Dual Anxieties of Technology and Labour: An Ethnographic Analysis of a University's WeChat Groups in China

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Abstract:

This article analyses the impact of social media technologies on the work practices of university staff and attempts to uncover the dual anxieties they face. The research is based on investigation into WeChat groups comprising a sample of 90 university academic and administrative staff. I consider the reasons behind the additional workload of all staff, which is driven by the erosion of the boundaries between the public and private spheres on social media platforms. Participant observation of WeChat groups and interviews with academics and administrators reveal that the emphasis on collaboration on social media and chronic connectivity at work blurs the boundaries between work and private life. Underlying the increased workload and emotional engagement through WeChat groups is a faculty evaluation system that is shaped by market-driven key performance indicators (KPIs) and the centralization of university authority structures. The precarious work conditions that result has increased anxiety about work and private life in the academic community. However, the coercive working environment does not offer academic labourers much opportunity to resist.

With the economic growth of the past few decades, Chinese universities have undergone a series of institutional reforms and have significantly increased student enrolment. As the number of students and staff has increased, so has the pressure and intensity of work within the university. More diverse modes of teaching (e.g., digital classrooms and distance learning), prompted by media technology, have brought new challenges to academics. To cope with the high intensity of teaching and research tasks over the last decade, universities have gradually adopted instant messaging software for work communication. WeChat [1] is the social media platform that has been widely used in China for this purpose.

Nearly 92.3% of the Chinese population (about 1.2 billion users) use WeChat for daily networking with family members, friends and work colleagues (Jiang and Wang, 2020). As China's most popular instant communication tool, WeChat revolutionized interpersonal communication, and it became an important means for employees to remain productive during the pandemic lockdown in 2020. Besides WeChat, communication platforms such as Zoom and Tencent Meeting [2] also have supplementary physical workplaces. Zoom and Tencent Meeting enable virtual face-to-face meetings, minimizing communication costs by eliminating geographic distance. Their functions have so far been relatively simple. WeChat, in contrast, as a platform for daily communication, has more comprehensive features and services that make it more flexible and inclusive when used for work. This flexibility and inclusiveness maximize productivity but puts presume on the user's private time.

About 75% of WeChat users obtain information and maintain relationships through WeChat groups (Jiang and Wang, 2020). They include the workgroups of universities and the research centres of major Chinese universities. Workgroups are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and require immediate solutions to all sorts of work issues that may arise, such as instant file sharing, personnel announcements, work schedule coordination, meeting announcements, and more. In addition to the absolute increase in workload, demand the constant online presence imposes an unprecedented mental and emotional burden. As such, digital technologies and social media have facilitated "the integration of human time and behavior into the parameters of electronic exchange" (Crary, 2013: 3). Like employees in other high-intensity, immaterial production industries, university academics and other staff are now part of the digital labour production chain. Their precarious situation is comparable to that of the controversial 996 [3] work model in China's high-tech and internet industries.

The nationwide lockdown caused by the Covid-19 outbreak in early 2020 meant that online teaching became the new normal for colleges and universities. Furthermore, in the absence of face-to-face communication and physical space, WeChat has become the main, if not the only, work platform for academics and other staff. People do not even need to turn on their computers. Messages, pictures, documents and videos are sent and received on cell phones. From the moment they open their eyes to the moment they go to sleep (and even during their sleep), people are always wrapped up in never-ending work issues with WeChat message alerts going off at all hours. The teacher-student relationship was previously limited to the classroom or to email exchange. This has changed, however, as teachers and students are becoming 'friends' on social media platforms. The intimacy of personal interactions with colleagues has been replaced by text messages, with the added pressure of responding to messages in a timely manner.

Within the critical political economy of communication framework, this study examines the precarious situation of university staff and attempts to answer the following two questions:

1) How do the flexible work schedules on WeChat affect the daily lives of university academic and administrative staff?

2) How has online work on social media deepened the dual anxieties of academic and administrative staff in higher education?

First, we review the theories of digital labour and technology creep which might explain the findings of this research from a political economy of communication perspective. The actual study considers WeChat groups of a sample of 90 university academic and administrative staff. In-depth

individual interviews with academic and administrative staff were undertaken. Our results indicate that the flexibility offered by WeChat increased the workload of staff and brought personal emotional relationships into the workspace, which changed the nature of the work itself. Another important finding is that the dual anxieties arising from the blurring boundaries of work and private life were disguised by an official rhetoric emphasizing the convenience of new work practices.

Literature review

Digital labour and technology creep

The Concept of digital labour first appeared in Tiziana Terranova's *Free Labour: Culture of Production for Digital Economy* (2000). Free labour, according to Terranova, refers to new forms of additional production activity arising from the knowledge and cultural consumption within the network environment. Free digital labour is based on voluntary and unpaid internet tasks, which include setting up and browsing web pages, sending and receiving emails, writing personal blogs, and making personal audios and videos.

Christian Fuchs and Eran Fisher's *Digital, Labour and Karl Marx* (2014) systematically discussed the definition, scope, and commercialization of labour, as well as the capital accumulation of digital labour (Fuchs, 2014:255). In *Reconsidering Value and Labour in the Digital Age*, they considered the issues of class reproduction involved (Fuchs and Fisher, 2015:11). Marx' s theory of labour value was held to facilitate an understanding of digital labour in the research fields of labour studies and information-communication technologies (ICTs). Mark Andrejevic (2002) pointed out that people are being watched when they are watching the screen. Being watched entailed the commercial appropriation of personal data and can thus be considered as exploitation (Andrejevic, 2013:192-212). His understanding of exploitation appreciates the benefits of online worker work, but still acknowledges the exploitative relation.

