

The concept of ‘sharing’ in Chinese social media: Origins, transformations and implications

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In this article we present an analysis of the concepts of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*—the Mandarin words for ‘sharing’—in the context of Chinese social media. We do so through an interrogation of the words *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* as used by Chinese social media companies. Using the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, we created screenshots of 32 Chinese social network sites between 2000-2018 and tracked changes in the usage of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* over time. The Mandarin translations in some ways operate like the English word, ‘sharing’. *Fenxiang* has the meaning of participating in social media, and *gongxiang* refers to technological aspects of sharing, while also conveying a sense of harmony. However, the interpersonal relations implied by *fenxiang*, and the political order implied by *gongxiang*, are quite different from those conveyed by ‘sharing’. Together, *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* construct a convergence of micro-level interpersonal harmony and macro-level social harmony. Thus, the language of sharing becomes the lens through which to observe the subtlety, complexity and idiosyncrasies of the Chinese internet. This article thus offers a new heuristic for understanding Chinese social media, while also pointing to an important facet of the discursive construction of Chinese social media. This implies a continuing need to de-westernize research into the internet and to identify cultural-specific meanings of social media.

Keywords: sharing; China; Chinese social media; de-westernization; language; web archives; cultural discourse studies

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Introduction

In this paper we analyze the concepts of *fenxiang* (分享) and *gongxiang* (共享)—the Mandarin words for ‘sharing’—in the context of Chinese social media. Primarily, we wish to understand

how the Mandarin for ‘sharing’ is used in the Chinese context and ask what this teaches us about the internet in China. In doing so, we seek to bring to the Chinese internet a focus on the language of the internet. Drawing on Raymond Williams’ *Keywords* (1976), scholarship such as Peters’ collection of *Digital Keywords* (2016) and John’s work on ‘sharing’ (2013, 2016) have shown this to be a theoretically productive undertaking. Accordingly, we inquire into the role and rhetoric of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* in Chinese social media—or, to put it differently, their semantic meaning and pragmatic functions. Additionally, we wish to explore the limits of the theoretical tools used to understand the internet in the West (especially the US) by highlighting some of the contingencies around its discursive construction. This aligns us with efforts to de-westernize communication studies (Park and Curran, 2000; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014) and leads us to ask whether what we know about the internet in the West through the concept of sharing applies in China, and if not, why not.

In other words, we offer a cross-cultural analysis of the keywords, *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*, both because they are central in the context of Chinese social media, and because they enable us to challenge and build upon what we already know about the internet in the West, in particular through the prism of the English word ‘sharing’, and to identify cultural-specific meanings of social media. We address these issues through an analysis of the words *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* as used by Chinese social media companies. Specifically, following John (2013), we use the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine to view previous versions of the homepages of 32 Chinese social network sites (SNSs) and are therefore able to track the introduction of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* into the language of Chinese social media, and to trace changes in the meanings and usages of those words over time. Our contribution is a novel reading of Chinese social network sites based on two of their central keywords. This reading advances our understanding of the internet in China

while at the same time showing that the language of the internet plays an important role in its construction. Given the cultural rootedness of all language, the cultural meanings of social media will thus be expected to vary. Our study of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*, and our constant comparison of these terms with the English, ‘sharing’, shows differences in Chinese and American social media, and goes some way in accounting for them.

Background

Sharing and its communicative valence

In the context of the internet, the concept of ‘sharing’ is a central and powerful metaphor (John, 2013, 2016). It operates by bringing together three distinct semantic fields. In the first, ‘sharing’ is a type of communication with emotional valence; it is the term for talk (Carbaugh, 1989) that defines therapy culture (Füredi, 2004). In the second, it is a technological term with longstanding usage in the field of computers (John, 2014). In the third, ‘sharing’ refers to a model of resource distribution that is both taught to American kindergarten children and marketed by Silicon Valley. Underlying all of these are positive cultural associations with ‘sharing’, most clearly conveyed through the conjunction of ‘sharing’ with ‘caring’.

Unpacking the metaphor of ‘sharing’ offers a mode of analysis that places social media in a broad historical, social and cultural context, and positions ‘sharing’ as a heuristic device for understanding a set of social phenomena. However, paying this kind of close attention to the concept of ‘sharing’ highlights its cultural and historical specificity. The kind of communication labeled ‘sharing’, for instance, is a relatively new aspect of ‘sharing’, dating back only around 100 years, and points to a self in need of reassurance in a changing world (see Chapter 2 of John, 2016). Analysis of ‘sharing’ also shows its paradoxes: ‘sharing’ is both a mode of participation in the

cutting edge of capitalist innovations (SNSs, the ‘sharing economy’), while at the same time it is deployed as an alternative to capitalist relations. Understanding the language of sharing online thus helps us to grasp how networked communication is defined, symbolized and carried out, which in turn provides a lens through which to observe the cultural dimensions and structures of relationship behind the concept of sharing itself.

