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Digital Identities in China

An Introduction

Paul J. D'Ambrosio

Recent discussions of the internet and related technologies are largely focused on the race for developing ever stronger artificial intelligence (AI).<?> Indeed, there are already a number of powerful algorithms that have tested assumptions regarding the uniqueness of human intelligence and shaken our self-assurance as a species. Currently, large language models, like ChatGPT, garner the most attention and call into question some of our most treasured abilities, from creative writing to writing code. However, we must also remember that among the most powerful and the most widely used algorithms on the planet, that is, those used in social media, have already proven quite difficult to control. They have had consequences their creators never imaged, and have been blamed for everything from disruptions in elections to deteriorating international relations and from increased rates of depression and loneliness to climbing (teenage) suicide rates.<?>

This special section is centered specifically on how social media and other web-based platforms shaped our conceptions of ourselves, of others, and the world. Both online and offline, the profiles we create on the internet have tangible impacts on our identities and on our interactions. There has been much discussion of this phenomena in recent years,<?> however, it has largely been done by Western scholars who look at Western experiences. Accordingly, concepts such as "authenticity" and related notions like "true self" dominate this research.<?> In this special section scholars have explored digital identities in China from the perspective of Chinese practices, literature, and philosophy. The three articles included here focus on the experience of Chinese netizens, how they develop notions of identity, and their connection to China's distinct tradition and culture.

The opening contribution to this special section is by Jordan Martin, is titled "Sincere Performance, Ruist Ritual, and the Leap from Sincerity to Profilicity." In comparison with the other two pieces in this special section, Martin's analysis is far more concentrated on highly conceptual issues. Drawing heavily on personal experiences, classic Confucian discussions of ritual, and on Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D'Ambrosio's research on profile-based identity, Martin argues that Chinese conceptions of identity, which have been largely based on sincerity, are moving quickly to profilicity.

The term "profilicity" was developed by Moeller and D'Ambrosio<?> to describe a mode of identity where one sees themselves, others, and the world, largely in terms of profiles. These are curated according to the expectations of a "general peer"—people who share similar concerns, but who are not necessarily personally known. Accordingly, identities (of oneself and others) are seen through "second-order observation"—one does not look directly at something, but at its profile. For example, the value of anything from a cellphone to an apartment is determined not by its material, but by its market-value, that is, how other people think other people will value the thing. The same is true for how profiles are seen.

Previously, sincerity or "role-based" identity was the primary mode of developing identities, of interacting with others, and of making sense of the world.<?> Here expectations were relatively stable, fairly obvious, and shared by members of a community. Norms were thick, life was relatively predictable, and people could easily know how they should behave based on shared understandings. Authenticity gradually came to replace sincere role-based identity. Here people no longer sought to align themselves with pre-given roles. Identity was to be found within, either discovered or created. As various aspects of the world sped up and diversified, the expectations and norms held by members of increasingly large communities became watered down.<?> Rights, laws, and other comparatively objective and universal technologies came to replace the rather localized yet thick norms and expectations that held more homogenous groups together.

Borrowing from Lionel Trilling, Martin notes that in Western societies we can note a gradual shift from sincerity-based identity to authenticity-based identity. Moeller and D'Ambrosio then demonstrate how today, with the proliferation of the internet and other technologies, profile-based identity has come to dominate. However, China, Martin argues, never fully embraced an authenticity-based understanding. Nevertheless, Chinese netizens are excellent at profilicity. China has, thus, skipped authenticity, transitioning straight from sincerity to profilicity. There are repercussions for the type of profilicity expressed in China, where issues related to authenticity do not arise.

The initial impulse for developing this special section was born from observations aligning quite closely to Martin's research: profile curation has a major influence in how people think of themselves, others, and the world. Nevertheless, just as roles are not the same in every community, and even the formal structures governing them can be quite distinct, so too does profile-based identity differ across cultures. In her understanding of "authenticity," the second contributor, Wang Yiwen, exemplifies how Chinese interpretations might differ. Rather than reading authenticity as speaking to creating and making or finding and discovering oneself, as much of Western culture and most theorists understand it, Wang looks at authenticity in terms of authentication. Authenticity or authentication in Wang's study is closely tied to the golden "V" used by Sina Weibo to signify that an online profile corresponds to a specific person, and that their real name is known.

An online profile is unique because one utilizes second-order observation and presents themselves to the general peer. This also entails, however, the ability to be

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anonymous. In more traditional settings, and according to most understandings of sincerity (role-based) and authenticity, people interact with others mostly in face-to-face meetings, and the actual identity of those involved is often known.<?> Online profiles, however, allow for interactions to take place with anonymous parties. Wang's "Parasite, Para-text: Daguguguji's Performance of Digital Identity" explores this phenomenon in China, which, she claims, is a trend followed by millions who wish to embrace inauthenticity (anonymity).