In the field of knowledge production and academic labour, digital technology creates a perpetual motion of "24/7 standby". Thomas Allmer (2017) developed academic labour studies as an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of education, management, policy research, cultural studies and sociology. According to Allmer, teaching and research are becoming increasingly virtual and digital. Numerous other scholars have argued that digital media has an impact on the working conditions of academics (Noble, 1998; Gregg, 2013: 123-134; Lupton, 2014: 35; Poritz and Rees, 2017:2). Universities require advanced researchers and a highly skilled workforce under neoliberal and post-Fordist conditions. As the expectation for productivity increases, the occupational stress for academic staff increases.

When it comes to media workers, gamers, freelancers, media interns, or technical specialists at internet companies, research on their work dilemmas and the welfare mechanisms that safeguard them should be placed in the broader context of global economic transformation. Existing research points to the fact that informational behaviours associated with social media activity can generate use value, while the surplus value generated by digital labour is exploited by capital owners.

From previous studies, we found three features of digital labour which comprise our analytical framework within the political economy of communication. Firstly, with the development of ICTs, employees experience a process of de-skilling and re-skilling, which blurs the differences between professional skills and technological skills and between work time and private life. For university staff members, the work of dealing with digital devices and the work of maintaining online social relations have been devalued. Secondly, digital labour is becoming free labour, and the work done

by employees on social platforms is unpaid. Working on a social platform appears to be voluntary according to one's own interests. But such work caters to the demands of ensuring capital flow reduces production costs and transfers risk from organization to employees. Thirdly, digital labour delivers an increasingly precarious status for workers as work hours become uncertain and short-term contracts become the norm.

This study reflects on digital labour practices by examining the unequal relationships that arise among academics and other staff working through WeChat at universities in mainland China. The concept of digital labour is deployed here to analyse the working lives of the university's staff. The network of relationships built by university staff using social media platforms is an exemplification of digital labour. Three dimensions are relevant here: cognition, communication, and collaboration. In general, university online work has adopted a neoliberal work ethic which is built into ICT innovations. In this context, university staff members suffer from a dual sense of job insecurity. It emerges from the encroachment of digital technologies in the workplace and from the Chinese academic context as such.

Technology creep refers to a situation where technological applications increasingly take up an individual's time in a non-productive manner (Ramey, 2018). Social media makes it easy for people to hide from others by texting instead of meeting in person. At the same time, individuals are under heightened surveillance because the interpersonal communication that they generate has increased dramatically. Immediate responses to online managers are required and people become transactional and reactive, which is detrimental to productivity and creativity. For example, social media increases the magnitude of connections among people to a point whereby online postings are the only way to communicate. Those in authority demand immediate answers and are more likely to ask simple questions to get what they want. People thus come to evaluate their success or failure by the number of e-mail and instant messages answered, group connections made, and the posts responded to. People become transactional and reactive instead of active. The concept of technology creep, as a manifestation of digital labour, explains the unprecedented pressures that technology has brought into people's daily lives.

Co-presence and chronic connectivity

In *Work's Intimacy* (2011), Melissa Gregg studied the impact of online technology upon a group of Australian professionals who were under the influence of the flexible work discourse and the intimacy narrative of work. According to the author, "technology has long facilitated particular work styles and preferences" which leads to persistent anxieties for employees (Gregg, 2011: 9). She developed the idea of "function creep" in reference to the prevailing discourse on the convenience brought by flexible working time and space. In fact, flexible work arrangements required additional labour from employees.

In her book, Gregg (2011) advanced the ideas of co-presence and chronic connectivity. Co-presence describes the situation where people are monitoring their email all the time. The platform that was originally designed to serve the asynchronous schedules of colleagues has become its opposite. As a result, employee co-presence intensifies the pace and immediacy of busy office matters. For office workers, this is a compulsive behaviour driven by complicity between standby technologies and emerging office subjectivity. Gregg (2011: 14) also proposed the term "presence bleed" to describe the experience whereby the location and time of work become secondary considerations, as people are confronted with a to-do list that seems perpetually out of control.

Chronic connectivity is highly circular among educated professionals as they consider being engaged in paid employment as a virtue, an accomplishment and as an expression of self-identity. The connectivity rhetoric normalized in discourses among media, marketing and business professionals convenes a default association between technology and convenience, flexibility and mobility. For example, people can see "technology changes the world" as an advertising language in all walks of life, a causal linkage which promotes the assumed positive relationship between technology and life. This construction of the online workplace displaced acknowledgement of "the material and technical infrastructures on which both the Internet and lives of the digital generation depend" (Turner, 2006: 261).

Several scholars have agreed with the stance taken by Gregg (2011), that the digitalized working sphere severely exploits employees (Ross, 2004: 2; Terranova, 2000). Other scholars, however, have argued that digital work can create a flexible, innovative and fair atmosphere among employees (Benkler, 2007:13; O'Reilly, 2005).

