# An Epistemic Trend or a Digital Pitfall? De-Westernizing Media and Communication Studies in Digital China

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## Abstract

Governments hiding facts and truth from the public seems to have become a common phenomenon, especially during the social crisis in China. The practice of the public using various media to express dissent and opinions, to overcome government censorship, appears to contribute to freedom of speech. Inspired by widespread online articles during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, this paper argues that the flaws in this logic are the dualism, which digital media created (pro-democracy vs authoritarian; freedom vs control), in understanding media in China. By borrowing the discussion of the de-westernization of media and communication studies, the paper argues that the introduction of digital media makes de-westernized studies in China harder because it prompts us to think "digitally."

## Keywords

Chinese Media; Social Media; Online Users; Digital; De-Westernization; Quantify

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# Эпистемический тренд или цифровая западня? Девестернизация медиа и коммуникационных исследований в цифровом Китае

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## Аннотация

То, что Правительство скрывает факты и правду от общественности, кажется, стало обычным явлением, особенно во время социального кризиса в Китае. Практика использования общественностью различных средств массовой информации для выражения инакомыслия и собственных мнений ради преодоления государственной цензуры, по-видимому, способствует свободе слова. Заинтересованный широко распространенными во время пандемии COVID-19 в 2020 году онлайн-материалами, автор данной статьи утверждает, что недостатки такой логики заключаются в дуализме, созданном цифровыми СМИ (про-демократия против авторитаризма; свобода против контроля), в понимании СМИ в Китае. Вступая в обсуждение девестернизации медиа и коммуникативных исследований, автор утверждает, что внедрение цифровых медиа затрудняет анализ девестернизации в Китае, поскольку побуждает нас мыслить «цифровым образом».

## Ключевые слова

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## Introduction

On the 10 of March 2020, *People* (*ren wu*), a Chinese magazine specializing in feature and biography reporting, released an article titled "The Whistle-giver (*fa shao zi de ren*)" from its WeChat account. This article shocked all of Chinese society, introducing the "truth" about how medical staff first noticed coronavirus in Wuhan in December 2019, and local authorities ignored it. The main feature of this article was Dr. Ai Fen, the director of the emergency room of Wuhan Central Hospital in Hubei, explaining how she noticed a patient from Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market that she suspected of being infected with an unknown virus (later confirmed as coronavirus). She realized the possibility of human-to-human transmission of this virus as she saw the medical test report of another patient with no direct contact with the Seafood Market showing "SARS coronavirus." Later, *People* published the interview as a first-person account. Dr. Ai Fen exposed many details about how she identified coronavirus, and she received criticism from leaders after she circulated the test report of the infected patient in her network. This reporting survived only several hours before the propaganda department deleted it. However, afterward, users on WeChat spontaneously created many different versions of this reporting in different languages and expressions, including English, German, Japanese, emoji, *pin yin*, oracle bone inscription, Morse, screenshots of original reporting, base 16 (computing numeral system), barcode, Braille alphabet, QR code, and "elvish" language (Tolkien invented this language in the book *The Lord of the Rings*). The exact number of those reinvented articles published on the Internet is unknown, but according to the calculation of a WeChat user, there were 33 versions of this reporting online, as the original one was censored (Zaixiangjixuan, 2020).

WeChat is an application that combines the functions of instant messaging and social networking. WeChat has a powerful function for enabling "one to an unlimited number of strangers" communication, or "public account" (Harwit, 2017, p. 318). This function benefited from different versions of reporting that WeChat users created and distributed widely through public accounts. All users who subscribe to the public account can access the articles it publishes; then, subscribers can repost the article to their online network (Stockman & Luo, 2017). Although some articles were censored during circulation and disappeared afterward, WeChat users reinvented more and different versions to detour the censorship and enlarge the circulation. Borrowing an online user's words, 10 March 2020 was the most absurd day since the birth of WeChat.