However, the degree to which arguments constructed around the specific meanings of the English word ‘sharing’ apply to its translations in other languages is a matter for empirical inquiry. The concept of ‘sharing’ as used in Western SNSs ‘works’ because it appeals to a sense of equality, refers to the digital transfer of information, *and* is a cultural type of talk through which we know ourselves and others; in other words, it appeals to a certain self and makes assumptions about how that self knows itself and maintains ties with others. Yet these premises do not necessarily apply outside Western cultures, raising the possibility that current work on ‘sharing’ is Western centric. Indeed, if language encodes cultural differences (Wierzbicka, 2003), then even though American and Chinese social media users all appear to be posting content, writing messages, uploading videos, and so on, the fact that their participation has different names—sharing/*fenxiang*—raises the intriguing possibility that it may also have different meanings.

This insight is put forward in the spirit of de-westernization (Park and Curran, 2000; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014), and following Shi-xu’s observation that ‘universalized “western” conceptions mismatch “non-western” realities on the ground’ (Shi-xu, 2016, p. 2). While ‘sharing’ plays a key role in the discursive construction of the internet in the West, the force of the arguments made by those in favor of cross-cultural pragmatics (Wierzbicka, 2003), de-westernization (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014), and Chinese discourse studies (Shi-xu, 2014) leads us to ask what

the Mandarin words for ‘sharing’ mean, and how they construct, and offer insights into, social media in China.

The self, sharing, and the Chinese internet

Nikolas Rose (1996) analyzes the ‘modern Western conception of the person’ (p. 22) in order to ‘question some of our contemporary certainties about the kinds of people we take ourselves to be’ (pp. 1-2). Rose builds his argument around what he calls the ‘techniques of psy’ (p. 2), which, he claims, give the Western sacralization of freedom an ‘inescapably subjective form’ (p. 16). This, of course, raises questions about cultures outside North America and Western Europe, questions that subsequent scholars have sought to answer using Rose’s critical historical approach. Thus, if ‘sharing’ in the West is a mode of interpersonal communication aimed at self-realization and self-discovery, will it mean something different in the Chinese context, where the self is construed differently? And what effect might this have on the language of sharing online?

Taken as the ideal type of collectivism (Triandis, 1995), Chinese culture is often understood as producing interdependent people who value social groups over the individual (for the implications of this on language, see Shi-xu, 2014). Similarly, Fei has argued that the traditional Chinese self is explicitly situational (Fei, 1992 [1947]) and closely intertwined with the attainment of moral values. These values are deeply rooted in Confucian thought and mainly concern the maintenance of harmony (or reciprocity), both at the micro-interpersonal level and the macro-societal level (Chang, 2001).¹ However, following a series of institutional reforms during the post-1978 years of ‘reform and opening-up’, a two-fold social transformation took place in China that saw the individualization of the social structure (Yan, 2010). Significantly, this period overlaps with the so-called ‘psycho boom’ in urban China (Hsuan-Ying, 2018; Zhang, 2018). This

saw the ‘development of the self, moral education of the individual, and the cultivation of a richly affective personality’, and spoke to ‘a deepening appreciation of the importance of the subjective, the intimate, and the private’ (Kleinman, Yan, Jun, Lee, & Zhang, 2011, pp. 29-30). As a result, the post-reform generation finds it more socially acceptable to pursue self-interest and is more willing to be emotionally expressive (Kleinman, et al., 2011; Liu, 2011; T. Wang, 2013).

Nonetheless, and despite the cultural implications of the adoption of a version of therapy culture in China, the Chinese path to individualization has had its own characteristics, producing a self that is distinct both from the Western individualistic self and from the traditional Confucian self. According to Yan (2010), this emergent Chinese self legitimizes self-interest, emotionality and desire, yet still closely associates with the state, resulting in a divided self. Kleinman et al. (2011) see this divided self as comprised of a ‘small self’ and a ‘great self’, reflecting the relationship between the individual and a larger, collective social group, be that the family or the state. The principle that the small self should yield to the great self fits well with traditional understandings of the individual-collective relationship. Having said that, the relationship between self and state is not necessarily one of obligation and sacrifice, and the small and great selves, Liu argues (2011), should be seen ‘as complementary parts of a balanced whole’ where ‘a process of re-collectivization has been concomitant to the process of individualization’ (p.191). In this twofold process, Chinese youth, the majority of Chinese internet users, are aware of their need for community, social trust and collective identity, while their sense of belonging beyond their individualism is not identical with the state’s vision, but rather with universal moral values such as humanity and social justice (p.190). This produces a subjectivity that may simultaneously participate in state discourses and operate in opposition to them.

An important part of the context in which the Chinese self is changing is the diffusion of the internet and social media in China. According to a 2012 McKinsey survey, China has the world's most active social media population, with 91% of respondents saying they had visited a social media site in the previous six months, compared with 67% in the US.² By 2020, China had 900m internet users and a 65% internet penetration rate. 20% of users' time spent online is on instant messaging and social media applications (CNNIC, 2020). Major social media companies in China such as Baidu, Sina Weibo and Renren have operations and economic structures that are very similar to those of Google, Twitter and Facebook.

