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Coates, J. orcid.org/0000-0001-7905-9504 (2017) *So 'hot' right now reflections on virality and sociality from transnational digital China*. *Digital Culture & Society*, 3 (2). pp. 77-98. ISSN 2364-2114

10.14361/dcs-2017-0206

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So ‘Hot’ Right Now

Reflections on Virality and Sociality
from Transnational Digital China

Jamie Coates

Abstract

A reflection of both the intensity of sharing practices and the appeal of shared content, the term ‘viral’ is often seen as coterminous with the digital media age. In particular, social media and mobile technologies afford users the ability to create and share content that spreads in ‘infectious’ ways. These technologies have caused moral panics in recent years, particularly within heavily regulated and censored media environments such as the People’s Republic of China (PRC). This paper uses the spread of a ‘viral’ sex video among young Chinese-speaking people who live transnational lives between Japan, China, and Taiwan, to reflect upon the question of ‘viral’ media as it is conceptualised more broadly. Their position both inside and outside Sino-phone mediascapes affords a useful case study to think beyond purely institutional discussions of Chinese media, and focus on the ways media practices, affects, and affordances shape patterns of content distribution. It examines the language and practices of ‘virality’ among Chinese-speaking people in Tokyo and shows how the appeal of content like the sex video ‘digital stuff’ on WeChat are typically a digital amplification of pre-existing social practice. Described in terms of ‘sociothermic affects’ (Chau 2008) such as ‘fever’ and ‘heat’ (re/huo), the infectious nature of media is imagined in different but commensurate forms of virality that precedes the digital age. In the digital age however, virality is also made scalable (Miller et al. 2016) in new ways.

Introduction

In July 2015, I was sitting in an old coffee shop in Shinjuku, Tokyo, when a ‘viral’ phenomenon broke out among my Chinese informants living in the city. I had been researching how media practices of young Chinese people in Japan effect their local social lives and political attitudes. I was passing the time with one of my closer friends and informants, who was a language student from Northeast China. Lin had completed her undergraduate degree in Beijing before moving

to Japan for further studies, and had hopes of doing something creative such as photography or fashion. We had been lounging with one eye on our phones and another on the overfilled ashtray on the table, occasionally commenting on something and holding up our smartphones to show each other what we were looking at. This mode of hanging out, co-present in both digital and corporeal terms, was the most common way we would spend time together, our interpersonal commentary serving as a meta-commentary on various social media. As she often did, Lin cursed and chuckled as she held her phone up to my face. 'Look, look' she taunted, as I started to work out what I was seeing. It was a video of a young man and woman having sex while standing in a changing room, the woman topless and pressed up against the mirror as the man held his smartphone up to film them. The few words spoken were mostly muffled by Chinese-language service announcements and banter from outside the changing room. Lin laughed and said 'people are such perverts' and, after I mistakenly asked if the film was taken in Japan and whether the people were her friends, she said 'no, no, this is just something that has blown-up and become a craze (*bao re*) in China.

This is how I first came to know about a video of a young Chinese couple having sex in the Sanlitun, Beijing outlet of the Japanese clothing store 'Uniqlo'. The impact of this one piece of footage was such that it was reported in several major English-speaking news outlets (cf. Phillips 2015; News.com.au 2015; Sola 2015). Translated to the Anglophone world, the terms 'viral' and 'meme' were often repeated as a common way of describing how popular and widespread the video had become. Moreover, the video became a focal point for discussions of censorship in China, and the punitive measures taken to curb sexually explicit content on the 'Chinese' internet. These acts of translation, and the idea of a censorship created digital-divide between China and the world, struck me as fruitful ground to reflect upon the mobile practices and emic terminology that inform Sinophone digital practice, particularly as a form of alterity that might complicate our understanding of 'virals' and 'memes'. Events such as the sex video often pepper the news outside of China, but are typically reduced to debates around the Chinese government's efforts to censor the 'Chinese' internet. While these issues are of concern, I am equally concerned by how little Chinese digital practice informs the theorization of media, and the degree to which popular media terms from the Anglo-European context are unreflexively applied to alternative digital media ecologies.