In the case of university staff working on WeChat, the same dilemma applies. The concepts proposed by Gregg (2011) explain the sense of responsibility that teachers may feel in preparing themselves to cope with work that may appear at any moment. They also point to the anxiety that arises in temporary work groups which involve a seemingly never-ending schedule of tasks. Social media provide a more flexible work schedule and workplace, but at the same time, this requires co-presence and chronic connectivity which are the manifestations of accelerated exploitation, both physically and emotionally. In the Chinese context, universities are largely state-owned and follow the direct instructions of government officials. In particular, the employment of staff is regulated not only by the education market but also by the political and ideological edicts coming from government authorities and their power centralization principles. For example, aside from the Dean who oversees the academic work of staff, there is also a Party Secretary at the same status level who is responsible for administrative issues. These complicated hierarchical relations, combined with the intensified technology creep of online work, contribute to the dual anxiety of academic staff.

In addition to technology creep and hierarchical organizational structure, culture might be another factor that affects the experience of employees in digital labour. In the mid-1980s, invisible work was a term coined for various types of women's unpaid labour. Examples included housework, baby care and aged care. Such work was assumed to be innate to women and of low economic status. Erin Hatton (2017) reconstructed the term "invisible work" and pointed out such that work reflects three intersecting sociological mechanisms: cultural, legal and spatial mechanisms of invisibility. Each of them conceals the actual depreciation of work practices. In the Chinese context, centralized management facilitating the penetration of digital technology into employee work lives is complemented by the collective consciousness. To gain a sense of group identity and group belonging, many employees may tacitly approve and internalize the subtle coercions of their work environment. This might help to explain the collective activities of the WeChat group we examined.

Methodology

Social media ethnography

Postill and Pink (2012) defined social media ethnography as the practice that shifts the field from traditional online spaces to social platforms. This fosters a new internet research methodology with a focus on habits, social movement and sociability. Social media ethnography emphasizes the

tracking, sharing, exploration, interaction and archiving of research. It ensures the controllability of social accounts and texts that are tracked and shared in the sense that social networks have memories (researchers can observe and save online texts, make screenshots and mine big data). The users who are investigated offer useful information about their online and offline interactions. In this study, we tracked and observed groups with participant consent, interviewed key informants who provided relevant information and analysed online texts and images. The research participants selected were from a newly established department of humanities at a public university [4] in Shanghai. Among 3,000 higher education institutions in China, the university in our study was ranked #65 [5]. Listed as one of the best second-tier universities in China, it simultaneously faces high government requirements for academic production and those imposed by its own administrators in a push to join the first-tier category. Therefore, our study reveals a particular set of pressures at the university, leading to an overload of work for both academic and administrative staff (e.g., answering e-mails and social media messages, responding to group messages even at off-duty time, maintaining online personal relationships with colleagues, participating in online meetings at short notice). The newly established humanities department investigated in this research receives limited financial resources from the university and is under pressure to produce impressive deliverables, including publishing papers, applications for funding and participating in teaching competitions. The combined pressures from the department and the university are representative of Chinese universities as a whole.

Research design

Fieldwork was conducted from September 2019 to March 2020, during the university's fall and winter semesters, when the teaching volume reaches its peak and the annual assessment approaches. At the time of our study, there were 90 staff members working in the new humanities department, including lecturers, associate professors, full professors and administrative staff. The school's daily affairs included undergraduate and postgraduate education, research activities and other academic events. There were several long-term and temporary WeChat groups used to organize daily work. The former were entitled "All Department Faculty," "Undergraduate Teaching," "Departmental Leadership," and "Department Headteachers". "New Teachers," "Conference Arrangement," and "Projects Application and Discussion". As indicated in Table 1, all groups can be divided into four categories according to the time duration and nature of work. In addition to participatory observation, we conducted in-depth interviews with 13 staff members to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals are influenced by such stifling and exhausting work structures. The information [6] about interviewees is outlined in Table 2.

Table 1. Categorization of WeChat Groups

Type of Groups	A	B	C	D
Group Scale	N = 90-100	N = 3-10	N = 15-30	N = 10-20
Nature of Work	Daily Routine	Casual Network	Important Info.	Emergent Issue
Time Duration	Long-term	Short-term	Long-term	Short-term
Atmosphere	Relaxed/Informal	Relaxed/Informal	Serious/Formal	Professional
Daily Activity	80-90 messages per day	20-30 messages per day	40-50 messages per day	100-150 messages per day

Table 2. Description of Interviewees

Administrative Staff				Associate Professors				Assistant Professors (Lecturers)							
Gender	F	F	F	Gender	M	F	M	Gender	F	M	F	F	F	M	F
Age	43	59	60	Age	45	41	38	Age	34	40	34	31	35	29	30

Main findings

Increased workload due to social media technology

The WeChat platform is the epitome of interpersonal and group communication effectiveness. It contains many features that enable the instantaneous transmission of all types of information. In addition to text messages and emoji, WeChat can also share videos, pictures, and voice messages, make webcam and voice calls, and perform instant office work through online editing applets. In the working structure of a WeChat group, the "mention" function is often used to communicate a message more specifically to a person or group of people. One example is as follows:

> @ Everyone. We will meet for the second time at 2:00 p.m. on December 9 (Monday). Please arrange your documents and send them to me within two days. I hope to finalise the general framework and each part of the framework of our application form next Monday. Thank you all. (December 5, 2019)

This "Projects Application and Discussion" group (Type D) was established for applying to academic funding sources. All members of the group are involved in applying for a government-funded project, so this message was applicable to all members. As soon as this message was sent, all members of the group responded to the message and promised to have the application ready within two days. Although there were still three months to go before applications for this government program were due, the college organized a lengthy screening process to maximize the chances of success. WeChat notifications ensure the participation of group members.