Later, "The Whistle-giver" spread from WeChat to other social media platforms (i.e., Douban, Zhihu, and Douyin), which triggered extensive public debates on the Internet. Many scholars, and public intellectuals started to voice their opinions on social media and commented on this phenomenal event. Ye Daying,

a Chinese film director, said that "deleting post is an act of a fascist" (Yun, 2020). The editor-in-chief of *Global Times*, Hu Xijin, wrote on his personal Weibo post:

> "[…] This is not a big deal. It is a form of online behavioral art [for netizens] to express grievance. There has been a long history for such grievances, which requires outlets and opportunities to give away. Social media provides an opportunity for the release [of it] in a collective manner, because it does not cost anything."

Such a phenomenon in Chinese media studies never lacks academic attention. Extensive works have investigated the relationship between the Party's Internet control and the creative practices of Chinese social media users regarding how these user practices contribute to freedom of speech in China (Gallagher & Miller, 2019; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Xu, 2015). Researchers have found that social media empower Chinese citizens to challenge the propaganda of the Party and develop their own narratives of controversial public events (Song et al., 2017). As Tang and Yang (2011) argue, "[C]ontrol inevitably incurs public resentment and induces various forms of subversion" (p. 680). To retain control over online territory, the propaganda department tirelessly develops new strategies to censor sensitive and dissenting content online, such as the filtering system for sensitive words and, since 2018, shutting down more VPN services by which online users access foreign websites. At the 12th session of a study group that the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee at *People's Daily* held in 2019, President Xi Jinping mentioned that it was important to strengthen the ideological works in the information age and "make the Party's voice spread widely and deeply" (Xinhuanet.com, 2019).

Controls and restrictions not only occur in the form of administrative orders; fully aware individual users recognize them. Gueorguiev, Shao, and Crabtree (2017) argue that most Chinese online users have a strong awareness of what sort of topics could violate Party taboos. Those who may have no experience with the use of media are less likely to discuss forbidden affairs. Scholars identify online users as having already carried out self-censorship prior to posting information online (Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Sullivan, 2012). However, self-censorship is a complicated process, and it is hard to know the specific reasons leading up to it because part of the process occurs as individual cognition (Gueorguiev, Shao & Crabtree, 2017).

Against this background, this paper would deny either the unprecedented changes that social media brought to Chinese society or the multiple layers of censorship that have occurred on the Internet so far. Rather, this paper tries to introduce the hidden aspects of Chinese media studies, which mainstream research neglects. Circulating the censored content as a way to express dissent and combat "authoritarian controls" has been taken for granted. But to what degree are such practices an indication of freeing online discourse in China? How do we measure it "scientifically," and what do the findings imply for future research?

Borrowing the discussions of de-westernizing journalism, media, and commu-nication studies, this paper critically engages with existing scholarship and identi-fies three issues in contemporary Chinese media studies. First, regarding the appli-

cation and adaptation of western-evidence-supported theories, Chinese media studies did not realize de-westernization because the emergence of digital media complicates the decision of what to de-westernize. On the one hand, it strengthens collective awareness because online users are fully aware of the presence of censorship online (Tsai, 2016), leading to users disguising their true feelings or expressing them in a performative manner. On the other hand, although China has its own social media platforms, these platforms are frequently compared with their western counterparts. Some platforms were created to mimic those from the West, such as Weibo-Twitter and Zhihu-Quora. The logic of how a social media platform operates seems comparable between the East and the West.

Second, achieving de-westernized Chinese studies should combine the evidence collected from the field at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels, evaluating the importance of discrepancies in evidence at the micro-/individual level. This is particularly important in digital times. As mentioned, online users quite often fall into a circumstance about with whom to agree or disagree when a controversial event appears online (Chen, 2018). Agree with the government or agree with victims? The polarized expressions frequently occupy social media.

