Excerpt: Social Media with Chinese Characteristics

WeChat is a giant social media platform developed by the founder of FoxMail Allen Zhang. FoxMail was acquired by Tencent in 2005, along with Allen Zhang’s transfer to Tencent, the very leading internet company which plays an indispensable role in mainland China with subsidiary services covering social media, entertainments, news, advertising .etc. However, with all those services and convenience provided by Tencent, the company is infamously known as an immense monopoly power who bullies small startups, stealing ideas shamelessly, and holds an absolute power and censorship over its users. Of all those traits, WeChat, the most successful service of Tencent with 0.96 billion monthly active users, is a quintessential miniature of the company Tencent, as well as a reflection of the social order in mainland China.

Tencent was founded in 1998, starting with an instant message program called OICQ, which later changed to its more well-know name — QQ, it was a mimic to the ICQ of Israeli. Just like QQ is from ICQ, WeChat is designed as an instant message app targeting at mobile phone users with the precedent success of WhatsApp. I wouldn’t say plagiarism should always be regarded as evil in terms of doing business, rather, copying is a quite established mode in the business world in China. As we all see today, though not designed originally, QQ and WeChat have both surpassed their fathers and have developed more functionalities which are bringing more profits than ICQ and WhatsApp. In 2016, WeChat’s average revenue per user is $7 per user, compared to $1 per user on WhatsApp, with more features like ordering taxi, or transferring money through electronic version of “hongbao”, the traditional Chinese red packet served as money container. However, a successful business does not mean perfect services, especially when a giant company occupies a great portion of the market, its unbalanced power brings numerous problems.

When talking about social media in China, there isn’t a second company that could serve as a rivalry to Tencent, this gives Tencent the absolute power to monopoly the industry. When everything is taken over by one party, the company does not need to cater for the needs of a specific group of people, their main goal is to keep expanding its services and make sure to satisfy the majorities. Moreover, Tencent has the power to control users’ behaviors, with notorious methods like censorship and blocking the account, the processes of making decisions are vague to the pubic and all involved many human factors. Take WeChat’s public account for example, a relatively new feature which serves as a open platform that all the users could subscribe and get notified when there is a new publication. The open platform is a compensation of the introversive nature of WeChat, a closed circle with only friends you know rather than a public account that everyone can have access. When entering into a article of the public account, occasionally, you can see the functions like leaving a comment, or giving bonus to the author. However, not all public accounts are able to let people leave a comment, only when the account are qualified as original and without any misconduct could it be eligible for features like comments or giving bonus. For the process of getting qualified, there is no public and outlined rules on how this reviewing process is done. Moreover, the displaying of comments is different from all other social media as well. Only the author has the right to see all the comments and decided which comment could be seen by the public. As a result, more often than not, all comments under an article holds the same value that in accordance with the author’s, even though the article has millions of reviews and serves as a namely public platform. Human factor plays such a significant role here and powers are granted in an opaque and unbalanced manner. The underlying reasons behind the phenomenon is the nature of an unbalanced distribution of power in the application itself, the powerful party controls its users, which is generally and negatively acquiesced by the mass who either drift along with the decisions or leave WeChat if you can.

As mentioned earlier, WeChat caters for its main group of users rather than the need of a specific group. The underlined value of WeChat also reflects the underlined value of the society. China has been in rapid development for nearly five decades, people’s living standards have definitely been improved to a great extent on one hand. On the other hand, there’re also tradeoffs like environmental issues, corruptions, ignorance of individual’s rights. WeChat, as a 6-year-old giant application, does have prominent achievement in a broad sense, but also with flaws and unsound mechanisms in the application. Even though not perfectly in every aspects, WeChat has already become the biggest social media platform in China, with 963 million monthly active users in Q2 2017. Similarly, Chinese Communist Party has been the ruling party since the establishment of People’s Republic of China, and there is no rival Parties. The Communist Party still shares many characteristics of a ruling class, and the political participation of Chinese citizens are very low. Therefore, the Party officials still hold power over the people, and the official could control many things vaguely which are not publicly and clearly stated in law and regulations. The Communist Party cannot resolve everything perfectly, otherwise the country can hardly make progresses. With a belief in Mao’s theology of “first conquering the principal contradiction of the principal problem”, the Party believes it is legit to ignore minor issues as long as they are making progress in a broad sense, within fields of economy, science, military .etc. The first and foremost goal for a social media platform is to gain users. With an imperfect and constant changing system, WeChat decides to adapt a hierarchical distribution of power, which is efficient but may bring about moral issues and other injustice. The company makes the decision because the stable increase of users is the foremost concern. Moreover, when everyone else around you are using WeChat, you have to choose between using the application and bearing it’s flaws, or quit the normal social context, most people will subordinately agree on the design instead of giving up the social platform, which may concern much more opportunity cost, that’s how WeChat won the game at the end of the day. Similarly, when the Communist Party gained its power, they need to consolidate their control over the country and its people. To achieve this, the Communist Party expands itself to 80 million party members with 0.3 billion people within the members’ family kin. With a mass foundation, the Party is therefore not possible to get replaced easily.

