Social media, religion and shifting boundaries in globalizing China

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Abstract
This article examines how Chinese Christians utilize social media to forge online communities and how religion is integrated into believers’ daily lives using the concept of intercontextuality. The intercontextuality of online communication enables Chinese Christian users to communicate about their daily routines and Christian values on a regular basis, thus allowing them to align their Christian concerns with wider social issues. At the same time, Christian users of social media are cognizant and wary of the highly restrictive political context of China. They often maintain a boundary between the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’, thus avoiding attracting the unwanted attention of the authorities. The article concludes with some reflections on the political implication of the study’s findings.

Keywords
Boundaries, Christianity, community, intercontextuality, social media

Introduction
Much existing research on the Internet and social media in China focuses on government regulation and censorship, popular culture, and state–society relations (e.g. Kim & Fung, 2017; Xin, 2018). However, the subject of religion and social media has only just begun to attract scholarly attention. The volume of essays, Religion and Media in China (Travagnin, 2017), on this subject is a good representative of a small existing but growing body of work. Like their fellow citizens, the Chinese Christians who are residing in and outside China have enthusiastically embraced mobile...
social media apps like Weixin and Weibo. However, Chinese Christians residing abroad who wish to establish and connect to religious networks in China often use a range of Chinese and foreign social media tools. As an example, they may use Facebook and WhatsApp when communicating with friends and fellow Christians overseas, and switch to Weixin when communicating with people in China (e.g. Liu, 2006; Lu & Qiu, 2013). Realizing the Internet’s potential for enabling believers to form online communities, mobilize, organize religious activities, and spread religious messages, the Chinese government has recently moved to further curtailed religious activities online (Barnett, 2018). The State Administration for Religious Affairs issued new rules on religious activities that ban live streaming of religious ceremonies on the Internet, forbid criticism of the Communist party and the country’s religious policy, and disallow religious organizations to distribute religious material or to proselytize. Our main argument is that the feature of intercontextuality on social media facilitates the blurring of boundaries between the ‘religious’ and other social domains for the Christian users. This further embeds religion in the everyday life of the believers. At the same time, Christian users of social media are cognizant and wary of the highly restrictive political context of China. They often maintain a boundary between the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’, thus avoiding attracting the unwanted attention of the authorities. We conclude with some reflections on the political implications on the religious identity, and community formation in the new media, of this phenomenon.

**Literature review**

In this section, we provide a discussion of the relevant literature and key concepts that we use in our analysis, namely, mediatization of religion, online community and shifting boundaries.

Some scholars have argued that the influence of the media has come to encompass social life at such an unprecedented level that even the realm of religion can be considered thoroughly ‘mediatised’. In other words, contemporary manifestations of religiosity in its social, cultural and political dimensions are integrally shaped by the logics of media (Hjarvard, 2008). In a highly industrialized, media-saturated society, media may act as both the producers and distributors of religious symbols and practices. The mediatization of religion embodies several features. First, media serve as the primary source of information about religious issues. This also means that the media has the huge potential to define and frame religious issues. Second, religious information and experiences are shaped by the demands of popular media genres. Third, media institutions are gradually taking over many of the social functions that used to be performed by religious institutions, such as societal rituals, moral orientation and community formation. In recent years, the invention of new media technologies like Internet-enabled social networking sites comprising Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo and Weixin has caused seismic shifts in the ways people conduct their social activities, which include religious practices.

The latest figures in 2018 by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show 880 million Internet users in China. The rise of mobile Internet and social media enables Chinese people to communicate globally (e.g. Liu, 2006; Lu & Qiu, 2013). China’s banning of global social networking sites like Facebook, Youtube and Twitter and many foreign websites has resulted in the rapid growth of Chinese firms which offer similar services. In 2017, Weixin has 494 million individual users in China and one billion user accounts worldwide. Our Chinese Christian informants use China-produced mobile social media apps like Weixin, Weibo and QQ. However, Chinese Christians residing abroad who connect to religious networks in China use legal and illegal Chinese sites and foreign social media tools, despite the fact that the government is censoring these websites (Zheng, 2008).