Third, current scholarship largely approaches online practices in China by quantifying their influences and users' behaviors (Huang & Sun, 2014; Tang, Chen & Wu, 2018). China is a country with a huge population and an equally large number of online users (netizens), but to what extent can the numerical measurement of online users' behaviors validate the knowledge to date of social media's fast-growing impacts? Situated in a global context, knowing how the social-media-empowered phenomena in China differ from other nations by evaluating its significance with quantitative methods is still not enough, due to the discrepancies in political systems and cultural reality. Especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, media content relating to this crisis circulates widely because of its relevance to the public interest. Stories with a large number of reposts attract the attention of both social media users and academic scholars. The focus of this study is not to document the numerical significance of the click rate and the number of viewers of Dr. Ai Fen's reporting. That case triggered this paper's effort to contemplate these questions.

People can have a voice online without exposing their identities in different contexts. We suggest the importance of knowing the motivations behind online users' creating and sharing information at a micro-level. Extant studies shed light on the Party's suppression of information dissemination at the macro-level and the meso-level, by investigating the regulations, orders, bans, and guidelines that regional and local authorities or media organizations issue (Gallagher & Miller, 2019; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Fang & Repnikova, 2018). This research addresses the importance of giving more space to exploring how individual users in China perceive online "sensitive" content and its circulation. Despite our inability to test the truthfulness of individuals' thinking, we could find reasons why they act as they do.

# Why do "digital media" matter?

Since the introduction of the Internet there in 1987, China has become a place where different social forces have fought, united, and struggled with each other. According to Hassid (2016),

> "the Internet brings systemic and irreversible changes to the Chinese political system" (p. 133).

This argument resides in a political-economic context that treats the Internet as a tool for political governance, not only regulating the dissemination of opinion online but also masquerading its function of eradicating dissent to maintain its authority. Taken together, the current debates concerning the Chinese Internet become two streams. The basis for the innovations in the daily use of technology is the well-developed telecommunication technologies; the online discourse concerning political/controversial issues is an indication of digital resistance.

### Daily use of media technology

The first stream examines various Internet-based media platforms, such as WeChat, Weibo, Douban, and Douyin, and how the use of the privileged functions of these platforms technologically inspires the daily practices of different social groups (Harwit, 2017; Herold, 2014; Tu, 2016). This stream has benefited from the rapid development of the Chinese Internet system. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), as of December 2020, Internet penetration in China had reached 70.4%, and the number of netizens (*wang min*) had reached 989 million. Access to the Internet through mobile devices has skyrocketed to 99.7%. The main Internet activities in which netizens engage are instant messaging (99.2%), Internet searches (83.0%), and online news browsing (80.9%) (CNNIC, 2021, p. 29). The technological achievements associated with the Internet have become an important index by which to measure the level of China's communication system infrastructure. Some scholars have proposed the idea that Chinese society is a platform society, indicating that the institutional governance of the Party and the daily practices of the public are mostly based on a well-developed technological infrastructure; meanwhile, this platform reshapes the production of cultural and political meaning in daily life (De Kloet et al., 2019; Van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Within this line of research, the innovative application of online media has twofold significance: the government's use and the public use. Here, the use of online media by governments and the public is a confrontational stance. As stated at the beginning of this section, governments learn quickly to use social media to implement governance and keep developing new functions. For instance, along with the proliferation of microblogging, early research shows that local authorities frequently use the Internet to collect public opinions and provide public services (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014; Zheng, 2013). Schlæger and Jiang (2014) argue that "research on state-netizen relations tends to emphasize confrontation while largely