The focus in Wang's article is on a particular Weibo profile, known only as "Daguguguji." Wang notes Daguguguji is one of the most well-known online personalities, and yet very little is known about the person(s) controlling this profile. Accordingly, Daguguguji represents the widespread culture of anonymity found on Chinese internet platforms. For example, it is not uncommon among Chinese netizens to find profiles with only pseudonyms, and even if someone's identity is known, many use profile photos of landscapes, animals, cartoons, celebrities, and other images that do not include the profile owner. Daguguguji is especially interesting because this profile fully embraces anonymity, using several pseudonyms interchangeably, playfully reconstructing celebrities profile photos, and generally functioning as a "paratext" in various ways. Wang explains "Rather than displaying the image of 'me' to be recognized by the other as 'myself,' Daguguguji disengages oneself from the displayed image on the screen and the pronoun "I" in one's posts. For example, by posting a selfie or video made for exhibitionist self-display, a user demonstrates that the images and words are theirs, whereas Daguguguji's authorial intention is obscured through parodic appropriation and the decontextualization of images from their normative use in the original sources." In this way Daguguguji's posts are parasitic, but also function as a para-text; the authorial power of both the original (authentic) author as well as Daguguguji, is undermined as authority is thrown into a strange parody as a rich culture of anonymity is simultaneously cultivated.

There is, however, a darker side to the internet. Censorship is notoriously harsh on the Chinese web, and while anonymity and parody are one type of therapeutic response, there are other ways to interpret the online culture in China. Zhang Sheng's article "The Painted Skin, Face Changing, Digital Coliseums, and the Circular Theater: On Digital Existence in Social Media and Wechat Moments" concludes this special section. Here Zhang reads some common experiences on the web through the lens of the short story "Painted Skin" ("Huapi" 画皮) by the Qing dynasty writer Pu Songling 蒲松龄, and draws on everything from Sichuan opera to Aristotle, Freud, and modern sociology to demonstrate that what happens online is paradoxically both more complex and more familiar than what we might think.

In "Painted Skin" a young male scholar is deceived by a demon who wears the skin of a beautiful woman to seduce him. Sensing something may be wrong the scholar seeks the help of a Daoist priest, who tries to help drive the demon away, but does not wish to kill her. Unfortunately, in the end the Daoist is forced to kill her and revive the scholar who she murdered. Zhang notes that on the web we all wear painted skins, and, modifying them based on online responses, we constantly change our faces, and even our feelings, based on various social validation feedback loops.

It is quite natural then that groups or "tribes" are formed in these online arenas, and Zhang argues that various "digital coliseums" emerge as people seek to present themselves as virtuous by defending "noble values such as social justice." Likewise, emotions transform quickly as a host of experiences are available at the swipe of a finger. There is thus much tension as people change faces, feelings, and even (online) actions with dizzying frequency. "People can transform from 'human to 'beast' at any point," as Zhang writes, and easily go from Dr.

Jekyll to Mr. Hyde with an ease only our "cyber masks" could allow.

In Zhang's work, "authenticity" is, as in Wang's, mainly interpreted in juxtaposition to "fabrication." Zhang notes that the majority of avatars used in Chinese online profiles do not include the user. Even those who do, Zhang argues, are presenting a particular "face." Zhang says that even using a real name as one's username is just a way to appear "authentic"—and it is nothing more than another mask, the mask one wears offline. But this is also mediated through the presence of online administrators. Zhang claims that they often act, or even see themselves, in positions like the Daoist priest of "Painted Skin." Reading between the lines, we might get a glimpse of a penetrating critique of the mechanisms which control online content.

The three articles in this special section span a broad range of interpretations and experiences of digital identity. From abstract conceptual discussions to a case study of a leading online personality, to more general reflections on online presence, presentation, and the administrators who are implicitly involved, they provide various contributions to understanding how online identities are curated in China. Importantly, while concentrating on specific characteristics of Chinese netizens, the scholars all include comparative angles, drawing from Chinese and non-Chinese sources alike. As we further explore the possibilities of algorithms, large language models, and/or AI, it is important to remember our humanity, and recognize how it is shaped by our technologies. Our approaches to how digital technologies shape our experiences, mediate our interactions, and transform how we view ourselves, others, and the world should be adjusted, and in doing so we should strive to account for uniqueness to the uniqueness of distinct cultures.

Notes

1 Many experts, both of AI and of foreign policy, agree that the development of AI will be a defining struggle in the coming decades. *The Age of AI: And Our Human Future* (New York: Brown, Little and Company, 2021), is a great example, it was written by one foreign policy expert and two AI experts: Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher. Other books such as Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Super-Powers* (New York: Harper Business, 2021) and Mustafa Suleyman and Michael Bhaskar, *The Coming Wave* (New York: Crown, 2023) provide similar discussions.

2 For more on the impact of social media on elections and international relations see Christopher Wylie, *Mindf*ck* (New York: Random House, 2019) or David Sumpter, *Outnumbered* (New York: Bloomsbury Sigma, 2018). On his website Jonathan Haidt has collected a number of scientific studies linking the increase in social media use to metal health problems—including especially depression, anxiety, and suicide (https://jonathanhaidt.com/social-media/; for another, earlier and related study, see https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/full/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300608). A more general and more lengthy analysis of the impact social media and various other AI technologies have had on nearly every aspect of our lives can be found in Shoshana Zuboff *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020).

3 Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 2010); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Hachette Book Company, 2017); Roberto Simanowski, *Facebook Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D'Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

4 Jill Walker-Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together* (New York: Hachette Book Company, 2017); Roberto Simanowski, *Facebook Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

5 Moeller and D'Ambrosio, See *You*.

6 For a more detailed account, see, Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972) and Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

7 These issues have been the focus of much research, see, for example, Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000); and Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). A shorter study is the influential paper by Zygmunt Bauman, "From Pilgrim to Tourist—or a Short History of Identity," in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. (New York: Sage, 1996),

8 For a more detailed discussion, see Putnam *Bowling Alone* or Bauman "From Pilgrim to Tourist.

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