In contemporary China, many commentators have noted a decline of public morality in society, which motivated many Chinese to turn to religion, including Christianity, for new foundations of morality (e.g. Liang, 2014; Weller & Wu, 2017; Zhuo, 2000). Consequently, this increases the
social significance of Chinese Christian communities for its members. The Chinese Christian clergy are also extending their pastoral work beyond the physical confines of the church by using the Internet and social networking sites. Their increasing online presence enables them to contact their members easily, resulting in the formation of Christian ‘portable communities’ (Chayko, 2008).

In China, many official and unofficial Christian organizations have their own websites, which contain information about their activities, key beliefs, history, evangelism, links with other Christian groups outside China, and so on. Such examples include ccctspm.org (中国基督教网站), chinacatholic.org (信德网) and gospeltimes.cn (福音时报). In addition, some independent churches have regular online publications (e.g. Aiyan, Xinghua). Youku has many Christian videos and programmes, which form an integral part of a Christian spiritual cultivation. The interactivity of Internet facilitates the formation of online religious communities where members share information, hold debates, provide mutual support, plan activities and so on. In an interview with the online Christian Times, a Protestant preacher from Guangzhou noted that ‘the Internet is the language of this generation’ and ‘is the challenge we face in spreading the Gospel and in building the Church; it is also the path that we need to take’ (authors’ translation).

The Internet can facilitate a sense of togetherness in an online religious community (Han & Kamaludeen, 2016; Lim, 2009; Vala & Huang, 2017). Campbell’s (2010) characterization of the Internet as a ‘sacramental space’ refers to how the cyberspace is used as ‘a space for personal spiritual pursuits and a social spiritual support sphere’. Christian groups facilitate their group activities, form networks with the international Christian community, and share diverse views about beliefs in social media (Horsfield & Teusner, 2007). In this regard, the notion of fellowship underpins the Christian perspective on community. For Christians, the meaning of ‘community’ embodies the concept of ekklesia (‘the called-out ones’), which is a Greek word, usually translated as ‘the church’ (Bible Study Tools, 2014). Thus, for Christians, the ‘community’ comprises God’s people, which form the universal Church. The bonds of this community of God’s people are forged through koinonia, or ‘fellowship’ (Lohfink, 1984). In this age of the Internet and social media, a Christian community is constituted not only through physical co-presence, but is also be complemented by what Madianou (2016) calls ‘ambient co-presence’, which is the constant presence of fellow Christians on social media on one’s mobile digital devices. These Christians may be readily accessible to one another even if they are geographically apart.

Meanwhile, in the field of religious studies, scholars have been sharpening their focus on how believers practice religion in their everyday life, often without paying much attention to what the institutional religion might say regarding dogmas and orthodoxy (Ammerman, 2013; McGuire, 2008; Schielke & Debevec, 2012). In other words, from the perspective of lived or everyday religion, people may ignore institutionally constructed boundaries that separate social life into distinct domains (Hofstee & van der Kooij, 2013). In this article, we use the concept of lived religion and approach social media usage as popular culture to examine how Chinese Christians negotiate, transcend, as well as maintain and enforce institutionally bounded domains. These domains include ‘religion’, ‘the secular’, and ‘politics’ which form the subjects of their social media interactions as they forge Christian communities. Commenting on online religion as lived religion, Helland (2005) notes,

In the case of online religion, people are living their religion on and through the Internet medium. For those individuals who participate in online religious activity, there is no separation between their offline life and experiences and their online life and experiences, and their religious activities and worldview permeate both environments.
Similarly, as social media usage is an integral part of our informants’ daily activities, religion is often not regarded as a distinct domain from other mundane experiences. An informant who was a member of a church Bible study group in Singapore claimed that her members would post a ‘song (that) can bring consolation or praise to others’.