neglecting the more mundane and conciliatory use of social media by local governments" (p. 204). Nowadays, Douyin, one of the most popular short-video platforms, is a main platform the government uses to publish information. CNNIC report (2021) indicates that by the end of 2020, different levels of governments had opened a total of 26,098 Douyin accounts. In addition to the open policy, Chen et al. (2021) notice that Douyin is also a major terrain for those governmental accounts to promote patriotism playfully. When controversial issues arose between China and other nations, interesting short videos reflecting nationalism and patriotic ideology were widely circulated online. Making memes and writing thrilling stories are no longer an advantage that netizens apply, but governments use them skillfully. A recent article from a social media account called "*ji ben chang shi*" ("Basic knowledge") published a survey showing that the mouthpiece media (e.g., Xinhua News Agency, People's Daily, CCTV News) have the potential to irritate their news subscribers by using too many sensational headlines for brief news on their WeChat accounts. The WeChat account of Xinhua News Agency is an example. From 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2021, the title of one hundred news popups applied sensationalist skills. Commercial media have extensively employed such a strategy to attract audiences, known as "shocking style."

Compared with governmental use of social media, public use is more diverse, largely because it does not always have a clear purpose, and it does not always match the original intention of the media platform founders. Chan's (2020) recent research on a popular dating app in China, Momo, shows that its users' motivations to use the app are not only about dating but about "everything." She notices that users use it according to their own needs, instead of in accordance with the app designers' expectations. Dating is only one of the reasons for users to download this app, and more people use it for purposes of killing time, socializing, and developing business. Lu and Lu's (2019) study concerns why ordinary people use Douyin. They argue that browsing news and keeping up with fashion have become major purposes. Apart from informative and entertaining functions, users also use social media to satisfy their psychological needs. Especially when an emergent crisis occurs, online users urgently engage in sharing and disseminating the information they know on social media, hoping to contribute to the truth of events (Chen et al., 2021).

### Digital resistance

Another stream of Internet knowledge argues that digital resistance and online mobilization are signs of another liberal force emerging after marketization (Esarey & Xiao, 2011; Hassid, 2016; Gao & Stanyer, 2014). The Internet is more than a tool for retrieving information in China, which also creates a place that resembles the "public sphere" (Hassid, 2016). Shao and Wang (2017) consider the structure of this public sphere as fragmented, because governmental forces, private power, and the market all mix together. Although the Chinese government has been developing strategies to keep the Internet under its control, such as filtering sensitive words,

netizens can always find new approaches to enlarge the impact of debates, putting pressure on the government and mainstream media to echo public demands (Tang & Sampson, 2012). For instance, a common strategy that environmental activists apply is using memes, adding censored textual content on memes, and making it into a video (Deluca et al., 2016). Some activists take advantage of the walkie-talkie function of WeChat to disseminate pictures and text, to achieve their protest goal. Zidani (2018) finds that Chinese netizens ironically use subversive language to express their grievance against society, one of the few ways that they could do so without being censored immediately.

Against this backdrop, studies on Chinese digital media share different focuses, including online activism (Gleiss, 2015), feminism (Wang & Driscoll, 2018), populism (Tai et al., 2018), and nationalism (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Han, 2015). Most themes here relate to the question of the extent to which the advent of digital media can provide more freedom to the Chinese public in the government-controlled media environment. "Government-controlled" here refers not only to the controls and restrictions imposed in political sectors but also to reducing the economic and financial sustainability of the state-funded media. Nevertheless, Benney and Xu (2018) argue that scholars' observations on the Chinese social media phenomenon center on the aspects that interest western scholars, such as power, gender, equality, and freedom, while overlooking some alternative aspects. The next section analyzes how this digital backdrop relates to de-westernizing media and communication studies in China.

## De-westernization in the context of China

As Xin (2018) notes, the unique social development of Chinese society calls for "developing new theoretical perspectives to explain its social reality" (p. 16). New theoretical insights do not come from a vacuum. As scholars from non-western societies introduce the indigenous presence to the western audience, non-western scholars must understand how the related discourse develops in a context with which they are familiar. Albuquerque (2020) wrote that scholars without western background fall into a loop that "western ideas do not predominate in consequence of their intrinsic merits, but as a result of the socialization of scholars from all parts of the world in western educational institutions, and the networks built around them" (p. 16). Therefore, de-westernization has become an important part of contemporary media and communication studies, whether in academic research or higher education (Dube & Rabe, 2017; De Burgh, 2003).