A great deal of writing about the internet in China has focused on censorship and the creative ways of dodging it (e.g. Zidani, 2018). However, following Yang (F. Yang, 2016), we seek to avoid this binary trope of censorship and resistance; nor do we wish to restrict ourselves to the lens of the democratization (Meng, 2010). However, we certainly should take the Chinese characteristics of the internet in China into consideration (G. Yang, 2012a), such as the state's hands-on regulation of social media platforms. Indeed, building on the individualism-collectivism model for the classification of cultural values (Hofstede, 1980), researchers have shown that social media users from different cultural backgrounds use apps with similar technological affordances differently (e.g. Jackson and Wang, 2013; Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011).

Paraphrasing Yang (2003), then, how can we see the co-evolution of the internet and a new kind of construal of self in China? After all, the majority of Chinese internet users were born since the 1980s. They have relatively more social mobility, which in the past was privilege-related, and enjoy 'mediated mobility' to a degree that previous generations did not (Hjorth and Arnold, 2012; G. Yang, 2012b). First, and importantly, we note that traditional socio-cultural traits have not been entirely eradicated, and that the influence of the situational self is still discernible (T. Wang, 2013).

Second, the self, which is both individualistic and situated, yields unique behavioral patterns among Chinese SNS users. In the Chinese internet, where information flows are paradoxically both open and censored—they are more open than in the pre-internet era, but more censored than in many other countries—Chinese youth feel more comfortable with expressing themselves and are more aware of ‘hidden’ information, though they are not disentangled from pre-existing relationships and social norms (T. Wang, 2013). As a result, they perform different kinds of self-expression that are situated in different types of relationship. Interestingly, Wang (2013) finds that Chinese youth prefer interacting with strangers, explaining that they feel freer to express their thoughts or emotions without the pressure to conform with their pre-existing identity, which is embedded in social norms associated with family and school. Chinese youth consider it too risky to share private interests or emotions with people they know. This preference for a disentangled self distinguishes them from their Western counterparts, whom the literature describes as more interested in socializing and sharing (at least on real-name SNSs) with pre-existing ties (Ellison and boyd, 2013).

The third facet is the association between self and state—the ‘small self’ and the ‘great self’ (Kleinman et al., 2011). This association is explicitly reflected in numerous examples of cyber-nationalistic movements (e.g. Chen, 2017). When faced with political issues concerning the state and nationality, Chinese internet users tend to demonstrate solidarity with the state.

The Chinese self is thus ambiguous, with cyber-nationalism and censorship coexisting alongside circumvention and self-regulation, and it would be simplistic to view the individual as merely subordinate to the state. For example, it has been argued that the concept of harmony (*hexie*), both as a Confucian ideal and a ‘language policy’, is a site of discursive resistance against propaganda and censorship (X. Wang, Juffermans, & Du, 2016). However, from the divided self

approach, harmony, along with other contemporary keywords, such as sharing (*gongxiang/fenxiang*), might more productively be seen as a site for identity negotiation between the self and state. In short, the divided self is positioned in an emergent and contingent interplay between users, state and technology, in which, as we shall show, Chinese concepts of ‘sharing’ play a crucial role. Before that, though, we shall present a brief explication of the Mandarin words, *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*.

Fenxiang* and *Gongxiang

Although *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* are both translated as sharing, they bear different connotations. The basic logics of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* are visible in their ideograms (Figures 1 and 2). *Fen*’s pictograph consists of ‘a knife’ and ‘separation’, and means ‘to divide’, while *gong*’s original pictograph shows two hands and means ‘together’. Given that *xiang* means ‘to have’ or ‘to enjoy’, *fenxiang* means ‘to divide and distribute’, while *gongxiang* means ‘to enjoy together’. Drawing on the usage of these words in texts in Mandarin, in collections such as the People’s Daily Full-Text Database, the Modern China Newspaper Full-text Database and the Chinese National Corpus, as well as on definitions in a number of dictionaries, let us now explore *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* in some more detail.

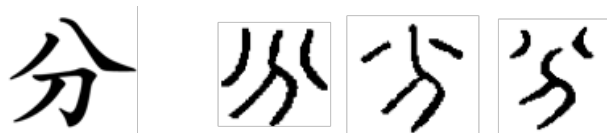


Figure 1: *Fen*’s modern Chinese form and its ancient forms



Figure 2: *Gong*’s modern Chinese form and its ancient forms

Fenxiang: *From dividing to communicating*

Dating back to the Qing dynasty, which was founded in 1636, the word *fenxiang* originally referred to the zero-sum division and sharing of financial resources. This usage was stable until the 1940s, when the sense of ‘dividing’ waned, and the objects of *fenxiang* broadened from financial interests to include honor,³ secrets,⁴ and so on. That is, *fenxiang* started to take on the meaning of ‘having something in common with’ in a non-zero sum manner.

In the 1950s, *fenxiang* came to be associated with the act of communicating one’s feelings and experiences. First, *fenxiang* started to represent the condition of empathizing with someone who was talking about their personal feelings⁵; second, *fenxiang* came to mean the act of telling itself.⁶ Since then, the meaning of *fenxiang*-as-communicating has become fully established, and *fenxiang* is frequently used to refer to a type of speech (cf. Carbaugh, 1989).