In this article, we utilize the concept of intercontextuality to examine how the widespread usage of mobile Internet and social media in China has enabled Chinese Christians to forge online communities in the practice of their religion. In this case, intercontextuality refers to ‘the social construction of relationships among events and contexts’ (Bloome et al., 2009, p. 319). Intercontextualization involves the social media user’s efforts at connecting events happening in different times and places. This connection is recognized by others on the same social network as meaningful and consequential from a religious perspective. For example, following the deadly Ya’an earthquake in Sichuan province in April 2013, Christian netizens flooded Weibo with interpretations on the disaster from a Christian perspective. One post quoted a passage from Revelation 16:15 (‘See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame’) to exhort the readers to be ‘awake as the time of our Lord’s return is near!’ (Chinese Church Voices, 2013). The religious actors’ online activities, enabled by the feature of intercontextuality on social media, further embed religion into everyday social life (e.g. Huang, 2017).

**Methodology**

Our data were collected from semi-structured interviews and online observations which were conducted as part of a larger research project on Christianity and social change in China. Interviews and fieldwork were conducted between 2013 and 2017. Our informants comprised 45 Chinese Christians based in mainland China (Chengdu, Kunming, Shenzhen and Wenzhou), Hong Kong and Singapore. Informants in mainland China and Singapore were all mainland Chinese, while informants in Hong Kong were ethnic Chinese.

Informants from the mainland consisted of lay Christians and members of the clergy belonging to both official and independent Catholic and Protestant churches. We found our informants through snowball sampling, starting with the Chinese Christians we know personally. We joined Chinese Christian groups on various social media platforms (e.g. QQ, Weixin, Facebook) in order to engage in online participant observation. The political sensitivity of the topic meant that we had to establish high levels of trust with our informants and ensure strict confidentiality. The Chinese Christians agreed to us joining their groups in social media because one of us is a Christian and has been involved in teaching the mainland Chinese Christians in a theological college and church in Singapore. Another of us was introduced by personal acquaintances in the Catholic and Protestant circles in mainland China and Hong Kong to the Catholic and Protestant clerical informants in these two places. In-depth interviews were conducted with the Chinese Christian users of Facebook who were either studying theology or working in Singapore.

These group of informants comprised one Chinese Christian who had studied and worked in Singapore for about 8 years who subsequently returned to work in China, and a group of Chinese Christian engineers who all worked in an American company situated in China. Four of the informants were bible college students, and one of them was leading a mainland Chinese youth group in a Singaporean church. Another informant worked in a factory. All the informants used social media to communicate activities related to their Christian group gatherings and prayer requests. As
religion is still a politically sensitive issue in China, we take extra care to ensure the confidentiality of the informants, and therefore, in this article, we use pseudonyms instead of real names for all interviewees, including those in China and overseas.

**Findings**

**Online Christian communities as fellowship**

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the forging of online community and its significance to our respondents, we need to know how they conceptualize community itself. From our interviews and observations, the respondents often discussed community in terms of fellowship. The concept of fellowship is elaborated in Biblical passages, such as Acts 2:42, ‘And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship [koinonia], to the breaking of bread and the prayers’. For Christians, salvation ‘is the work of God in creating covenant community’ (Kraus 1993, p. 32, emphasis added) where the believers discussed their understanding of scriptures, shared meals together, as well as celebrated rituals such as Passover. In this biblical sense, Christians gathered to share about their lives and provide mutual support to one another to sustain their faith. Thus, for many Christians, a community, such as fellowship, allows fellow believers to account to one another and strengthen each other’s faith, so that they are less likely to fall into sin and be distracted from the path of faith.

This is demonstrated by the experiences of Wen and Paul (pseudonyms). Wen was a woman in her early 20s who was working in a factory in Singapore at the time of our interview. Her experience typifies the kind of Chinese Christian transnational connectivity of mobile Internet and social media. Here, she shared that she posted her baptism experience on QQ:

> I told my friends that I had been baptised. Then they asked me why do I need to be baptised? What is baptism? I told them that it’s a process for becoming a Christian. They then asked me why I believe in Christianity; you are a Chinese and you still believe in it? I told them that whatever it is, this is my choice and they have to respect that. After that my friend explained to me that she said that because she hoped that I can bring her into Christianity as well.

