goffman's classic theatrical framework “facial expressions [...] are generally carefully monitored (and engineered) to preserve the desired mask”.[[46]](#footnote-46)

[Figure 3]

Figure 3: Frowns, bare legs, branded drinks and fashion items linked to situated events. "Why it doesn't snow? Please snow... \*praying hands\*" (3.92km away) / "Rainy day, I drenched myself, if I get sick no one will look after me..." (3.44km away).

Part of these semiotic efforts of constructing a public and social face rely on what Bourdieu calls a "language of urban sentimentality"[[47]](#footnote-47) which juxtaposes selfies with situated comments and referents: the place where one is eating, one's commuting status and the vexations of traffic and weather, all precisely localized by GPS-measured distances. This urban sentimentality, which seems much more related to a nexus of mobility and networked sociality than active flirtation or purposeful romantic searches, does also rely on textual means. Usernames, short biographies and regular status updates become another crucial site of distinction between active members and occasional users. In this context, the practice of posting sentimental quotes from romance novels, rhetorical questions, complaints about boredom or loneliness, in combination with a doctored self-shot of a frowning face or sensual hints of body parts, described scornfully by several informants as *qiu guan'ai* (literally ‘begging for love’), appears more as a strategy of attention-management aimed at maintaining a façade of presence and activity for existing and potential contacts.

In conclusion, mobility enables users of social platforms like Momo to construct their own portable façade to be carried around everyday movements and commutes, becoming temporarily visible to other users intersecting paths, as “the many transit spaces of our global network society facilitate meetings of all sorts [...] they are sites of mobile face-to-face interaction”.[[48]](#footnote-48) This “mobile face-to-face interaction”, as mediated by Momo and similar software, is very different from uploading one's own personal pictures on Internet websites always visible to just about anyone. This difference might explain the success and popularity of this sort of mobile applications offering the lure of an “immobile mobility”,[[49]](#footnote-49) a façade that functions as a site-specific point of access for location-based, random encounters. Yet this popularity, especially when paired with gender roles and mores, ends up generating overloads of contact requests and competition for attention. It is for this reason that strategies of self-presentation move away from the obvious goals of romantic searches or flirtatious advances and acquire a platform-specific code: optimizing one's profile picture for attracting replies, managing one's picture gallery to represent lifestyles and dreams, proving one's reliability and involvement in the app through constant updates. As Figure 4 illustrates, the competition in this attention economy stimulates the users to exploit the very structure of the platform to prove their wit, creativity or familiarity with the app.

[Figure 4]

Figure 4: Exploiting the platform. Mixed-media nicknames ('President Xi lead me' with Chinese flag and rocket), and multi-panel pictures split to fit into Momo's predetermined 8-picture profile gallery.

**The Social: 'Stranger Stranger' or 'Lonely Lonely'?**

We have hinted at how mobility reshapes social networking platforms and the competing self-presentation strategies of their users. Yet, after conversations initiate, what are they actually about? Is most of the sociality between Momo users just about sexual fantasies, one-night stands or romance, as it would seem to be implied by reports on the “mystical tool to get laid” (*yuepao shenqi*)? From our interactions with various informants on Momo, sexually charged conversations appeared to be mostly disdained or deemed uninteresting, likely as another result of gender roles and imbalances, and female users established an array of codes and warnings to discourage straightforward approaches and rude proposals. Besides ignoring contact requests, informants would define these kind of vulgar conversations as boring or *wuliao* (literally ‘nothing to talk about’), emphasizing how, more than disturbed by them, they didn't find anything interesting in them, preferring to interact with users who provided smart dialogues, humour and (even flirtatious) wit.

Having shown that, despite the mythology surrounding it, Momo is hardly a 'dating app', we would rather define it as a pastime flirting platform. Ben Ze'ev defines flirting as “a subtle, sexual communication [...] a kind of enjoyable play having the pleasant atmosphere that is typical of the promise of sexual activity" that yet is "not necessarily a prelude to sexual interaction”.[[50]](#footnote-50) Despite classical understandings of the term, which define flirting as “in the main, non-verbal behaviour”[[51]](#footnote-51) we would follow Ben Ze'ev and point out how “the crucial element of both flirting and cyberspace" is, in fact, a kind of non-purposive conversation similar in atmosphere to relaxed gossiping, an "idle, relaxing, and enjoyable talk” which “involves being playful and attaching little importance to the given subject”.[[52]](#footnote-52) Informants confirmed this broad understanding. "I once had the congenial company of a girl. For half a month, we chatted every day until 3 a.m. We talked about all kinds of funny things until we were both exhausted and fell asleep laughing", recounts a male user, noting how he never actually met his online night-chat partner. Another male informer analyses his motivation to use Momo quite thoroughly: “On every boring holiday, every sleepless night, I always expect to have someone from the opposite sex feel the same around me. I just want to talk about some bullshit, not for love, not for *yuepao* (getting laid); I just want unadulterated chatting without constraints, under a slightly *aimei* (erotic and ambiguous) atmosphere”.