Once a new message occurs, members have to click the notification to eliminate the red reminder dot. However, the "@" feature that can reach all the members at other times imposes a lot of extra unnecessary tasks on them. For instance, the WeChat group of "Undergraduate Teaching" (Type C) shared a notification on September 26, 2019, about students taking computer tests:

> @ Everyone, please inform all students to visit the department office on September 27, September 29 and September 30 to get the 2019 College Computer Grade Examination admission forms. The mock examination will be held in room D413, building D, new campus from October 14 to October 15. Thank you.

This group is comprised of 25 members including department heads, undergraduate administrators and teaching secretaries of different disciplines. It specifically focuses on issues concerning undergraduate students. Administrative staff use this group to post frequent updates to the teaching schedule and coordinate events. With "@everyone", the author of the message wants to maximize the effectiveness and reach of the message. Although not everyone was involved in this message, group members found themselves mentioned when they opened the WeChat page. Only by reading through the message could they find out whether they needed to do something about it or not.

Constantly being tagged through "@" has become a very stressful experience for many academic and administrative staff, as it means that new, unscheduled work has suddenly appeared. Moreover, these notifications are usually accompanied by very tight deadlines, and many staff feel that their jobs are in a constant state of flux, as expressed by one interviewee: *"I feel a little bit nervous when I see the red tip 'someone @ me'. I have decided to turn my phone off during the weekend"* (female, 34). However, in addition to being used as a work platform, WeChat is also the main channel for people to communicate with friends and family, the most convenient way to make payments, and at times the only way for many people to get news and information. Few Chinese people today can spend an entire weekend without using WeChat. So, it is becoming more common, as another interviewee noted: "I always receive the work tasks released in the group during the off-duty time or on weekends*"* (male, 41).

In addition to being passive recipients of information, staff members are expected to demonstrate their professional competence and to express their academic views on certain issues in the WeChat group whenever and wherever they can. For example, if they are unable to attend a meeting organized by the faculty, they need to provide comments in the group. The spatial and temporal separation that once existed between paid work and personal activities has been broken down in the age of the internet. Employees are now required to produce outputs in a seamless environment. One staff member who was absent from a meeting commented in the group:

> I was glad to know that the department held a meeting on the 19th to discuss teaching issues. Because I am on a business trip, I provide two articles for everyone to communicate. ... Both articles focus on the 'construction' of teachers in the journalism and communication major. Judging from the exchange of information at the meeting, everyone responded enthusiastically and brought it to the teachers of the department for discussion. Wish the meeting success. Two articles are attached. (November 19, 2019. "All Department Faculty.")

The extra workload is evident to both the administrators who post these messages and to the staff members who receive them. One interviewee described the daily state of a colleague who was responsible for forwarding news regarding departmental activities to the group: *"Mr. He is our administrative staff who works hard. I see him using the computer at any time, at the airport, on business trips, at meetings"* (female, 43). The overwhelming stream of messages for all staff means an endless relationship with work: "You often wake up and find yourself dragged into a temporary workgroup" (male, 40). This is also a reflection of an internalized need to demonstrate one's presence and engagement with work. In other words, a symbolic performance is required to show that one is a "competent" digital employee even if the online activity has nothing to do with core work functions.

Digital networked labour exhibits characteristics such as "perpetual motion" and "sleeplessness". The spatial dispersion and flexibility of digital labour allows all staff to work from

any location, such as a public meeting, a transportation hub, a coffee shop, or even their own home. The traditional demarcation of nine-to-five has been transformed into working "on-call." As mentioned, scholars have referred to this phenomenon as invisible labour (Crain, Poster, Cherry, and Hochschild, 2016:2). Jonathan Crary also discussed this model of labour in *24/7: Late Capitalism and the End of Sleep* (2013). He argued that capitalism controls our lives 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and that sleep, as the last form of resistance, cannot escape being terminated. Our individual and social identities are shaped and reshaped in conformity with the uninterrupted rules of market operations, information networks, and other systems (Crary, 2013:5). Manifestations of "perpetual motion" and "sleeplessness" exist in fields of digital work such as programming and game playbour but also shows up in the way that university managers implement the digital technologies in their work. For example, to monitor staff during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school management department developed a program requiring group members to report their body temperature and whereabouts online through scanning the QR (quick response) code shared on WeChat every day. Although the school administration carried out effective management through the implementation of digital technology and were genuinely concerned about their employees, staff still felt anxious because they had to report information twice a day. Thus, the improvement in staff work efficiency comes at the expense of their private time, which means that they work overtime without extra pay. To some extent, digital technologies are a managerial convenience for superintendents' work, rather than an enabler of academics' work.