Among the people we observed were a group of Chinese Christian engineers who worked in the same China-based American software company. The group was led by Paul, an American Chinese, whose family originated from China, and migrated to the United States. Paul attended a theological college in Singapore and married a fellow Chinese Christian in the college. They returned to China where Paul worked as an engineer in the American company. In the company, he formed a bible study group. In our focus group discussion conducted with this group, a young lady became a Christian because a colleague explained the gospel to her and invited her to join the group. She felt her work was more meaningful since she became a Christian, and she found social support in the bible study group. All the members of this group were in their 20s and communicated religious matters such as prayers, preaching and worship, as well as personal and work matters in Weixin. This allowed for the amalgamation of the sacred with the daily lives of members which led to the feeling of openness and trust among members. This, in turn, enhanced the community solidarity of the group members.

A Protestant clergy explained that social media sites aided his pastoral care in that his online sermons have allowed him to forge more personal relations with fellow Christians. Pastor Leung (pseudonym), who provided pastoral care in a Christian primary school in Hong Kong, realized he
could draw his congregation’s attention to the biblical significance of an exhibition material by sharing with his students ‘on the Internet and the link between it (the exhibition) and the Bible’. In addition, ‘This information comes from both the government and Christian organizations and is very useful when it comes to preaching’.

These religious leaders acknowledged that the rising popularity of the Internet and social networking sites has significantly impacted their work. Due to the rapid pace of communications on social media, religious leaders respond to online messages selectively. A Protestant pastor explained that ‘there can be up to a hundred messages waiting for your response in just one morning’. Religious leaders sometimes felt overwhelmed by the demand for their attention on social media. Some became highly selective in their usage of social media, especially pertaining to the veracity of the vast amount of information circulated online. Pastor Yang (pseudonym) said that he would respond promptly only to pastoral care matters, and refrain from re-posting unverified and unverifiable information. He confessed that ‘When someone is sick, or has met an accident, and when people share prayers, I will respond immediately’.

Father Andrew (pseudonym), a Catholic priest from the official Catholic Patriotic Church was an active user of Weixin and QQ. He explained how the new media technology impacted his pastoral work in that it enables ‘others to contact me over spiritual cultivation matters’.

Each day, Father Andrew would post a couple of his Bible reflections on Weixin which elicit responses and stimulate further discussions. An acquaintance wrote, ‘I often follow Father’s reflections, a few words will provide clear guidance to a troubled soul’. In addition, the priest also conducted catechism by uploading excerpts from the Catechism of the Catholic Church on his Weixin page (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** WeChat screenshots of Father Andrew's Bible reflection and teaching catechism. Love is greater than sacrificial offerings
Thus, for many of our respondents, an online community as fellowship led by the clergy allows believers to account and strengthen each other’s faith, so that they are less likely to fall into sin or be distracted from the path of faith. We argue that an important way in which this can be achieved is through the important feature of intercontextuality in social media interactions. In Figure 2, the Catholic priest encouraged his church members to let go of others’ wrongdoing and liberate their heart, to get to know the living God and consider their actions, because “When one borrows money, you can see one’s heart; when one return money, one sees one’s character” (quote from Figure 2).

**Intercontextuality, shifting boundaries and embedding of religious values in everyday life**

Intercontextuality of online conversations of Christian clergy is seen in the screenshot taken from a Catholic priest’s Weixin page below. The one on the left shows the subjects and topics of the posts, such as ‘put away from other people’s faults and liberate your mind’; ‘2017 Summer Camp: get to know God in everyday life, enjoy the holidays together’; and ‘San Mao’s [a late popular author] 20 most poignant quotes; and borrowing money and repayment of debt reveals one’s character’:

![Image of WeChat posts](image)

**Figure 2.** Intercontextuality on clergy’s WeChat. Borrowing money and repaying can reveal one’s character.
Christian Psychological Services (心理咨询基督教服务处) is one of the many Christian services hosted by Weixin. We were alerted to this mobile service by Debby, a young Christian. She consulted for articles and advice on issues related to marriage life in the app. Debby explained that the stated aims of the Christian Psychological Services were the following:

‘We are a group of Christians. Among us there are government-registered psychotherapists, highly experienced counsellors, and pastors and preachers’. Its main service was to answer queries on ‘marital, family and psychological matters’ and to ‘foster a full and happy life’.