In one of the earliest anthropological analyses of Chinese university students' courtship practices, Moore identifies a peculiar lack of infatuation, and finds superficial flirtatious behaviour not to be “institutionalized in student discourse”.[[53]](#footnote-53) It was regarded as a waste of time or just plainly inappropriate. In contrast, we found the recurrence of the terms *aimei* and *wan aimei* (‘playing / enjoying ambiguity’) among Momo users describing their conversations on the platform to indicate precisely a desire for establishing and maintaining superficial, flirtatious interactions that often remain in the realm of the digital. Moreover, the persistence and recurrence of these conversations (“everyday”, “on every boring day”, etc.) and the avoidance of *wuliao* interactions (the ones in which there is literally nothing to talk about, because they are just about sex) hints at the fact that the sociality sought by Momo users is an ambiguous one, in constant tension between the possibility of physical contact, as quantified by the distance between the users constantly shown in the conversation, and the pleasure of whiling days and nights away without the pressures of a more demanding relationship. Given the way in which the app seems to be used not so much to find blind dates but mainly to pass time and fight the boring spells of everyday life and transit, Momo might literally mean 'Lonely Lonely' rather than 'Stranger Stranger', as one user comment quips ironically, with a Chinese play on words.[[54]](#footnote-54)

[Figure 5]

Figure 5: Conversation versus boredom. "Personal signature: When you are bored (*wuliao*) do not hope I will keep you company chatting with you!"

**The Locational: Less Than Dating, More Than Doing Nothing**

During our fieldwork, one of the authors lived in an old residential area near a night market. He one day got in touch with N.M., a young girl found through browsing local profiles. After ongoing conversations, the girl invited him to join a Momo group with approximately thirty other members, mostly shop-owners, hawkers, and sales personnel working in the vicinity. The group description read: “Absolutely NO *yuepao* [getting laid] (if you want to, please send each other private messages). This group chat is only for everyday pastime chatter”. After a while, the author was able to scroll through several pages of the group's chat logs, observing how the recurring topics of conversation were local issues such as: the weather, nearby food joints, and general gossip, often discussed in a carefree and direct way, also by virtue of the fact that group members did not know each other in real life. As N.M. explained, she joined the group because “it is simply too *qileng* (‘lonely and cold’) to spend the evening sitting there [in the night market], staring at people coming and going”. What the members of this group shared is the necessary stasis on their workplace, a cramped, yet not prosperous night market, and the boredom resulting from nights spent sitting among passers-by walking through their stalls in a bitterly cold winter.

In fact, just as illustrated in the previous examples, the mobility of devices makes this kind of sociality possible mostly in conjunction with the locational capabilities of the GPS technology and Internet connectivity. As Hemment explains, "the emergence of locative media signals a convergence of geographical and data space that comes about as soon as computing becomes mobile or ambient, reversing the trend toward the view of digital content as placeless, only encountered in the amorphous and other space of the Internet"[[55]](#footnote-55). These thirty night market hawkers, bounded by a geographical necessity, work-time and long spells of inactivity, found a way of passing time by using the locational capabilities of Momo to set up a local group and just keep each other’s company. Here Wallis’ formulation of “immobile mobility”[[56]](#footnote-56) resonates with Goffman's concept of “mobile with”:[[57]](#footnote-57) a mobile device connected to the Internet running a locational social platform helps users in escaping their forced immobility into a layer of togetherness that is way more *local*-space than *cyber*-space.

Goffman's further elaboration on the concept of “mobile with” fits with features of the night market Momo group: its components are characterized by a “civil inattention to non-members” (N.M. happened to ignore actual customers while replying to group messages); they maintain a “proximity to members” (sharing both location and activities); they develop “ritual practices for joining and departing” (the Momo group has basic rules of conduct).[[58]](#footnote-58) Yet, quite tellingly, Goffman's original definition of a “mobile with” – that is, “a party whose members are perceived to be ‘together’”[[59]](#footnote-59) – does not apply to groups like the one in question. In fact, it is precisely the mediated nature of the night market vendors' sociality that hides their togetherness behind apparently self-concerned interactions with digital devices. When the author eventually took a walk through the night market, the ubiquity of smartphones and tablets in the hands of intent shopkeepers and street vendors suddenly hinted at a kind of sociality very different from the recurring images of the “lonely crowds” of isolated users and alienating technologies portrayed in popular and academic narratives.