Blurring boundaries between professional and private life

In addition to the hidden extra workload brought about by social media platforms, intensive daily interactions among co-workers have led to a more intimate working relationship. For example, the group entitled "All Department Faculty" (Type A) has a general focus and presents more diverse social attributes. The main aims of this top-down management initiative are to promote morale and strengthen solidarity. There is a high volume of social connectivity in terms of number of messages among group members, and the information circulated in this group is less targeted to individual users. On November 12, 2019, a farewell party was organized for two retired staff members. Pictures of the party were circulated in the group. Another staff member who did not attend the party sent their congratulations in the WeChat group:

> Warm farewell party. Thank you, Mr. Huang and Mrs. Tian, you are our role models.

> I wish Mr. Huang and Mrs. Tian and their families good health! Good luck! Enjoy your happy and wonderful retirement life!

However, the hierarchical structure within this kind of intimate communication allows for subtle coercion among staff members that goes beyond the scope of professional relationships.
On September 10, 2019, which is Teachers' Day in China, many members of the "All Department Faculty(全院教师)" group posted good wishes and greetings in the group:

> Happy holidays to teachers.

> Today, the campus is full of flowers. Students send beautiful flowers to teachers to express their best wishes and wish them a Happy Teacher's Day. Perhaps some teachers did not have courses today and did not receive our little gifts. We send our best wishes. Happy Teacher's Day to all of you.

Close observation shows that the first person to send this holiday greeting was the head of the department, followed by more senior academic and administrative staff. Younger teachers usually replied with an emoji to echo the greeting or to express their gratitude to others for their blessing. Apart from the holidays, many congratulatory messages were about department and individual academic accomplishments. For example, on October 30, 2019, the same group announced that the department had achieved a remarkable enrolment rate for new students. Here are some of the prompt responses in the group:

> That's great, good news! Teachers are working hard. You are awesome.

> This year's enrolment team is awesome.

> Congratulations to the enrolment team for their contribution to the KPI project of our school! Keep going in 2020.

The subtle coercion here to keep working is related to the notion of invisible work put forward by Erin Hatton (2017). The social and cultural mechanisms of invisible work lie in people's pursuit of group affiliation and identity, the demand for sharing educational and scientific research information and the demand for presence in online communities. Under these circumstances, people will avoid the feeling of being isolated by group members in a working scene. By participating in the "coercive" greetings, academics and administrative and staff find a relatively comfortable and safe way to pursue their group affiliation.

Besides sending texts to show this collective consciousness, emoji is also a common tool used by staff members in group celebrations. WeChat comes with many emoji to encourage good wishes and appreciation. They include flowers, thumbs up, hugs and applause. To save time and energy, academic and administrative staff often send these emoji to express their opinions. The most common scenario is where all staff copy the same emoji content from the last respondent. This way, they express their agreement without making their opinion stand out and without appearing apathetic by not responding at all. As one interviewee said, "I directly copied another teacher's expression and words to show my blessings" (female, 34).

Although replies and interactions are not mandatory, the WeChat message page still showed notifications with numerous reminders that clearly indicated a significant level of interaction between senior staff and their colleagues. This creates anxiety for teachers who do not participate in the holiday greetings (i.e., worrying whether they should also respond). Academic and administrative staff constantly pay attention to these messages to avoid missing out on the work-related information interspersed within the more personal messages. Moreover, the nature of this interaction does not allow the teachers to understand what these activities of group celebrations were about. Many of the staff members were new to the college, so this behaviour was simply an attempt to fit in with the group. As one interviewee put it: I know little about this issue because I just joined this school. However, I will praise it first with my blessing (male, 45).

Praise is essential "to meet people's demands for emotional interaction" (Jiang, 2019). People in a team seek to achieve a sense of belonging, collective identity and social maintenance (Cheung and Lee, 2009). Although WeChat workgroups primarily aim to handle work issues, a combination of labour and social discussions within the group has emerged due to the social nature of the social media platform. In this research, some new staff who had never met before in the group participated in collective "praising" activity within their groups. This also reflects the need for employees to show collectivist attitudes that conform to the group norms and cultural expectations. Through such

work, employees negotiate the tensions between their personal and professional identity (Khanna and Johnson, 2010). This type of work is implicitly or explicitly required by the organization.

The intimacy created by the co-presence of social media platforms has a lot of emotional labour attached to it. Due to the social pressure of always being online, prompt replies are seen as a minimum social courtesy. Moreover, to avoid inaccurate emotional expressions in their texts, people have become more cautious in their wording. This cautious social behaviour eventually led people to send similar messages using emoji. Within a community of university academic and administrative staff who share the value of hard work, chronic connectivity makes such a close working relationship a necessity. As Gregg (2011: xi) claimed, chronic connectivity is economically and emotionally exploitative, especially for young and new employees. Some of them may not be willing to deal with social relations in the workplace because it is not a job that they can get paid for. However, the constant connection and always-on lifestyle facilitates emotional coercion, which makes social life an indispensable component of work. As a result, the use of social media has conflated the professional and private lives of all staff. Adding a heavy layer of emotional engagement has thus been added to the workload.