Furthermore, from the 1980s, *fenxiang* started to be contrasted with selfishness and began to be acknowledged as virtuous and generous, both in relation to physical belongings and interpersonal relations. For example, an article in the People’s Daily said: ‘One should learn to respect, understand and cooperate with others. Learn to *fenxiang* your treasured possessions with others, and at the same time learn to *fenxiang* the happiness of others’ (8 January 1998). Here we can see *fenxiang*’s dual usage as sharing both tangible goods and intangible feelings.

Fenxiang also came to refer to the communication of one’s feelings in the therapeutic mode as China started importing therapeutic practices from the West from the 1990s. Thus, in 1996, a journal dedicated to academic education wrote about marital relationships as follows: ‘Complete open *fenxiang* means that the door to communication is always open’. This is very similar to American texts from the same period about the importance of sharing for maintaining healthy

relationships (see John, 2016, pp. 35-36), yet it clearly builds on pre-existing ties between *fenxiang* and empathy.

In sum, over the past half century, *fenxiang* has taken on communicative meanings and has come to be associated with talking about emotions. It has also become a word with positive moral connotations, similarly to ‘sharing’ in English. At the same time, *fenxiang*’s older meanings of distributing, having in common, and empathizing, persist.

Gongxiang: Enjoying together, technology and harmony

Emerging in the Han Dynasty (established some 2,200 years ago), *gongxiang* initially meant to enjoy together, or to have something in common with someone. The objects of *gongxiang* were mostly abstract and positive, such as peace, joy and well-being. This usage remained stable until around the 1980s, when ICTs began to diffuse in China. *Gongxiang* started to take on technical and computer-related connotations in terms such as ‘resource sharing’ (*ziyuan gongxiang*), ‘information sharing’ (*xinxi gongxiang*) and ‘file sharing’ (*wenjian gongxiang*). *Gongxiang* thus overlaps with the technological senses of sharing.

Most recently, *gongxiang* has become the word used for ‘sharing’ in the context of the sharing economy. Interestingly, there have been debates in China over the appropriateness of the word *gongxiang* to refer to the for-profit activities of commercial enterprises that resonate with those reported in the US. These debates bring to the surface the word’s 2000 years of history, a history that has given it deep socio-cultural connotations. Specifically, the idea of *gongxiang* is closely related to a Confucian concept of the ideal society, *datong*, literally, ‘the great harmony’. Learned by rote by every schoolchild in China, the famous phrase from *the Book of Rites*—‘The world community equally shared by all’ (*Tian Xia Wei Gong*)—depicts an ideal society and

remains one of the fundamental tenets of Chinese thought. The association between *gongxiang* and harmony was further advanced by Sun Yat-sen, who in 1911 led the Xinhai Revolution that overthrew China's last imperial dynasty. Sun put forward the 'Three Principles of the People' (*Minzu, Minquan, Minsheng*) and a set of governing tenets 'Own together, govern together, share together' (*Gongyou, Gongzhi, Gongxiang*) to lead the new Republic of China. After the Chinese Communist Party's takeover in 1949, *gongxiang* remained prominent throughout the Maoist and the post-socialist eras. According to Mao and subsequent leaders, *gongxiang* reflects the objectives of common prosperity and social equity. The national strategic mission of 'constructing a socialist harmonious society', put forward in 2004, emphasizes the crucial role played by social equity and justice in bringing about harmony. Indeed, in 2015, the CCP declared *gongxiang* one of the five guiding principles for China's future development. 70 years of CCP rule have seen the constant repetition and reinforcement of *gongxiang* as a path to harmony, making *gongxiang* integral to the Chinese social imagination, and an essential element of mainstream political thought in China.

Although they are both the Chinese equivalents of 'sharing', *gongxiang* and *fenxiang* have developed quite differently (as summarized in Table 1). While *fenxiang* has gradually transformed from dividing and distributing into an act of communication with interpersonal connotations, *gongxiang*'s newer meanings lie in the technical realm, while conveying and promoting the value of sharing and harmony in a higher societal sense. These are the meanings and connotations of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* that are brought into play when these words are deployed in the context of Chinese social media.

	Original meaning	1900s	1930s	1950s	1980s	2000s
<i>Fenxiang</i>	To divide and distribute (financial and legislative benefits, rights and interests...)	To have in common, to enjoy together	To empathize with someone		Embedded with virtues such as generosity, selflessness, caring	Participating in social media (sending, posting, or making something public online)
			To communicate (experiences, joy)			
<i>Gongxiang</i>	To have in common, to enjoy together (joy, happiness, achievements, harmony, etc.)				Technical, ICT-related sharing (information, resources, hardware, files, etc.)	
	Also regarded as a path to harmony					

Table 1: Summary of developments of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*

Methods

In order to examine the deployment of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* by Chinese social media companies, and to understand the purposes and cultural values that these terms reflect, we collected data from 32 Chinese social media websites. The sample includes the most influential and the earliest SNSs in China as well as well as micro-blogs, Q&A communities, product/service review communities and other niche sites (see Appendix A).

The Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine was used to collect data. The Wayback Machine enables internet users to see archived versions of websites. Following John (2013, pp. 170-2), we first located the earliest archived frontpage of each SNS—the earliest versions were from 2000—

then moved forward in time through to May 2018. Having produced screenshots of the archived web pages, we then looked through them for changes. When updates were identified, we sought other important pages, such as About or FAQ pages, so as to record other shifts in SNSs' self-description, and saved them as additional materials which we also analyze below.

Using the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti, every instance of the words *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* that appeared on the archived web pages was coded by the first author, whose native tongue is Mandarin. Each instance was analyzed both in term of its content (what was expressed) and form (how it was expressed on the webpage). A process of open coding, axial coding and selective coding was conducted (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Each new instance of the words *fenxiang* or *gongxiang* was compared to material already collected. New codes and categories were formed after reading, re-reading and contextualizing the instances. Furthermore, the first author explained and justified coding and analysis decisions to the second author—who does not speak Mandarin—which made the analysis more explicit, and subject to reappraisal. Constant, iterative comparison, along with triangulation, contribute to the reliability of this qualitative study's findings (Madill, Jordan, & Shirley, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1998)

During open coding, various aspects of the webpages (website type, webpage type, date and time, the location of *fenxiang/gongxiang* on the page, when they first appear, whether they replace other words, etc.) were established as code units. The axial coding enabled further generalization and abstraction of the concepts and information found in the open coding. Instances of *fenxiang/gongxiang* were coded in terms of their 'objects of sharing' (John, 2013), such as links, photos, music, or 'your life'. We followed John's (2013) division of objects of sharing into 'concrete objects' (e.g. photos), 'fuzzy objects' (e.g. 'your life'), or 'no object' (where the user is simply exhorted to 'Share!'). Moreover, different types of sharing were allocated to families of

codes such as zero-sum or non-zero sum sharing, information sharing, sharing of emotions. The last step was selective coding, the purpose of which was to integrate and abstract higher-level codes and relationships based on the former coding processes. The following emerged as selective codes: the subjects and the objects of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*, the types of *fenxiang* (self-presentation, relationship maintenance, contributing to the community), and the types of *gongxiang* (as a technological term or as an abstract ideal). This analysis enabled us to trace shifting uses and meanings of the words *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* in Chinese social media since their emergence.

Findings

Fenxiang as participating in social media

Similarly to ‘sharing’, *fenxiang* is a flexible and dense word, used to refer to an ever-expanding list of online activities, including updating a status, reposting data across platforms, and sending photos/videos/links to others. Also similarly to ‘sharing’, it was between 2005-2007 that *fenxiang* became the word to denote participation in SNSs. For example, on 10 January 2006, Xiaonei updated its home page to include the text, ‘*Fenxiang* music, films, and books you like’⁷ in the list of activities one can carry out on the site. This watershed is followed by the pervasive use of *fenxiang*. Thus, most services established after 2008 have *fenxiang* in their taglines or self-descriptions from the outset.

Fenxiang in Chinese SNSs has developed more or less in line with John’s (2013) account of the major changes in the use of ‘sharing’ in Western SNSs. For instance, the adoption of a rhetoric of fuzzy objects of sharing can be seen on Kaixin, which changed from being an ‘online community’ where you ‘*fenxiang* your photos, diaries and mood’ (8 February 2008) to a ‘social

network site' where you '*fenxiang* your life and joy' (21 May 2009). We can also see this in the SNS, Qzone. Launched in 2005, Qzone started without talk of *fenxiang* on the site. In 2007, though, users were invited to share concrete objects: 'Write diaries, *fenxiang* photos and music' (14 August 2007). Six months later, users could 'Write diaries, *fenxiang* photos, albums and music, let friends *fenxiang* your joy' (27 Jan 2008). This is *fenxiang* as empathizing, as discussed above. Following a major update in 2011, however, Qzone's tagline was changed to: '*Fenxiang* your joy, it gives you joy to *fenxiang*' (8 February 2011), where *fenxiang* is used as a term for communicating (positive) emotions, with the justification that doing so makes one feel good. The following year Qzone changed its tagline once again, making it '*Fenxiang* your life and keep the touching moments' (10 October 2012), where *fenxiang* has a 'fuzzy object of sharing'. Alongside a photo of friends on a beach, arms raised in celebration (Figure 3), the tagline is the only meaningful text, making '*fenxiang* your life' the essence of the site. This rhetoric is also apparent on Weibo, which started telling users to '*Fenxiang* what's fresh' at its launch in 2009. An example of *fenxiang* being used without any object at all is provided by Fanfou, which in 2007 stated that 'Communicating and *fenxiang* will bring you and your friends closer' (26 June 2007).



Figure 3: Qzone’s front page (archived version), 10 October 2012

An example of *fenxiang* being introduced to a site to refer to activities that were already available is offered by Jiebang, a location-based SNS for mobile devices. It was launched in 2010 with the invitation to ‘post the latest places you’ve been’ (20 April 2010), but shortly afterwards updated its self-presentation to, ‘Explore the city and *fenxiang* your tips with friends’ (29 June 2010), where ‘tips’ are a concrete object of sharing. The About page from a couple of months later includes ‘*Fenxiang* life with your friends’ (28 September 2010), marking the adoption of a fuzzy object of sharing. A couple of years later the tagline was rewritten, bringing a fuzzy object of sharing to the platform’s front page: ‘You can create, discover and *fenxiang* the beauty of life with your friends’ (12 December 2012). While the functionality of Jiebang did not significantly change

from 2010-2012, the adoption of a rhetoric of *fenxiang* highlights its desirability as the mode of self-expression and interaction with others.