In this last example, the locational capability of mobile devices is repurposed a way of passing time with fellow vendors, establish a place of encounter and a loose sense of solidarity in a sometimes boring and unpleasant work environment that requires immobility and constant presence. An implication of this situatedness of networked interactions is a paradigm shift from placeless imaginations of a cyberspace populated by interactions dislocated in place and time to actual digital media practices embedded in everyday lives and proximal sociality. Yet, this does not imply a 'coming back home' from Rheingold's virtual community[[60]](#footnote-60) to the local community of the district or neighborhood. As in the case of flirting, the locational sociality enabled by Momo remains suspended in the ambiguity between a network of emphatic friends sharing hours of chill and boredom in a range of a few hundred meters, and the rarely crossed line between leisurely chatting and getting to meet each other in person. When a group member suggested doing a meet-up in a nearby KTV, only two people showed up, and the organizer himself backed off in hesitation. When, after more than one month of acquaintance, NM agreed to meet the author to get some books he promised to give before her leaving. She was waiting there with her boyfriend, up only for a few minutes of dismissive chit-chat before getting back to work.

**Conclusion: If You Are (Not) the One**

This book is designed for you... if you're ready to explore the World Wide Web of romance! You'll learn how to get online, and get the search results you want quickly. Whether you're single or already involved, you'll find answers to all your questions about how you can make romance happen every day.[[61]](#footnote-61)

So reads the introduction to *Internet in One Hour: Romance and Relationships*, one of the many guidebooks to the World Wide Web aimed at the growing masses of users approaching the burgeoning consumer Internet of AOL, 14.4kbps connections and Netscape browsing. Twenty years later, in the age of 4G, social networking and locational apps, one has to ask if romance is actually all that users want to happen in their digitally mediated everyday lives. Is Momo really the ultimate *yuepao shenqi*, the ‘one-night stand mythical device’ portrayed by media narratives, welcomed by sexual revolutionaries and feared by moral panic hustlers, if most of its users do actually use it in different ways?

We answered this question by drawing on a digital, mobile and visually shared ethnography of the actual arrangements of software and more or less portable hardware embedded in the everyday lives of Momo users in China. Following the mobility turn in social sciences, and locating the use of ubiquitous technologies as mobile immobilities and personal façades across layered urban networks, we had several discoveries: that apparently trivial and narcissistic practices of self-presentation play a pivotal semiotic role in the platform environment; that the kind of sociality privileged on Momo is actually more about interesting conversations than speed-dating and sexual encounters; that its locational capabilities are exploited for local solidarities deeply linked to layers of urbanism, work and co-presence.

Given the size of our sample (a few scores of informants), our findings are by no means generalizable to a hundred million users. Yet, we deploy them in order to argue against reductive conceptualizations of ‘online dating’, ‘Internet culture’ and similar concepts that rest on dated assumptions of a separation between online and offline lives. In the post-digital, pervasively mediated world of ubiquitous computing, we prefer focusing on the situated practices, platform sociality and vernacular content appearing at the point of encounter between users and technologies.

This theoretical stance is a powerful antidote towards determinist explanations of media use and adoption: if Chinese users went from a cautious preference for passivity and anonymity to an apparently dazzling exhibitionism, this has more to do with the small-scale, everyday media sociality than with ethnicity, culture or communication technology in itself. Similarly, one hundred million users of a pruriently discussed app do not necessarily imply the drastic social changes described by media and academics: “desiring China”,[[62]](#footnote-62) “China’s hormone revolution”,[[63]](#footnote-63) “people’s pornography”,[[64]](#footnote-64) “China’s sexual revolution”[[65]](#footnote-65) and other slogans have to be carefully verified at the level of localization, since

major studies of changes in sexual practices […] lead to much more moderate conclusions. Behaviours are certainly becoming more varied and diversified, and that reveals a growing interest in sexuality, but they are changing relatively slow and have little to do with the explosion of sexualized material in the media.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In other words, actual user practices say more about local contexts than larger theorizations about Chinese society say about the popularity of Momo. As a matter of fact, when embedded in the ensemble of social expectations, peer pressure and family narratives around affects and relationships, the snapshots presented in this chapter outline a larger and more coherent picture. In contemporary China, where the popularity of TV matchmaking reality shows such as *If You Are the One* (*Fei Cheng Wu Rao*) directly reflect most parents’ involvement in their offspring’s marriage arrangements, their disapproval of dating during school years, and the common resort to matchmaking services. In this context, ‘flirting apps’ such as Momo provide a much needed safe haven for relational experimentation.

To conclude, without agreeing with her portrayal of social life shifting to “post-familial families" in which people are “alone together, each in their own rooms, each on a networked computer or mobile device […] spending more time with technology and less with each other”,[[67]](#footnote-67) we believe that it is Sherry Turkle who provides one of the best summaries of the kind of pragmatic use of technology we found and described among Momo users in China: “people doing what they have always done: trying to understand themselves and improve their lives by using the materials they have at hand”.[[68]](#footnote-68) Momo is mostly not about dating, but also not just about grooming a useless virtual persona or ‘doing nothing’ in front of a screen. Rather, it enables a kind of *aimei* flirting along the tensions of place, sex and identity with others who are quite not ‘the ones’ – ephemeral and proximal partners much more interesting than the *wuliao* world of social pressures, prescribed roles, and mediated images.

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