Thus, this app embedded in Weixin facilitates the intercontextualization process that allows religion, commerce, psychotherapy, family life and personal consumption to converge and interact with one another as an integrated experience for the users. Hence, such intercontextuality enables Christian values to be transmitted across different social domains in a common online space.

In another Weixin group, Chinese Christian professionals who attended the same church in Shanghai formed a Bible study group that was led by a Chinese Christian, Cynthia, who had studied and worked in Singapore for about 8 years. The Weixin group consisted of 10 members of her Bible study group: a Singaporean couple who were from the church she attended in Singapore; another Singaporean couple from the same Singaporean church but who were based in Singapore; and a Singaporean teacher. Most of the conversation revolved around the adaptation problems that Cynthia experienced in moving from working in Singapore to China and her complaints about her work situation in China. The conversation in Weixin centred around her struggles, how she wavered between looking a job in China, the indecision about going to the United States for theological education and purchase of public housing apartment in Singapore. In their Weixin conversations, Cynthia’s Christian friends offered advice based on the Bible and their evaluation of her situation. They encouraged her by quoting verses from the Bible, and urged her to pray regularly. The Singaporean couple was concerned that Cynthia’s decision to pursue theological education in the United States might be her escape from her difficult situation in China and might not be applicable to her church when she returned to China. She replied that she needed an understanding of psychology and history, apart from theology, to understand the social problems and needs in China.

The above example illustrates how intercontextuality in social media allows the communication of religious practices to take place in the same space as other ‘non-religious’ topics. This facilitates the interlacing of the religion and other aspects of the daily lives of Christians. Such intercontextual form of communication on social media also creates a feeling of openness among members and conveys the message that they could offer support to one another. This could in turn foster a sense of community and solidarity among group members. Thus, intercontextuality in social media enables believers to juxtapose the religious and everyday events, which subsequently reinforces users’ belief that their faith ought to penetrate other facets of their lives, such as work and daily lives. This process is underscored in our interview with Simon, as he explained the supposed divide between the religious and secular domains. He felt that there should not be a ‘strong separation’ between ‘church life’ and what they do from ‘Monday through Saturday’. Instead, their ‘faith should be a consistent route’. According to Simon, therefore, one’s work and daily life should be part of one’s entire Christian experience. To have a sacred and secular divide means that the believer is living separate lives at work and in church, which is inconsistent with the teaching in the Bible and would prevent Christians from providing effective witness of their faith in society.

Despite government intense surveillance and control of the Internet in China (e.g. Arsène, 2012; Lei, 2018), Christian online communications connect with discourses of the global Christian community. The transnational networks enable the international Christian community to form
solidarity in fellowship with the Chinese Christians who may be facing challenging circumstances such as official censorship and demolition of churches in Wenzhou in Zhejiang province (Figure 3). The following example is an illustration of creation of Christian fellowship in social media, bringing together Christians within and outside China to focus on a common cause and foster Christian fellowship. The screenshot below shows a post on Weixin detailing Christians’ responses towards Zhejiang authorities’ demolition of churches. This highlights the solidarity in fellowship which is enabled by social media of Christians in the face of government crackdown. This can be accessed, read, commented upon and further circulated by Christians in and outside China.

Through the local and global connections forged via digital networks – even with draconian government Internet control – the concerns and issues in China such as poverty, official corruption, social injustice, environmental pollution and political tensions become shared concerns among Christians from China and elsewhere. Conversely, Chinese Christians residing in the country are able to engage with global events. Conceptually and practically, intercontextuality on social media allows Chinese Christian users to fuse the local and global, the secular and religious, and the mundane and transcendental.