Key performance indicators and centralization of authority

The increased workload and the depth of emotional engagement on social media platforms are largely the result of conflicting evaluation mechanisms within Chinese institutions of higher education (especially with the introduction of the liberal market economy in the 1980s). To encourage academic staff to produce more academic outputs and obtain national-level research funding, universities have, in recent years, adopted a corporate KPI management system. This system quantifies the workload of academics and influences their salaries. There is an unequal power relationship between the management department and academics in this mechanized promotion mechanism. In the pre-KPI era, academics who are promoted to professors and deans have an absolute advantage when it comes to academic publishing and project applications, and they also enjoy a great deal of implicit power (fulfilling the criteria for promotion and the relationship with the academic authorities). Their monopoly over academic matters could hurt the promotion process for others. In addition, the dual management system, whereby the dean oversees academic affairs while the party secretary manages the administrative and ideological activities, has engendered many conflicts. As one of the young assistant professors interviewed put it:

> WeChat groups always post news about party or government education events and encourages us to attend them. The department also organizes many lectures and functions. Most of these events were scheduled on weekends so as not to interfere with regular classes. It was hard for me to find time to read and write after a week of classes, but I had to attend these events. Some of the lectures had nothing to do with my research interests at all. However, those who did not attend were required to explain their reasons to the dean. I cannot go to the dean every time. It made me look very detached from others. (female, 31)

Other staff members experienced the same anxiety. Many academic activities, such as conference attendance, training or other administrative duties, are not counted in the KPIs. However, these extra tasks cannot be avoided, as they are required and enforced by the dean or by senior academics. This is a product of hierarchical power and further intensified by new technology. The work that cannot be recorded in the KPIs becomes a burden, as expressed by an interviewee: "I have a lot of

daily routines and feel that my time for academic research has been taken away" (male, 38). This anxiety is magnified with the constant stream of WeChat messages about new articles published by other colleagues and successful project applications. Normal leisure activities outside of work hours for young academics are seen as a lazy and inefficient use of time: "I cannot stay at home to write papers. I have to be at the office, otherwise, I cannot help watching various TV shows online (male, 29)". For many female teachers, this work pressure is also in great conflict with their family responsibilities: "Sometimes I do not have classes and I take care of my children at home. However, I feel especially guilty when I do nothing about my course or paper at the end of the day" (female, 35).

For young academics new to the institution, the pressure comes from a variety of sources. First, the six-year tenure system requires many publications in top international journals, involvement in national projects and hundreds of thousands of words of academic monography. Each year these requirements become more rigorous and difficult to meet. Second, the intense competition among junior academics makes interpersonal relationships, in addition to quantitative metrics, especially important. As a result, performing administrative tasks is a way for some young teachers to maintain good relationships with their superiors: "I know these extra tasks of assisting professors or organizing meetings are taking a lot of time from my own research, but hopefully this labour will impress the ones who make the final decisions on my stay" (female, 30).

There are also many KPIs that are confusing for academic staff. In response to the government's demand for the internationalization of higher education, Chinese universities are increasingly emphasizing English publications and overseas academic activities. However, quantifying these international academic activities into indicators equivalent to those of the Chinese academic industry is a problem that many universities face. Despite large differences between various disciplines, many completely different categories of academic output are forced to be considered against the same indicators. One of the most obvious changes is the quantitative requirement for international journal articles. Due to a lack of knowledge of international journals, Chinese universities have adopted the SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) criteria for the assessment of liberal arts. Other high-level international journals that are not included in the SSCI are not classified as valid or are considered insignificant. According to the academics interviewed in this study, SSCI journal articles where they appeared as second authors were not considered as a valid basis for promotion either. This assessment mechanism has caused much discontent. According to an academic interviewee:

> Assessment criteria are changing all the time. It takes at least six months to a year to publish an SSCI article. Second authorship counts as valid when the article is submitted, but not when it is published. Also book chapters don't count as valid either. Everything revolves around the first authorship of an SSCI journal. If you are not the first author, you don't know when it will become ineffective performance. (female, 31)

This phenomenon shows the significance of many long-standing institutional pressures, which presumably pre-date digital communication technologies. However, the involvement of social media platforms and digital technology aggravates the problem. People are always depressed, claiming that they want to turn off their mobile phone and escape from the work. This is a sign of work anxiety which pre-dates social media. Technology is not the exclusive source of anxiety, but the medium and catalyst of it.

Since the faculty assessment results are closely tied to their salary, academics pay extra attention to this process. Each October, when university and department-wide evaluations of teaching and research performance are conducted, there is unprecedented activity on WeChat. Evaluation methods are communicated through a web-based system which requires people to keep track of what is happening in the groups. Due to the complexity of university-level regulations and policy documents, many staff members use WeChat to obtain information that is more directly relevant to them. However, this requires the instant screening of different information from different groups. At the same time, academic staff need to keep in touch with the constant flow of colleagues' achievements in WeChat groups such as "All Faculty" in order to know whether they are meeting the department's general standards. In this sense, WeChat serves primarily to intensify the informal pressure to match the performance of colleagues. Academics can choose to disappear completely from the online platform or quit the WeChat group, but this may lead to some informal predicaments, such as poor interpersonal relations, low communication efficiency and complaints from other colleagues. In general, all staff must rely heavily on WeChat to stay abreast of developments at the departmental and university levels. It is important not to miss out on important information about the constantly changing promotion standards every year and to show decent performance in hierarchical working relationships.