Practicing de-westernization is not easy to do, theoretically or methodologically. First, to know what is "non-West," the conceptualization of the West requires clarification. To what extent does our analysis, built upon the dichotomy of West and non-West, help to broaden the horizon of examining the media phenomena in the world? West and non-West could appear as a pair of notions in the comparative studies of media and communication, or as a set of paradigms where more

patterns of communication can develop (Hanitzch, 2007). Meng and Rantanen (2015) suggest that what is beyond the West is more than non-West. Binary terms, such as "the West and the rest, the Global South and the Global North, the West and the East," have been out of date for capturing geography or culture-based distinctions because these terms limit the variety of cultural forms and generalize the transition within one system (Ranji, 2021). Moving to media studies, we use binary terminology to study the structural and political differentiation of media configuration (Ranji, 2021), but the media systems in the world are not a static concept. The development of media marketization in China since the 1980s is a good example (Zhao, 1998; 2008). Along with the growth of digital media, the transformation of media systems, platforms, and patterns takes place simultaneously in China. State-funded media, "state-preneurship" media, private media groups, semi-commercial/official media appear in the market and race with each other. The characteristics of each media system that Hallin and Mancini (2004) identify are nowadays not as distinct as decades ago. Scholars industriously use new phrases, such as "ecosystem" and "hybridity," to explain the digitized media system in the world, which carefully captures the fluidity and porousness of media systems today (Anderson, 2016; Chadwick, 2017). While scholars look at the nuances of how media content is produced or consumed at a micro-/meso-level among nations, to what extent can we argue that the similarity or discrepancy in individual behaviors between different systems affords the changes of a "system?" A case study of the transformation of a Party organ newspaper, *China Youth Daily*, suggests that even Party media could employ the narrative strategies that popular journalism uses, without conflicting with its propaganda role (Wang, Sparks & Yu, 2018). But to say that the media system in China is a hybrid is insufficient. Since the encouragement of digital transformation from the Party in 2014, newspaper, magazine, and Internet portal media have urged their media professionals to use digital technologies to accelerate the production of media contents and brand-building that attracts all types of audiences. Chinese journalists and media professionals have significantly shifted their work from offline to online. This is similar to the findings of the national survey that Weaver and Willnat (2016) launched, namely, that social media and the life and work of journalists tightly connect them. However, we cannot argue that the Chinese media system is similar to that in the United States, even though media professionals share behavioral similarities in their daily routine.

Second, drawing from the first concern, the different interpretations of de-westernization between the West and the non-West are worth investigating. Assuming that the dichotomy helps in understanding the globe, the second issue concerns how the different parts of the world comprehend the importance of de-westernization and what to de-westernize. Less research clarifies the differences between them. Waisbord and Mellado (2014) maintain that "de-westernization in the West, refers to a shift in academic knowledge to broaden the analysis by considering experiences, research findings, and theoretical frameworks devel-

oped in the rest of the world" (p. 362). As Curran and Park (2000) argue, granting the preservation of discussing "national" and "local," globalization matters more in media and communication studies. "In making the case for de-Westernizing media studies, we are not suggesting that normative values have only a zonal application. On the contrary, the values of liberty, equality, and solidarity seem to us to have a universal validity" (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 12). Although these narratives from the West seemingly demonstrate an inclusive view that exploring the debate of non-western media and communication phenomena should occur under the tenet of "common good," the interest and value that the West advocates still embed their narratives. Demeter and Goyanes (2021) refute that "the so-called globalization of knowledge is conceived as an encounter of cultures that implies the abolishment of the knowledge of the subordinated participants" (p. 2). De-westernization contains profound meanings. Scholarly, non-western researchers hope to defend their domestic cultures, industrially and politically arguing that de-westernization is an act of eliminating post-colonial characteristics (Waisbord & Mellado, 2014; Waisbord, 2015; Thussu, 2018).