Why was this 'craze' (*re*) called a 'viral' in English-language media? What does 'viral' mean? In popular Anglophone usage, the term 'viral' is associated with the rise of digital media, even more so since the advent of social media (Burgess 2008). The concept of 'viral media' has been attributed to several people. Some trace the origins of 'viral media' to the 'viral marketing' campaigns of the 1990s (Nahon et al. 2011; Juvetson and Draper 1997) whereas others have shown how its early academic inception can be found in the 1994 book *Media Virus* where Douglas Rushkoff argues 'media events are not *like* viruses. They *are* viruses,'

(Rushkoff 1994: 9). The tendency to equate the spread of media content with biological processes however, has a long history extending beyond the term 'viral' (Shifman 2014). For example, it is often quoted that current popular understandings of 'viral' media are strongly influenced by another term: 'meme' (Dawkins 1976). Borrowing from the Greek term for imitation *mimema*, Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' to argue that 'Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission' (1976, 189), defining 'memes' as units of culture that replicate across milieu. Eager to suggest that 'memes' seek reproduction in ways akin to genetic survival, Dawkins and many 'meme' enthusiasts have suggested that phenomena as wide as ideas, linguistic patterns, and faith in God can be attributed to the virus-like propagation of 'memes'. From the late 1980s into the early 2000s, a field intended to study the spread of memes, *mimetics*, grew in popular discourse. Public advocates for mimetics, such as Susan Blackmore (Blackmore and Dawkins 2000), have tried to explain almost everything as 'memes'. Somewhat deservingly, clumsy efforts to sidestep the empirical findings of fields such as anthropology, sociology, and linguistics attracted many critics of 'memes' (Aunger 2001; Downey 2008; Sperber 1996) and over the same time and in a similar fashion, the concept of 'viral' media attracted its own critics (Arauz 2008; Chapman 2010; Yakob 2008).

The major objections with both the concepts of 'meme' and 'viral' largely revolve around a perceived misattribution of agency, as well as various inconsistencies in the conceptualization of *what* is transmitted and *how* it is re-produced. For example, in suggesting their own concept of 'spreadability' as a solution to 'viral' metaphors, Jenkins, Ford and Green argue that the term 'viral' overlooks the active role people play in producing participatory cultures, where media content is spread as a part of social practice (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013). Similarly, the terms 'viral' and 'meme' have been criticized for their appeals to 'scientistic' authority (Aunger 2001). Greg Downey summarizes these criticisms in his sarcastically phrased 'We hate memes, pass it on' (Downey 2008) where he shows how the attribution of personality-like qualities such as 'selfish' to cultural phenomena overlooks the role of people, institutions, and pedagogy.

Despite the many analytic shortcomings of 'virals' and 'memes', the rapid spread and seductive qualities of media content are common topics in popular discourse, and these terms are part of how we understand digital media in everyday Anglo-European life. For example, popular commentators such as Bill Wasik have suggested that America is now a 'viral culture' (Wasik 2009), and google trends searches for both 'memes' and 'virals' show consistent growth in the use of these terms in English-language net culture since 2004 (Google 2017). With the widespread debate and everyday use of the term 'viral' within Anglophone worlds it would seem disingenuous to dismiss popular understandings of 'virals' and 'memes', as these phenomena play reality altering roles in many social contexts. Rather, in the spirit of the 'ontological turn', perhaps we should take the gap between emic and etic understandings of viral media as a methodological

and epistemological opportunity (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). As John Postill has shown in positing the term ‘viral reality’, the rapid spread of media content and the ways they reshape political and social processes in Europe is ‘real’ (Postill 2014). What is more, as Postill clearly outlines, concerns about the viral qualities of social media and digital practice have caused many to debate the very ‘real’ consequences these practices might have for democracy, particularly in relation to the activism in Egypt in recent years (cf. Almiraat, 2011). The question remains however, whether there are alternative ‘viral realities’. Investigating what it means to be ‘viral’ within highly mobile Chinese digital cultures serves as a methodological injunction to rethink our approach to media events and the processes that allow them to spread.