Limited room for resistance

Tremendous pressure from the assessments forced most academics, especially young professors, to accept changing policies and increasingly intense workloads. At the same time, the centralized administration made it more difficult to accomplish these goals. However, the academic community was not completely passive. Cell phones and social media platforms have features that allowed people to block information. Examples include "sleep mode" and "airplane mode" on electronic devices. Unlike the complete disconnect from work and social environments obtained by turning off the device, temporarily blocking information helped staff feel slightly less anxious about having to communicate. Thus, such phone features on the phone serve as a buffer between turning off the phone and maintaining "presence". One of the interviewees in this study explained why was helpful in her life: "People can make phone calls on WeChat. If I adjust it to sleep mode, my phone will still beep if someone from the department calls me. So, I usually go straight to flight mode when I sleep" (female, 31).

Other senior professors choose not to use smart phones to escape the distractions of social media: "Some faculty members do not use WeChat very much, you would better call them or send text messages" (female, 59). These academics who do not use social media inconvenience the daily work practices of the administrators, who have to communicate with these professors in other ways: "Some work notices need to be re-mailed or confirmed in person" (female, 60). However, as a form of resistance, these older academics succeed in reducing their exposure to redundant information and overwork. It should be noted, however, that this behaviour does not apply to the younger academic staff. Older professors are not part of the newly implemented KPI evaluation system, and most of them have, or have been offered, permanent positions. Young academics have no such privilege.

However, for academics and administrative staff who were frequent users of WeChat, there were still some features that help to ease the anxiety caused by the information overload. These include the "Block group messages" and "Block adding friends via group chat" features. The former makes the constant flow of new information appear in a less intrusive way, while the latter prevents

members from adding someone as a friend on the platform for work-related reasons. Because receiving a friend invitation and not accepting it is considered rude, the platform's mandatory features reduced the occurrence of this behaviour. "I am included in almost dozens of WeChat groups on my phone. I have to mute most of them to remain sane" (male, 45). However, in many cases, blocking group messages proves to be additional work. As expressed by one interviewee: "Because I block a lot of group messages for a long time, it causes me to have to scour the group chat histories for a long time if I want to find a file or event-related information, and these histories are usually very large and complicated" (female, 31).

On the one hand, academics are bombarded with information from social media technologies and, on the other hand, they are under pressure to work overtime due to the dual evaluation system. Staff in Chinese universities have very limited ability to resist these forces. Even if they try to reduce the interruptions from their department's WeChat group in some limited ways, they are not able to make institutional changes or challenge the system. As one participant put it, "Unless you leave Chinese higher education, other universities aren't going to be substantially different from here" (female, 30).

Conclusion

This study analysed the impact of digital technology on the working practices of university academics in China. It provides a timely description of dramatic structural changes that have taken place in a state-funded university in China. Our social media ethnography of academic and administrative staff and their work on social platform reveals a shift in digital working practices across public and private borders. By observing WeChat groups and interviewing university academics and administrative staff, we found that, while the technology-driven social platform does provide some convenience for employees, it also conceals the exploitation caused by technology creep and function creep onto productivity and creativity.

First, due to the flexibility of work time and workspace, the risk and burden of work has been shifted from the university at the institutional level to the staff at the individual level. Invisible work involving digital devices, maintenance and surveillance of online applications has been ignored. Work is increasingly self-managed, uncounted and unpaid. Second, the emphasis on co-presence and chronic connectivity on social media platforms embeds too much activity into work itself. Employees need to handle the relationship with their colleagues just because they are all in the friend list in WeChat. WeChat was primarily designed as a social platform for advancing friendship, but the workgroup has reshaped its original intention. Thus, staff members must both maintain their social relationships and fulfil scheduled tasks in just one mobile application. In other words, the technology-driven WeChat workgroup brings friendship, which blurs the boundary between public and private relationships. Finally, technology creep causes staff to spend more time on social media platforms in a non-productive manner. And it has even become an extension of the existing power structure, centralization of authority and prevailing workplace norms. On the one hand, people are forced to receive information and orders about their work while using WeChat for private social activities. The need to be in front of a computer 24/7 is implied by the constant stream of work documents that are shared anytime, anywhere. On the other hand, co-workers become more intimate with each other due to the social media nature of WeChat. Therefore, using WeChat for work compels people to cope with the extra workload while investing more emotional labour into their relationships.

However, anxiety and worries among academic and administrative staff are not caused by technology alone. They are also caused by the social mechanisms of invisible work in China. Staff members' anxiety will not be alleviated if there is no digital technology component in their work. The identity of professors in higher education in China is that of civil servants of the state, which means they have a seemingly steady job, income and identity compared to lower ranging staff members. Additionally, however, the tenure track system from North America has been applied to the Chinese context, which makes newly enrolled assistant professors temporary workers for three to six years, further increasing the precariousness of their work. Technology has become a stimulus and an accomplice, intensifying the exploitation of employees, and creating an imbalance between effort and reward.

It is important to think about what causes anxiety among staff in the field of higher education in China. Is there any way to resist the coercion of digital work and invisible exploitation in the economic and emotional sense? Are there any alternatives to the current working practices? As we mentioned in the last section, technology intensified the frustrating experience of catching up with ever-changing work demands and coping with the surveillance of work practices. At the same time, technology is not the only factor that increases people's professional anxiety. China's socio-economic circumstances are principally responsible for such work shifts. In a country with marked power centralization, a professor's identity as civil servant of the nation does not accord with the economic relation between the university and its staff. This is not a service relationship but rather a supervisor-subordinate relationship, in which professors regard their work affairs as executing orders from superiors. Meanwhile, some work on social media is rendered invisible and devalued for it has been excluded from legal definitions of "employment" and is not monitored by the organization.