A seemingly win-win situation is thus established through *fenxiang*: on the one hand, users are promised deeper friendships and wider social ties when they *fenxiang*; and on the other, users' extensive *fenxiang* practices produce user-generated data for the platforms. In this sense, and similarly to 'sharing' on social media in the West, Chinese SNSs work hard to promote *fenxiang*.

Gongxiang as the ultimate goal

In contrast to *fenxiang*'s ubiquitous presence in SNSs' call for participation, *gongxiang* appears much less on the front pages of the sampled sites, and when it does, it is mainly deployed for its technical meaning. Sina iAsk, for instance, whose tagline is '*Fenxiang* knowledge together', had a part of its site devoted to 'resource *gongxiang*' (resource sharing), where users could share files (1 July 2005). However, *gongxiang*-as-technical-sharing is only part of the picture. As shown by the vision statements of the two largest SNSs, *gongxiang* refers to harmony, which is the ultimate objective of the platforms that encourage *fenxiang*.

For instance, when Xiaonei, the leading SNS at the time, switched its name to Renren in 2009,⁸ CEO Chen Yizhou published an open letter in which he cited the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China in explaining the new name and the vision behind it:

The name 'Renren', as in 'everyone is duty-bound to work for and benefits from social harmony' [*Hexie Shehui Renren Youze, Hexie Shehui Renren Gongxiang*],⁹ is a Web 2.0 brand that can accommodate all internet users and can support a socially responsible and enterprising spirit as well as long-term, healthy development, while at the same time having the potential to become an icon that is respected and loved by vast numbers of users.¹⁰

Gongxiang represents social harmony that benefits everyone. This quotation marks Renren's ambition to fulfil its social responsibility, which it defines in terms taken from an official Communist Party document, while entertaining millions of users. Likewise, Tencent, the parent company of Qzone, QQ and Wechat, describes its long-term vision as becoming a 'most respected internet enterprise'. In order to achieve this, Tencent 'strives to help build a harmonious society and to become a good corporate citizen'.¹¹ Similarly, Baidu claims to be 'bridging the information gap, achieving a sharing society'.¹² These vision statements highlight the companies' self-representation as enjoying the respect of their users and as building a harmonious and sharing society.

Referring to official discourses on harmony (*hexie*) and sharing (*gongxiang*), we can see in this use of *gongxiang* that SNSs are aligning themselves with objectives laid out by the state. The language adopted is official, and can be read as the companies clearly stating that they are not looking to disrupt the overall objectives of the state.

Discussion: Sharing, *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* from a cross-cultural perspective

The Mandarin translations for 'sharing' in some ways operate like the English word, 'sharing'. *Fenxiang* is the equivalent of sharing in its sense of participating in social media, and *gongxiang* refers to the more technological aspects of sharing, while also conveying a sense of harmony that we might associate with the term 'sharing and caring'. Indeed, both the imagery and imaginary around *fenxiang* and sharing are similar. *Fenxiang* is visually represented on Chinese SNSs as groups of friends, joyful children, or hands working together. In terms of their symbolic meanings, *fenxiang* and sharing are both profoundly endowed with pro-social values such as generosity and caring. Also, the SNSs' taglines are similar. Since 2006, most of the sampled Chinese SNSs have

deployed a rhetoric of *fenxiang* and, similarly to Western SNSs (John, 2013), have taken on fuzzy objects or no object of sharing in their language. But as with the word ‘sharing’ in English, they are saturated with their local context. Just as ‘sharing’ is a useful prism through which to examine Western social media, so *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* are a useful prism through which to observe the internet in China. In this section we show how *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* reflect and construct relations between the self, others and society, before discussing their role in the relations between the individual, social media, and the state. In both cases, our observations of ‘sharing’ on Chinese SNSs resonate with the notion of the divided self (Kleinman, et al., 2011), and relate to the deep roots of the words in Mandarin, from which they attain their rhetorical force in the context of the Chinese internet.

The divided self in Chinese social media

With *fenxiang* as the essence of online social participation, and *gongxiang* as its ultimate goal, Chinese SNSs offer a realm where users experience different kinds of sharing that manifest different construals of self. When *fenxiang* stands for posting about oneself or sending messages to other people, it would appear to signify a divided self that is both individualist and situational (Kleinman, et al., 2011), where these selves are normally in competition, and are not mutually reinforcing. Yet through *fenxiang* users are encouraged to express themselves and form new ties, to ‘*fenxiang* music, films & books that you like and get to know like-minded people’ (Xiaonei, 2006); and to maintain pre-existing ties, because ‘communicating and *fenxiang* will bring you and your friends closer’ (Fanfou, 2008). In other words, *fenxiang* on SNSs connotes both self-expression and relationship maintenance, thus combining two goals that have been difficult to achieve simultaneously. Therefore, through *fenxiang*, users are able to perform an individualistic

and embedded self at the same time. Through *fenxiang*, Chinese SNSs bring a Western model of communication to a Chinese audience: the rhetoric of *fenxiang* invites users to express themselves in a manner not dissimilar to the therapeutic sense of ‘sharing’ in English. However, just as the Chinese psycho-boom has local characteristics (Zhang, 2018), in this instance the connection between *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* constructs participation in SNSs in relation to deep values in Chinese culture. Therefore, although ‘sharing’ in English and *fenxiang* in Mandarin refer to the same activity (communicating with ties on social media), the nature of these ties and the selves that constitute them—and hence the communication between them—is different.