Third, Iwabuchi (2010) states that "we all know that theories, concepts and methods which have been developed in a particular place and at a specific historical juncture must always be imaginatively translated when they are applied to other times and places (or to the same place but at a different time)" (p. 404). The prevailing academic debates in non-western contexts could have nothing to do with the values or norms the West proposes. This may not be due to the lack of interest in western studies but rather to the disconnection between methods, their applications, and theoretical assumptions—in other words, how to scientifically explore the occurrences which share little similarity with the West. With the background of globalization and the rise of media technology, studying the differences and making comparisons between the West and non-West includes identifying the geographical flow of knowledge, experience, and information between nations and presenting the findings to western academia. De-westernization has become a systematic act that requires scholars to critically study the context in which theories grow and face the cultural issue pertinent to a particular social condition (Jin, 2020). A recent paper discussing the feminist movement and media in China notes that introducing Chinese phenomena to western academics would encounter methodological difficulties, including translating and decoding the cultural meaning of colloquial language (Huang & Sun, 2021).

We have known that "all theory is situated somewhere—there is no such thing as a decontextualized theory" (Wasserman & de Beer, 2009, p. 429). The introduction of western media, journalism, and communication theories to China brought the social, cultural, historical, and philosophical underpinnings of these theories along. In Qi's book (2014) documenting the knowledge flow from the West to the East, she writes as follows:

Alien concepts and theories were carefully selected by Chinese innovators, who assimilated versions of these concepts and theories into an environment that was both hostile to Western thought in general and accommodating of select elements of Western thought, especially those elements that were conceived to strengthen Chinese capacities for independence and advancement in the emerging involvement in a world dominated by foreign powers. (pp.65-66)

Put another way, the contrast between China and the West is at the center of academic concern. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, "freedom vs suppression" is a theme that mostly non-western media and journalism studies explore (Wasserman & de Beer, 2009). The means that non-western scholars use to organize and narrate their stories have embedded the values that western societies promote. Much research seemingly adopts an inductive approach to look at the "go viral" of public events online, regarding the volume of information that online citizens consume, the flow of dissemination, or the click-rate stream. However, grounded on the established scholarship that the voice of dissent is a form of social mobility that should have online advocacy, and the surveillance of such dissent online is sinful, how do follow-up studies borrow the meaning this argument contains, to investigate dissenting for other purposes, without preconceptions?

Based on these points, de-westernizing media and communication studies is tough work. Researchers from non-western countries attempt to break through the Eurocentrism, and then American centrism in media and communication studies, by publishing their indigenous stories through western academia. However, such efforts turn to enhancing the status and prestige of Western-experience-based academic research, which ascribes to an institutional bias (Albuquerque, 2020). As more junior researchers join into the Western academia, they enhanced such status by publishing in prestigious academic journals (Albuquerque et al., 2020). But, apart from the difficulties that all non-western scholars must face, scholars working on Chinese media and communication studies face additional challenges in this digital age.

## De-digitization or De-westernization?

We mentioned in the introduction of this paper that digital media brings difficulties for scholars in thinking beyond the methods and theories we have already used to approach digital life. Here, we borrow the explanation by Fussey and Roth (2020) that "digital" refers to "Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), computer mediated communication, the internet and the web, social media, Big Data, artificial intelligence, computational decision making and, increasingly, nanotechnologies" (p.2). This section will blend the three issues we proposed earlier to argue what scholars face when they adopt a de-westernized perspective to examine Chinese media studies.

Years ago, while carrying out a study about the digital impact on journalism in China, the first author met an editor during her fieldwork. The editor had been working in a newspaper group for 8 years, and he once told the first author in their

personal communication that the reasons for certain online articles getting popular were rather more complicated than we had known. He said that many faddish (*wang luo bao kuan*) articles online that circulated to a significant number usually would experience a process of emergence–deletion–re-emergence–re-deletion. "After several rounds of deletions, readers will be more curious to read it," he said. Using deletion to intrigue the public about a topic had become a strategy that online media organizations used to draw the attention of potential audiences. Both Party-organ media and commercial media would use certain means to attract audiences for a living.