Within this paper I reflect upon the terms we use to conceptualize ‘viral’ content as a window onto the relationship between digital content, sociality, and practice. Thinking from the Chinese context I trace an alternative genealogy of ‘virality’ to show that, in as much as digital practice has accelerated the spread of media content, the rapid and seductive spread of meaning has a long history that precedes digital life. Building on this genealogy, I concur with Miller et al.’s recent social media research cohort that it is the scalable sociality of contemporary media that distinguishes it from previous media forms (Miller et al. 2016). I extend the concept of scalable sociality to include scalable content as a means to understand virality, and in turn argue that digital practice is perhaps best understood as a form of scalable virality. Understanding the virality of content as it spreads through Chinese, particularly networks that operate on transnational scales, helps us explore the relationship between digital life and mobility. It demonstrates the role of digital affordances in making content ‘mobile’, while also attending to the the differing ways this semiotic mobility is described and imbued with meaning.

The alterity of digital China

It is difficult to avoid speaking about the ‘Chinese’ internet and its related terms and practices, without veering towards the language of ‘techno-orientalism’ (De Seta 2016a; Morley 1995). And yet, it is important to understand the ways infrastructure development, the politics of censorship (Wallis 2015), and their occasionally carnivalesque practices (Herold and Marolt 2013), have led to an alternative ecology of media practices (De Seta 2016a; Lum 2014). These practices are not relegated to the PRC but spread out, rhizomatically (Bateson 1958; Deleuze and Guattari 1987), among Chinese-speaking peoples worldwide. Rather than treating the alterity of Sinophone digital practices as a bounded site of difference, I interpret it as a methodological opportunity to reflect upon the potentially taken-for-granted ontological suppositions of terms such as ‘viral’ and their associated practices (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017). In order to situate the terms mentioned above,

and the practices I will go on to explain, it is important to understand some of the general history and layout of China's digital landscape.

Although the 'Chinese' internet developed over a similar time period as the internet in the rest of the world, the legal and infrastructural processes that have shaped it ensure that it has a history that distinguishes it from broader narratives about digital globalization (Herold and Marolt 2013; Herold and De Seta 2015; Qiu and Chan 2013; Yang 2011). Today, the advent of mobile technologies and Sinophone media developers' efforts to capture this market has created an inseparable link between digital life and everyday mobilities. However, much like in other parts of the world, this widespread access and popularity was less so the case twenty years ago. Private use of digital networks at home was not made legally available to citizens of the People's Republic of China (PRC) until 1997, and a significant rural-urban divide exacerbated unequal access to digital technologies in the early 2000s. For example, only 1.8% of the population had access to the internet in the PRC in 2000 (CINIC 2017). Government policies surrounding censorship created an image of China's online world as bounded and regulated, epitomized in the term 'the Great Firewall of China', which was purportedly coined by Sinologists Geremie Barme and Sang Ye for a *wired* magazine report (De Seta 2016b). The 'Firewall' is a cluster of government campaigns, technologies and practices, such as the 'Golden Shield Project' initiated in 1998; the failed 2009 software filter 'Green Dam Youth Escort' (*Lüba Huaqi Huhang*); and, the 2014 campaign 'Clean Web: Sweeping Away Pornography and Striking Illegality' (*Saohuang Dafei Jingwang*). It is patchy, porous, and relatively ineffective against the motivated and tech-savvy, but 'the Great Firewall' serves as an imagined barrier between China and the rest of the world, informing digital practices in various ways. For example, Facebook and Twitter were banned in China in 2009 following reports that rioters in Xinjiang were using the services to communicate. And Google and its associated services, such as Youtube, withdrew from China in 2010 after disputes over censorship. The common practice of using VPNs to side-step official bans have been called 'crossing over the wall' (*fanqiang*), and they have enabled motivated fans of international pop culture, such as fans of the Japanese celebrity Aoi Sola (Coates 2014, 2017), to participate in Twitter and Facebook discussions. At the same time, censorship measures have ensured that, in practice, non-Chinese social media platforms that appear seemingly ubiquitous worldwide, are far less popular than their Chinese counterparts.