**Enforcing boundary: separating the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’**

As discussed, intercontextuality in social media facilitates the discussion of spiritual matters and encourages Chinese Christians to practice religion in their daily lives. At the same time, we also need to be aware of the technology’s limitations which were highlighted by our informants, namely, its potentially individualizing effects. It could lead to Christians to engage in religious activities as
individuals, while avoiding face-to-face community interactions. Here, the Chinese Christians fear that online religious practices may replace the face-to-face community, which they deem to be crucial to maintain their religious community. The communications platform can also become massive distractions. For Pastor Leung, the heightened emotional state generated by Christians gathering at the same time, and physical space to engage in common activities, is an essential element of fellowship:

If we do our prayers alone using the internet, we will not reap from the church. Liberation is what we get from churches, and then we share it with others and encourage one another based on the teachings and our own experience and actions . . . Thus, I do not agree on worshipping over the internet, unless the person is ill or overseas. People must gather together to feel the emotions and atmosphere of the group.

With the intense state monitoring of online activities in China, Chinese Christians we spoke with often expressed reservations over sharing 'sensitive' and 'political' matters. Qian Yu, who was from an independent church in a rural part of Wenzhou, had personally experienced state surveillance. She expressed how it had instilled fear among her and her fellow undergraduates who were from an independent church:

The Internet and social media can be used by Christians to build religious communities and solidarity, and many are aware of these media’s mobilizing potential. But when size grows too big or publicly active, the government is likely to respond harshly.

Jacob, the leader of a Bible study group of Chinese factory workers based in Singapore, looked unfavourably upon overseas Chinese Christians who openly criticized the Chinese government on social media. He felt a personal responsibility to protect Chinese Christians in China by not implicating them in controversial discussions on social media. According to him, many of those who discussed religion and social issues explicitly on social media were based overseas, hence outside the immediate reach of the Chinese authorities. He warned that such ‘speeches are likely to pose threats to a few vulnerable domestic groups. Or it may enable the Chinese government to tighten its policy as a whole regarding religion’.

Evidently, most of our informants assumed that the state authorities monitor all forms of online interactions, hence would avoid discussing matters that attract the authorities’ attention. These matters included visiting foreign Christian missionaries, preachers and speakers. Sensitive subjects also include Chinese politics and the Communist Party, Sino-Vatican relations, Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang, and human rights. Some informants mentioned visits to their church premises by officials from the local Religious Affairs Bureau and Public Security. The security personnel seemed to know beforehand that there would be foreign speakers present. A Protestant lay leader of an independent church in Chengdu told us that when an American professor visited and taught in his church, the ‘police somehow was informed beforehand about such events’.

Thus, Christian users’ communication in social media not only leads to formation of religious communities and integration of religion in everyday life; it also involves active negotiations with the Chinese state. Though some Chinese Christians may overtly voice their discontent and anger towards the authorities and on social injustice, most were very cautious not to be seen as resisting the state as members of their respective Christian groups. Father Andrew, the Catholic priest from the official Catholic Patriotic Church, quipped that the state authorities wanted Christianity to be a
‘bird-cage religion’ (鸟笼式的宗教). For him and many Christians he knew, the Internet and social media sites were used primarily for spreading the Gospel, reflections of the faith and Bible passages, and not for discussing broader political issues:

I think the more ‘sensitive issues’ today, from the perspective of religion, would probably be China-Vatican relations, this involves the appointment of the bishops, and also the Taiwan issue, and so on. For me, it’s just about spreading the Gospel, Bible reflection, faith reflection, and such matters. To the authorities, the more you write about ‘bird-cage’ kind of matters, the better!

The Protestant lay leader from the independent church in Chengdu also expressed being cautious on social media:

I feel that certain sensitive issues should not be discussed in those kinds of channels. I guess the police have not been very strict about these social media. I feel that they think that there is no need to bother about these, but when they decide to take act, they can do so easily . . . Thus, when we send out messages, we tweak some of the words to make it sound more ‘correct’.

Li Juan, a Christian leader from Wenzhou who was studying at a Bible college in Singapore at the time of our interview did not share her views and feelings on religious matters in social media. An important reason was Li Juan felt that ‘it is too dangerous’ to use social media to publicize gatherings. Both she and her fellow Christians believed that their phones were tapped. As a result, she knew many Christian leaders who carried multiple phones to try to circumvent government surveillance. Her remarks show both self-censorship and the increased instrumentalism in how Chinese Christians form communities. As many Christian groups and churches in Wenzhou and elsewhere in China sought to establish ties with their counterparts overseas, and vice versa, interactions with foreigners has become a ‘sensitive’ issue. As a church leader, Li Juan was particularly mindful of the need to handle this matter well:

Chinese government is still worried about your connections with foreigners as it might implicate political matters . . . There are times where the monitoring is extra strict like during major events or periodic changes. During these periods, the monitoring over the internet will be more extensive, same for mobile phones. There are also times when they are more relaxed. It all depends on the political situations then. We all understand how this works, when something big is happening in the country, we should not be too aggressive in our actions or else the authority will hit you hard.