As proposed by Deng Xiaoping during his visit to Shenzhen, development is believed as the unyielding principle in a developing country like China. Similarly, in order to substantially improve the system as a whole, WeChat knows they need to go beyond simply an instant messaging application and keep growing with developing new features. After gaining a good amount of users as an, WeChat decided to expand and assimilate other applications to become an entrance to the internet, or with some moderate exaggeration — the platform of the internet era. To achieve the ultimate goal, WeChat first added the functionality as a mobile browser. Users can share webpages in their moments, however, there is no url input field, instead, WeChat rolled out its new feature of scanning QR code to visit a website. As a result, QR code became prevalent in China. Later on is the mobile payment, both WeChat AliPay have the function, the new method of transferring money with a click revolutionized the way of payment. In China, everywhere you need to deal with money, you can see two QR codes for money transfer, even with beggar on the street, one is green from WeChat, and the other one is blue from AliPay,. Other following functions include ordering taxi, getting food delivery, booking tickets, online shopping. Nonetheless, all of these functions base on WeChat are provided by the business partners of Tencent, users on WeChat cannot use other service providers. Another ridiculous thing is sharing items information from Taobao, an online shopping platform under Alibaba founded by Jack Ma, is intentionally blocked on WeChat, even if in the form of a link. To face this challenge, Taobao created an encrypted random string which WeChat cannot recognize, and once you copy it to your clipboard then open the Taobao app, you will be magically directed to the item shared by your friend. The convenience WeChat brings us definitely makes our live much easier, but at the same time, it makes people who doesn’t have a WeChat account feel odd and unfit in the society. In order to lead a normal life in China, we have to use WeChat, while most people do love WeChat and are getting so used to it as if they are WeChat enchanted. However, within the world of WeChat, the users have to align with the settings of the application—use the service of Tencent’s business partners, get censored by the government, the worst thing is that users have no way to change those unreasonable settings, and most of us take it for granted.

Another issue is the privacy, as notified in WeChat’s term of use, the app “has full permission to activate microphones and cameras, track your location, access your address book and photos, and copy all of this data at any time to their servers”. That’s a common request in most social media applications, however, WeChat needs to give all those data to the Chinese government. As the national-security law and the new cyber-security law granted, the government has access to almost all personal information of a user of WeChat and any other applications from a Chinese company. Rather than simply argue about privacy, I’d say the powerful party against subordinated party is the real issue here. If information regarded as non-privacy could be sent to the government, it should also be accessible by the general public. If the decision makers makes laws imparting different power to itself and the public, it will isolate itself from the public to some extent, which is an undesired reality. From above analysis of WeChat’s characteristics, we may boil the contradicts down to the long-lasting topic of “structure versus agency”, the ability of an individual to act freely and independently is the essential meaning of agency, while in the circumstance of WeChat, individuals are subjects subordinated to the system, users cannot live without the structure, and they cannot escape either, since there doesn’t exit an alternative in the same scope. Moreover, as things are under control of a oligarchic group, the system endows rights unequally to its users and admins. Similar in China, since the mass cannot make a change on the system, they would just numbly take the reality for granted. As long as their interests are not affected directly, they will acquiesce to yield their rights to the decision makers. As a result, even though the whole group is becoming better off from an outsider’s perspective, very little political participation are from the people in actual, nobody can act independently from the social structure, but obey the wills of the Big Brother.