At the end of 2016, 53.2% of the PRC population officially had internet access amounting to over 731 million users, 27.4% of these users lived in China's rural areas (CINIC 2017). However, these figures are difficult to verify and are likely conservative. The use of internet cafes and phone sharing in rural areas, for example, suggests that shared access may be more prevalent than official figures. The popularization of mobile technologies has dramatically changed the landscape of digital practices in China over the past 10 years. In 2007 a little over 10% of the Chinese population had internet access and were largely dependent on

desktop computers. 24% of net users utilized mobile technologies in 2007, while today 95.1% predominantly use smartphones (CINIC 2017). Due to these changes, mobile internet access is not only reshaping urban lives, but plays increasingly important roles in rural people's lives (McDonald 2016), and the lives of rural-urban migrant workers (Wang 2016).

In many senses, Chinese digital life constitutes the largest network of alternative platforms, practices and meanings in the world. There are information services akin to Google such as Baidu; originally browser based social networks such as QQ, the ICQ-like messaging service founded in 1999 which has grown to become a multi-media platform; microblogs that have been equated to Twitter, like Sina Weibo; and, most recently a variety of smartphone based apps such as WeChat, which was started in 2011, and Tantan, established in 2014. While these services are often touted as alternatives or even 'copies' of Facebook, Twitter, and Tinder, they are distinct assemblages of socialities, meanings, and practices. Historically, China's most popular microblogging platform, Sina Weibo has been one of the major focuses of scholarly attention. Launched in 2009, Sina Weibo is a publicly visible platform with functions originally similar to Twitter, but it has since evolved to incorporate a range of other content and uses that hold similarities with Instagram, Facebook and Youtube. Due to its public visibility and longer history, it has been easier to study in an ethically justifiable way (Svensson 2017), and has attracted a range of methodologies with a focus on politics and online discourse in China (Schneider 2015; Svensson 2015; Wu et al. 2011; Wu et al. 2013; Yuan, Feng, and Danowski 2013). Complimenting this microblog research, recent ethnographic work has come to the increasing consensus that platform choice differs between locales, performances, and socialities (Miller et al. 2016), and that microblogs may not best reflect everyday practice. For example, Tom McDonald has shown in his study of social media use among rural villagers that Sina Weibo was not very popular and that his informant's choice of QQ as their favoured platform related to the degree of visibility and the socialities this visibility affords (2016). As one of China's oldest social media platforms, QQ provided his informants the most services and possibilities to manage their presentation of self (Goffman 1959), using functions as varied as music and video streaming to private and group-based messaging. In contrast, recent work on rural-urban migration (Wang 2016), and other Chinese urban contexts (De Seta and Proksell 2015; De Seta 2016a; Holmes et al. 2015; Sun 2016) have found WeChat to be the fastest growing and most popular form of social media among young urbanites.

In line with most findings over the past 5 years of urban digital practice research in China, I found WeChat had become the most common way Sinophone socialities were produced in Tokyo. A relative latecomer to the social media game, WeChat (*Weixin* lit. Micro-message) has grown to become almost synonymous with Chinese smartphone-based social media. In early 2017, 80% of Chinese mobile internet users surveyed reported using WeChat (CINIC 2017), with 938