Derrick, a Singaporean architect, who once worked for a foreign Christian non-governmental organization (NGO) in community development work in Sichuan, was also very cautious when using social media in China. He confessed how he and his co-workers were fully aware that social media and the Internet was ‘not a private domain, it’s a very public domain’. Hence, they highlighted their ‘professionalism’ as much as possible when they communicated with each other, and often used ‘coded, encrypted message . . . some phrases that we use to substitute what we wanted to say’. Derrick cautioned that they ‘usually do not communicate anything that discredits the government, we do not do anything that discredits the community’.

The discussion above demonstrates that while some boundaries were unclear, transcended or not recognized in social media practices, the boundary between religion and politics seems to be assiduously maintained by Chinese Christian users.
Conclusion

The main aims of this article are to examine how Chinese Christians utilize social media to forge online communities and how religion may be integrated into believers’ daily lives.

Theoretically, we utilize the concept of intercontextuality and shifting boundaries on social media to analyse the meaning making processes by Chinese Christians to integrate religious beliefs and practices, and mundane activities related in their daily lives. We also adopted an analytical perspective that considers online religion as lived religion, and media and religion as deeply embedded in Chinese culture. As Robert and White (2007, p. 12) notes, ‘The movement away from religion as institution and dogmatic and moral propositions to religion as culture has brought much for attention to aspects of religion which are important in the everyday lives of the people’.

Based on the findings and analysis, we offer several observations as a form of conclusion.

First, social media usage for religious purposes is becoming ubiquitous, more varied and sophisticated among Christians in China. This means that the boundaries that define Christian groupings take on a more fluid and shifting nature. Hence, we observed that the Chinese Christians’ praying and meditations on the Bible were often interwoven with discourses on their professional work, global news events, socializing, commentaries of daily happenings, and other seemingly mundane matters. The communication of religious practices like prayer, preaching and worship singing took place in the same media space as communication of members’ daily activities, such as cooking, eating, studying, going on retreats and moving to a new house. They are motivated (but not only) by religious beliefs and principles to participate in online groups and discussion, thereby cultivating social ties supported by religious networks. We have argued that this has to be understood with reference to the Christian notion of community as a fellowship.

Due to the widespread use of social media as a form of popular culture, Chinese Christians may allude to Christian values and viewpoints made possible through the advantages of intercontextuality that social media offer, without being explicitly evangelistic. The intercontextuality of online communication thus enables Chinese Christian users to communicate regularly about their daily routines and Christian values which allows them to align their Christian concerns with wider societal issues. At the individual level, this fusing of religion with daily activities often blurs or ignores the institutional distinction between the ‘religious’ and ‘non-religious’. At the same time, while there is ample evidence of religious symbols and discourses that transit across social domains in the online environment, the domain which is still largely out of bounds is politics. This is due to the widespread awareness among Chinese Christians of state surveillance. Most of our informants refrained from engaging in explicitly political activities and discussions of ‘sensitive issues’ on social media. Given this situation, we should not infer that these Chinese Christians informants were necessarily apolitical. In fact, from our interviews, the converse was often true – to them, Christianity as lived religion encompasses different domains of social life, including the political domain. The broader political implication is this: given the Chinese Christians’ conscious effort in maintaining boundary between the ‘religious’ and the ‘political’ in social media communications, they are less likely to use this media for political mobilization and activism. However, this also implies that when the Chinese Christians do wish to mobilize, they are most like to do so in subtle ways (cf. Katzenstein, 1990), which includes relying on the intercontextual features of social media, and may avoid the close scrutiny of the state.
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