As in the case of Dr. Ai Fen, we cannot easily conclude that the massive click rate and the number of reposts indicate netizens' endorsement. The netizens who built a sequence to share this story in different versions tried to uncover the truth or support the idea that authorities covered the truth, but what is the "true" reason that netizens chose to do so, maintaining their social networking or joining a spiral of "voicing"? An act of sharing on Chinese social media merely means a form of participation (Zhao & John, 2020). Researchers argue that sharing content online in personal networks is not only for Chinese online users to maintain and construct social ties; it also contributes to understanding the digital platforms, with numbers for scholars (Zhao & John, 2020, p.10). Today, if a particular post circulates online with a significant number, the assumption is that it contained social significance in the context of China.

Studying digital things does not necessarily mean that we should think digitally. (The Chinese translation of "digital" is the same as "numerical/numeric.") As "digital" came into the world of academia from the field of daily life, the meaning of this word has been transferred into a term and highlighted for its intangible and omnipresent power both online and offline. The obsession with social media, AI, Big Data, and algorithms has permeated every corner of life. Although platform owners could monitor the trends and predict the development of a public issue, the data collected from digital platforms cannot explain the reasons why people act so. Providing interpretations cannot enable realizing the subjectivity of humans. Pan (2016) argued that by over-relying on digital tools to understand human life, technicians construct an epistemic hegemony. Although we did not fully agree with the idea that technicians could claim hegemony over others by constructing a digital kingdom, digital media is much more powerful and dangerous than we think.

We argue that digital media, especially social media, complicates the motivations and behavioral choices of individuals. The central goal of this paper is not to critique Chinese media and communication studies. It aims to elicit a critical issue, namely, how to treat the relationship between Chinese digital media, western knowledge, and the use of methods to explore the issues this entangled relationship involves. The space digital media has created brings opportunities for both researchers and Chinese citizens, and much scholarship has investigated how these challenges that digital media has initiated have changed China. However, this paper

points out that so far, studies of Chinese digital media cannot fully reveal the nature of its inner logic. Existing literature about this field parallels what is interesting or heatedly discussed in the West. This forges an epistemic tradition of examining media and communication studies as a dichotomy, although some researchers have made attempts to break this thinking. Also, studying digital presence with digital methods (e.g., data mining, modeling, social network analysis) is another epistemic pitfall. Indeed, numerical data are evident, open, and easy to obtain, and using them avoids touching the taboos of governmental censorship in China. But what leads to the choices of researchers applying these methods? The theoretical assumption in the hypothesis drives researchers who choose to use quantitative methods to be strongly aware of the ties between theory and methods. Conversely, qualitative researchers call for expanding or refining a theory from new findings (Collins & Stockton, 2018). That is to say, quantitative researchers rely on the theory to interpret their data. In this scenario, how do scholars realize de-westernization? An epistemic disposition sets a digital pitfall, namely, the role that theory plays in de-westernization studies.

For this paper, we reflected on our experience in western academia and the daily consumption of digital media for years. They inspired us to argue the worthiness of exploring many hidden aspects of media and communication studies in the digital age if we could be clear about the pitfalls that "digital" creates. Exploring these aspects does not require maintaining our attention on the digital devices or platforms themselves. More interesting findings could arise from interrogating individuals offline on their feelings.

The views in this paper probably seem cynical to the researchers favoring big data, algorithms, and quantitative research. As we argued, the concerns put forward here came from our observations that a data society was overwhelming us. This situation creates tension between how we tell stories about Chinese culture and how scholars not from this culture hope to know about that. This tension is an ongoing situation, blending debates about western knowledge, Chinese experience, method and theory in academia.

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