Thus, there is a tension between the Chinese social context emphasizing which emphasizes obedience and service and the current economic environment where the neoliberal work ethic has long been prominent. The deregulation of government provides more freedom for each production subject, which is an important reason why most universities in China have adopted the tenure system characterized by the themes of "get promoted or leave" and "pre-employment & long-employment". As Boltanski and Chiapello (2003) put it, "What is always being done, moving, changing - this will bring you prestige, not stability, which is often synonymous with inaction." (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2003: 19-22). The new system requires workers to eliminate the spatial and temporal boundaries between public and private spheres. This has been internalized through the process of individual self-supervision and self-appreciation. It comes down to the employees as agents subordinating themselves—willingly or not—to the new regime of digital academic labour (rather than social subordination being the direct result of any technological innovation). WeChat workgroups are just a mirror of many remote communication/information processing technologies. The anxiety that work and online platforms produce, no matter what kind of network platform is used, will likely expand with the disappearance of work-life boundaries. What is hidden behind this shift is not merely the change of working practices brought by the digitalization of labour, but also a series of structural problems that need to be solved. Compared with western countries that have rich experiences in labour arbitration and employment legislation, China has yet to implement such measures to improve the working conditions for university employees. Possible reforms include improving the existing labour legislation concerning technological innovation and moderating the hegemonic rhetoric of flexible work and the accumulation of precedents in handling online and offline labour disputes.

The release of educational information, the negotiation and discussion of work issues and changes in the organization of academic conferences foreshadow a change in the labour paradigm. Announcement boards, telephone calls and e-mails have been substituted by social communication such as in WeChat groups. Meanwhile, the traditional organization of meetings has shifted from face-to-face meetings to on-line meetings, with a combination of physical absence and distant presence.

Specifically, the basic welfare of university professors comes from the assessment of their teaching and academic work, rather than the fulfilment of "invisible" tasks within some temporary WeChat workgroups. This is akin to the argument made by Hatton and Gregg (2011), that the rhetoric of flexible work conceals the fact that the amount of work time will not be reduced by flexible hours. Although academic and administrative work is conducted in a public place, it is no longer a traditional workplace. The spatial dispersion within the WeChat workgroup leads to the diminished importance of offices, classrooms, and other usual labour locations.

Professors may initially welcome such work flexibility for a while, and then promptly fall into depression. Each of our research participants experienced anxiety caused by the unlimited hours and persistent job demands. The positive side of flexible work is more likely a hegemonic rhetoric shaped by avid promote3rs of technological vistas such as the smart city and the creative economy. In flexible work, negotiation, cooperation and teamwork across social media platforms is synonymous with office culture. Many trivial processes, such as monitoring e-mail or WeChat messages, responding to posts and preparing online meetings, learning to use WeChat/Tencent Meeting or Zoom App for work activities have been ignored and not counted for KPI assessment. Thus, promotion of flexibility and convenience allows changes to the scheduling of tasks but has little room for the change in the amount of work to be prepared and accomplished. As we explained earlier, professors who could not attend meetings were still expected to participate through the WeChat group. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, academics had to learn to use online teaching platforms designated by the university instead of choosing an online teaching platform that they were familiar with, even though the latter might be easier to operate. Technology facilitates remote work and makes employees frustrated as they have to learn the new technology. Invisible work such as the maintenance of digital devices and monitoring of online applications enhances the precarity of work. This shifts the risk associated with uncounted and unpaid efforts from the university department to the individual.

In China, most contemporary knowledge labour can only be realized through the intermediary of digital technology. Therefore, even if digital technology does not invade every working scene, the digitalization of labour still has a substantial impact. Employees in the university suffered from the dual exploitations of centralized power relations and technology creep in the context of an ultra-competitive work environment. The former is the basic source of anxiety while the latter plays a role of medium and catalyst.

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Endnotes

[1]   WeChat is a free instant messaging mobile application first put into the China market by Tencent Technology Company in 2011. With the comprehensive function of messaging, voice chatting, photo and video sharing and group chatting, it has become popular for users of all ages. WeChat group is a function whereby users join a group spontaneously to send message, share files, pictures, and videos.

[2]   Tencent Meeting provides an easy-to-use, smooth, secure, and reliable cloud-based, high-definition video conferencing solution that enables customers and users to host or join meetings anytime, anywhere. During the COVID-19 outbreak, Tencent Meeting provided free services, connecting users all over mainland China. Tencent Meeting and WeChat belong to the same company.

[3]   A common working pattern mostly seen in internet companies in China is that people start work at 9am and finish work at 9pm, 6 days a week.

[4]   This university is in the list of 211—a classification system set by the Education Ministry to describe the second-best higher education institutions in China. A similar list is 985 which includes the best universities with the most financial and other support from the government.

[5]   Figure from the website of Admission of Graduate Students of Shanghai University. Available at: https://yjszs.shu.edu.cn/xxcx/shdxgnwpm.htm

[6]   The names of the participants remain anonymous, as required.

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