million users worldwide in the first quarter of 2017 (Hariharan 2017). It is the second largest messaging app in the world, after Facebook Messenger. WeChat was started as an app by Tencent in 2011, the same company as QQ and one of the oldest social media developers in China. Originally a side project in 2011, its purely app-based functionalities have since become one of Tencent's most successful products, and in many ways heralds an increasingly inseparable marriage between digital practices and mobility. The app itself requires verification through a telephone number, and was originally only intended for smartphone use, although online and PC-based versions have since been made that you can log into by verifying them on your phone. Each quarter WeChat gains new functionalities, making it difficult to summarize in many ways. As of early 2017, WeChat consisted of a cascading wall (called moments in English) where you can share general content with your personal contacts; group walls formed out of your contacts and their own contacts; official accounts that act as news services and interest groups; financial services that allow the gifting of money, and immediate payment for services and commodities in China; and, a range of other apps and games that operate in conjunction with WeChat. In terms of messaging content, WeChat encourages the mixing of text, audio-messaging, videos and images, and has developed a complex ecosystem of Gif-like animations and emojis that are designed to only work within WeChat.

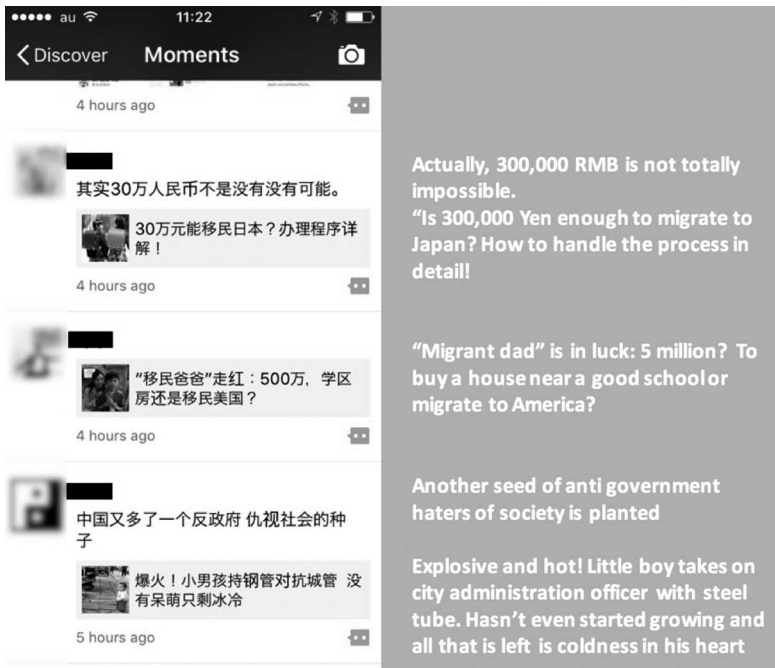


Figure 1: Example of Moments Wall in WeChat (left), and translation (right).

The WeChat users I met in Tokyo spanned mainland Chinese and Taiwanese users, with occasional speakers of standardised mandarin (*Putonghua/Guoyu*) who had no ethnic Chinese heritage, such as myself. In this sense, although dominated by mainland Chinese users, WeChat was more an assemblage of Sinophone sociality than it was a form of 'Chinese' social media. It was not simply made up of citizens from the PRC, but also people who were linguistically and culturally competent in Chinese-languages. Its Chineseness depended on shared and approximate semiotic logics rather than strictly defined ethnic identifications. For example, the ability to joke and understand the many layered references encompassed in other people's humorous content shaped group-membership more than ethnic or national identity. Similarly, the written script shared between many Sinophone and other North East Asian languages ensured that WeChat afforded forms of conviviality and connection between people who might otherwise not associate with each other. Yet, this pattern of sociality grew out of largely embodied encounters with each other in Tokyo. The WeChat users I followed were a series of overlapping networks grown out of face-to-face interactions within various spaces of consumption and play within Tokyo. Exchanging WeChat contact details was incredibly common, and often served the function of a handshake within crowded clubs and restaurants. 'Do you use/play with (*wan*) WeChat?' followed by a quick exchange of details using either a proximity based search or the scan of a QR code, became a phrase and practice that invited strangers to become acquaintances. The term *wan* (use/play) embodies the way communication, utility, and play, are often collapsed into each other in Sinophone sociality. It also demonstrates how the linguistic idiosyncrasies of one language might elucidate the experiences of other sociocultural worlds. As a native English-speaker it is easy to understand how social media might be understood as a field of play, and yet it also evokes different associations than saying 'Are you on Facebook, or can I find/follow you on Twitter', as we might in English. Using the same method as my interlocutors I asked for permission to become contacts with, and eventually follow, several networks on WeChat. One group was specifically formed for the purpose of my research and several others relating to various specific interest groups spanned both Tokyo, Taiwan, and mainland China. There was a group for the employees and followers of a local Chinese-language news service; a group of billiards enthusiasts; one group was for a bar and one was for a group of artists and their friends. There were also two groups for specific businesses, two for fans of dining in Tokyo, and two were general chat rooms for separate networks of friends. Overall the groups covered roughly 300 people. Despite the varied nature of these groups, the sex video spread throughout their varied discussions. Over the 48 hours following when I first saw the sex video with Lin, I witnessed the short video repeated several times in differing forms within each of the groups. A range of creative responses built on the original video were passed from group to group. And they combined group-member created responses, with other popular user-generated images and jokes from the wider ecology of Sinophone digital content.