These differences are manifested through the language of *fenxiang/gongxiang*, which is reflective of the relationship between the small self and the great self (Kleinman, et al., 2011), with the individual on the one hand, and the state, society or community on the other. Specifically, if the goal of *fenxiang* for individual users is self-development or relationship-building, as mentioned above, *gongxiang* can be read as *fenxiang*’s ultimate state. This implies that small, individual-level sharing ultimately leads to larger, society-level sharing. It is through deploying this rhetoric that SNSs strive to transform individual users’ content production into contributions towards a better community and society. Thus, for example, Weibo’s tagline—‘*fenxiang* small joys, pass on big dreams’ (15 February 2013)—underlines the logical connection between individual experiences and societal ‘dreams’.

These observations can be held up against meanings of ‘sharing’ in the US, where we observe a very different culture of self-disclosure. For instance, in China under the Cultural Revolution it became risky to express one’s feelings, leading to a generation of Chinese people being brought up to distrust strangers and not to disclose their innermost thoughts and feelings (Kleinman, et al., 2011). Meanwhile, in the US, under the dual auspices of the counterculture and

therapy culture, authentic self-expression was becoming a central value as people were exposing their personal lives to an unprecedented degree. Therefore, when interpersonal communication started moving online in the 1990s, the American and Chinese contexts for such communication were strikingly different. While the word ‘sharing’ in the Western context could draw on the decades-long experience of intimate interpersonal communication (John, 2016), the word *fenxiang* in the Chinese context could not. This is not to say that Chinese people did not express emotion during the Cultural Revolution. However, this is not the kind of wide-ranging sharing of emotions for the purposes of self-discovery and tie-formation that was taking root in the US at that time, but is more suggestive of Zhang’s (2018) argument that the revolution superseded the self in Maoist China.

In sum, analysis of the language of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* in Chinese social media reveals the entanglement of a new individualistic self with a self that remains socially embedded in pre-existing relationships; it shows how micro-level harmony (*fenxiang*) and macro-level harmony (*gongxiang*) cohere with each other.

The interplay among the individual, SNSs and the state

As well as mediating interpersonal relations and linking them to a higher order of social harmony, the dynamics of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* also reflect and construct the interplay between the individual, SNSs and the state. This much is consensual: *gongxiang* represents a social ideal, expressed through equal access to information and the elimination of the digital divide, for example, while *fenxiang* is a practical way to achieve *gongxiang*. Thus, Chinese social media platforms act as both mouthpiece and mediator in the relationship between the individual and the state.

Given that *gongxiang/fenxiang* can be used as a synonym for an ideal society, they serve to create a balance among users, internet enterprises and the state. Both *gongxiang* and *fenxiang* play a role in this. Chinese SNSs are financially driven to attract and retain users, while remaining aligned with the state, which role they carry out in two ways: on the one hand, they demonstrate their responsible corporate citizenship and seek to maintain a ‘harmonious (*hexie*) and sharing (*gongxiang*)’ cyberspace; on the other hand, they use a rhetoric of *fenxiang* to attract users and motivate them to create content and data. Our analysis shows that the discourses of *gongxiang* and *fenxiang* help both technically and rhetorically, allowing Chinese SNS to do both.

Also, the use of *gongxiang* by SNSs’ CEOs suggests quite different objectives for participating in SNSs than those presented by, for instance, Facebook, and this in two main ways. First, in promoting ‘sharing’ Facebook is not seeking to convey any kind of message to the American government. Second, the vision Facebook is promoting is of understanding between atomistic individuals; Facebook seeks to afford its members ‘the power to share’, believing that this will make the world more open and connected. This, though, is not the same as the route that Chinese social media see as leading to *gongxiang*, precisely because of the very different understandings of the self between Facebook on the one hand, and Renren, Tencent or Baidu on the other.

If social media (Western and Chinese) strive to create communicative spaces for social betterment, then one might well ask how Chinese harmony is maintained and practiced differently from possible Western counterparts, such as Mark Zuckerberg’s belief in the creation of a ‘global community’.¹³ What we ultimately see in *fenxiang/gongxiang* is the convergence and mystification of social media platforms’ interests and responsibilities: Chinese SNSs attempt to attract users while adhering to the state’s discourse. Positioned between the state and individual users, Chinese

SNSs seek to maintain a harmonious cyberspace in compliance with the duty of corporate citizenship, while at the same time attracting users and motivating them to produce ever more content and data in accordance with the SNSs' commercial aims. The rhetoric of *fenxiang/gongxiang* enables them to do just this. Associated with positive values such as friendship, joy, wonder, and knowledge, the rhetoric of *fenxiang* encourages users to post positive content and to foster positive relationships. Likewise, promoted by the state as a political ideal, *gongxiang* extends desirable prospects but also bestows unavoidable responsibilities on social media platforms. In this way, *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* become the lens through which to observe the subtlety, complexity and idiosyncrasies of the Chinese internet.