A Chinese Viral, Meme or 'Craze'?

As part of a practice-oriented approach to digital media, it is worth interrogating the terms used to describe these practices. Within this section I interrogate Chinese 'virals' from a keyword perspective (Williams 1985), seeing whether alternative terms for the contagious qualities of media might add to the 'concept-metaphors' (Moore 2004) we use to understand these practices. The words 'meme' and 'viral' have been translated into Chinese but serve different conceptual and metaphoric purposes than their English counterparts. Meme has been translated as either *miyin* or *moyin*, which connotes the 'charming' (*mi*) or imitative (*mo*) elements (*yin*) of popular cultural assemblages. However, in daily practice this translation of 'meme' is not widely used among Chinese speakers, save for when reporting on international discourses on 'memes' which already featuring the term. Similarly, although there is a translated term for 'contagious media' (*chuanran meiti*) and 'viral broadcast' (*bingdushi/xing chuanbo*), discussions of 'virals' are either business-oriented, such as in viral marketing, or they are used by Chinese government censors to describe the malicious qualities of certain media content. The Uniqlo sex video is one example of the use of 'viral' in official government rhetoric.

Although the official details of the case are difficult to verify, the predominant narrative surrounding the sex video is as follows. After deciding to break up, the couple made the video as a risqué memento sometime before the film was circulated. However, around the 13th of July, the young woman lost her phone, and the person who found it distributed the film through her WeChat account. The sex video was subsequently posted on the more publicly visible Sina Weibo on July 14th, and spread quickly in the following 24 hours (YahooHK 2015) After spreading quickly, many 'netizens' (*wangmin*) suspected the film was an advertising prank on the part of 'Uniqlo' itself. This suspicion attracted the attention of the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) officials because the distribution of sexually explicit material for profit is a serious offence in the PRC, and an advertising campaign using these tactics would constitute a violation of Chinese law. However, these accusations were later dismissed by the CAC after a public statement from Uniqlo-China's manager (Thepaper.cn 2015). As the sex video spread, a search for the couple turned into the popularly called practice of 'human flesh search engine' (*renrousousuo*) (Shuimu 2015), a term used to describe situations where large numbers of users engage in a carnivalesque search for individuals' identities (Herold and Marolt 2013). This led to a string of false identifications of the couple involved, before two business students from Beijing Union University were identified and admitted to being the couple in the film. 5 people were arrested in relation to the Uniqlo sex video, including the couple in the film and three others charged with circulating the film.

Two days after the initial circulation of the Uniqlo Sex video, the CAC issued a statement declaring: "The online '*bingdushi*' (virus-style) dissemination of the 'vulgar (*buya*) changing-room video' breaks the '7 foundational clauses' (*qitiao*

dixian) of the CAC, and seriously violates the core of socialist principles” (CAC 2015). As this statement suggests, in the eyes of Chinese officials the term ‘viral’ speaks as much to their uncontrollable and violating qualities, as they do to their spreadability. As Elizabeth Povinelli argues, the ‘Virus’ acts as a powerful figure in current regimes of governance (Povinelli 2016). Describing contemporary governance as *geontopower*, which depends on regulating the distinction between Life and Nonlife, Povinelli argues the ‘Virus’ antagonizes power structures because ‘It confuses and levels the difference between Life and Nonlife while carefully taking advantage of the minutest aspects of their differentiation’ (2016: 19). In a similar way, the CAC statement is suggestive of the capacity for images and meanings to spread and seemingly take on a life of their own, challenging the Life-Nonlife distinctions of meaning and media, and disrupting any government-level pretence of a responsible Chinese citizenry. In this sense, describing virals as virals is in many ways ‘seeing like the state’ in the Chinese context (Scott 1999).

From the perspective of the groups of Chinese youths in Tokyo I conducted my fieldwork with, the sex video was not a ‘viral video’ or a ‘meme’, but rather ‘fiery’ (*huo*), explosive (*bao*) and ‘hot’ (*re*). It was defined by its qualities, rather than as an object. The terms they used reflected a wider trend within Chinese discourse to describe the popularity of a joke, term, or video, through metaphors of heat. Much like in earlier English-language descriptions of celebrity and popularity that precede the internet, a character or media event in contemporary Chinese vernacular can be described as ‘hot’ (*re*), as ‘on fire’ or ‘fiery’ (*huo*), as well as other qualities associated with heat, such as the colour red (*hong*). These references to heat invoke equally contagious but less biomedical images of virality in the Chinese context. Moreover, they show connections to an older history of social crazes in China, with some ethnomedical connotations akin to, but also different from, the English term ‘viral’. Heat can spread in virus-like ways for example, and an excess of heat and energy, such as the condition of *shanghuo* (literally ‘rising fire’), is often prescribed as a cause of poor health within Chinese ethnomedical systems (Rongrong and Hiroshi 2008). Taking on heat can be caused by the over-consumption of heat-inducing foods within Chinese ethnomedical classifications, such as dog meat, but has also been associated with certain patterns of thought and workplace stress in recent years.

Although not directly equated with illness, the contagious qualities of social crazes in reform era China have also been described using the term ‘hot/heat’ (*re*), which has in turn been translated using terms such as ‘fever’ and ‘craze’. As David Palmer describes *re* in *Qigong Fever*:

A ‘fever’ is a form of collective effervescence in China’s post-totalitarian phase which occurs when official policies and informal signals sent from above correspond with, open the space for, and amplify popular desire, which appropriates these spaces in unexpected ways, simultaneously complying with, appropriating, disrupting and mirroring the projects of state hegemony (Palmer 2007: 81).

Since the early 1980s there have been countless 'fevers' and 'crazes' including, a 'Chairman Mao *re*' (Barme 2016), a 'Culture *re*' (Wang 1996), a 'Stock Trading *re*' (Hertz 1998), and a 'Leaving Country *re*' (Louie 2004). In more recent years, the tendency for *re* has accelerated and proliferated in micro-blogging networks, with reports of ethno-patriotic crazes like the Ming Dynasty *re* (Shui 2007) and an anti-Japanese *re* (Kanke 2012).