Conclusions

Even though 'sharing' translates as *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*, and even though all of these words refer to participation in social media, it is most certainly not the case that what we know about 'sharing' can be unproblematically transferred into the Chinese context, reinforcing the need to continue to de-westernize communication research (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). It *is* the case, however, that the reasons for inquiring into the keyword, 'sharing', and the methods for doing so, remain pertinent in the Chinese context. Indeed, we have shown here that studying the meanings of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang*, and comparing them to 'sharing', offers a new heuristic for understanding Chinese social media, while also pointing to an important facet of the discursive construction of Chinese social media. In particular, while 'sharing' and *fenxiang* both refer to a kind of therapeutic communication, the differences between the Western and Chinese selves engaged in this communication filter through into the exhortation to share on SNSs. We may all be talking about ourselves online, but our selves differ; they are oriented differently towards other

selves, society, and the state. In the context of Western social media, ‘sharing’ (or at least an ideal type of ‘sharing’) appeals to people who authentically communicate their true core selves, and, according to SNSs, is a practice that will bring about better interpersonal understanding. In the context of Chinese social media, *fenxiang* appeals to people who wish to communicate within a reciprocal relationship while expressing themselves in a risk-free, altruistic manner, while for the SNSs, *gongxiang*, the state attained by *fenxiang*, will bring about societal harmony, in keeping with the state’s objectives.

This has profound implications. To the extent that ‘sharing’ is a key construct for social media in the West, then in China, where social media’s constitutive activity is *fenxiang*, which draws on and enacts a Chinese self, social media have a different meaning. They are always already Chinese social media; and the corollary: what in the West are called ‘social media’ are always already *Western* social media. Let us put this differently: American and Chinese social media afford posting status updates, uploading videos, and so on. But the force of our argument here is that to say ‘Weibo affords sharing’, for instance, is, in a way, misleading, because ‘sharing’ and *fenxiang* mean different things and do different rhetorical work. For many years Facebook argued that it was making the world a better place by providing its users with ‘the power to share’. Whatever this may mean, we have shown that ideas like this play out differently in different languages and cultures (Wierzbicka, 2003). Taking this further, if Chinese (or Indian, or Nigerian) social media are always already Chinese (or Indian, or Nigerian), then perhaps we should reign in our expectations regarding the transformative power of social media. Further research in other contexts and across platforms (that describe themselves in terms of ‘sharing’) should explore these possibilities. Moreover, researchers in non-English contexts might consider applying the approach adopted here in order to generate novel insights into the internet and social media across the world.

This study shows that even when explicitly imitating American social media, Chinese social media platforms are creating something distinctly Chinese because the self and interpersonal relations are different from the outset, as is the language used to describe them. We are not arguing here that the self, or social media, are solely constructed through language; we are, however, arguing that without attention to language we are unable to fully account for their construction. This examination of *fenxiang* and *gongxiang* not only shows us that Western and Chinese social media differ, it also goes some way in showing us how.

¹ We are acutely aware that the collectivism-individualism dichotomy has its limitations, including over-generalization and Western-centrism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002; G. Wang and Liu, 2010). Furthermore, collectivism itself is a diverse concept (Oyserman, et al., 2002), such that Chinese collectivism is not necessarily the same as Japanese collectivism.

² <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/chinas-social-media-boom#>

³ For example: ‘Our war of resistance is holy and arduous. Everybody can *fenxiang* the honor of victory.’ 4 Oct. 1942, Dagongbao Guilinban

⁴ For example: ‘The British government insists to *fenxiang* the secret of the atomic bomb.’ 27 Sept. 1949, Dagongbao Xianggangban.

⁵ For example: ‘Reading this cheerful letter, I *fenxiang* the happiness of the young man.’ 25 January 1953, People’s Daily.

⁶ For example: ‘It was 9 pm when I got back. My heart was still beating fast, and I didn’t even think about having dinner. I was so eager and thrilled to *fenxiang* my joy with everyone. Whenever I met a comrade, I spoke excitedly: “I met Chairman Mao today! I met Chairman Mao today!”’ 12 August 1966, People’s Daily.

⁷ All translations are the authors’.

⁸ Xiaonei translates as ‘on campus’, while Renren means ‘everyone’.

⁹ The quote is from the Report to the Seventeenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China on 15 October 2007.

¹⁰ <http://tech.qq.com/a/20090804/000306.htm>

¹¹ <https://www.tencent.com/en-us/abouttencent.html>

¹² <http://home.baidu.com/home/index/company>

¹³ See his manifesto, *Building Global Community*, <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10103508221158471>.

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