The concept-metaphor *re* and other heat-related terms thus stand for an emic conceptualisation of the virality of everyday social life. Adam Yuet Chau has explored these themes in his discussion of the 'red-hot sociality' (*honghuo*) of festivals and events in China as part of his call to focus on the sensory production of sociality (Chau 2008). Drawing on a longer history of scholarship on 'heat' (*re*) and the positive valuation of 'heat and noise' (*renao*) in religious activities and markets in China and Taiwan (Weller 1994; Yu 2004), Chau suggests 'sociothermic affect' (499) as a 'native conception' (498) of sociality and effervescence (Durkheim 1965) in China and Taiwan. Sociothermic affects are 'more diffused than "feelings" and more complex than simple excitement' (499). They are a mode of social excitement reminiscent of Durkheim's 'collective effervescence' (1965), although they attend more to the dynamics of intimacy and estrangement between actors, rather than the effervescence of society as a whole. Prosocial affects are associated with heat, whereas antisocial affects are associated with cold. According to Chau the distinctly social nature of these affects ensures that they also evade a simple interpretivist framework, because they not only involve acts of communication but also 'the body, the senses and being-in-the-world' (500). In his other work Chau has used Actor-Network Theory (Latour 2005) to show the central role the amassing of 'non-human actants', such as pigs and consumable intoxicants, plays in the production of festive sociality and its sociothermic (Chau 2013).

These terms and metaphors imply a native concept of 'spreadability' (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) that both posits media content as 'catching' in an affective sense, if not 'contagious' in biological ways. The contagious image of sociothermic affects indicate that the enthusiastic re-production of sociality can take on properties beyond the control of lone interpretants without succumbing to an understanding of media and meaning as somehow having a personality of their own. Chinese understandings of sociality as spreadable, seductive, and affective, suggest that social life has always been contagious. And indeed, emic understandings of sociality, encapsulated in terms like *guanxi* (connections) and *renqing* (human sentiment), underpin a large part of the anthropological and sociological understanding of China (Kipnis 2002; Gold, Guthrie, and Wank 2002; Sun 1990; Yang 1994). From the language used to describe sociality, to the preponderance of pre-internet era 'crazes' it is clear that the enthusiastic social spread of meaning is by no means relegated to social media. If, as Postill suggests, we live in 'viral reality' today (Postill 2014), then from a Sinophone perspective we might say that we have always been viral.

Scalable Virality

As the official Chinese response to the sex video suggests, there is a difference between positing media content *as a virus*, and recognizing the tendency for media content to spread and gain popularity. To call media content a virus, or its associated metaphor of ‘memes’, is to take a political stance on the sociality of media, one where ideas and meaning are either a threat to control (virus) or a force to be contended with in a survivalist interpretation of social life (Dawkins and Blackmore etc.). However, recognizing the *virality* of media content does not necessitate calling media content ‘viral’. As Postill (2014) and Dan Sperber (Sperber 1996) argue, we can be interested in the ‘epidemiographic’ and/or ‘epidemiological’ qualities of media practice without agreeing with the use of ‘memes’ and ‘virals’ among mimetics enthusiasts. Sperber has shown how ‘memes’ and ‘virals’ misattribute a ‘survival of the fittest’ logic to the spread of media content where the content itself is imbued with intentions and desires. In making this point, Sperber suggest an epidemiological approach where the vectors and attractors that afford the spread of a symbol, image or term, are closely analysed. Postill shows how Sperber’s insights might be applied to recent debates about media and activism, arguing that we can move away from the approaches of Dawkins and Blackmore while maintaining an interest in why and how meanings spread.

As the case of Chinese concept-metaphors for sociality and digital practice show, media content and its ‘spreadability’ (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) can be understood from the affective and sociality producing qualities of media without reference to viruses per se. In this spirit, I suggest a hard etic distinction between the terms viral and virality. Virality is a term that has already become popular among some scholars (Shifman 2014) and in many ways captures some of the meaning of the Chinese term *re*. For example, Jeff Hemsley and Robert Mason define virality as:

A word-of-mouth-like cascade diffusion process wherein a message is actively forwarded from one person to other, within and between multiple weakly linked personal networks, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of people who are exposed to the message. (2013: 138)

Hemsley and Mason’s definition provides us with a useful way of describing the social distribution of media content. However, Chinese emic terms of similar processes remind us of the need to incorporate an understanding of the affective qualities necessary for a ‘cascade diffusion process’ to take place. Without asking everyone to learn standardised mandarin (*Putonghua/Guoyu*) I would like to suggest that we build off Chinese understandings of *re* to conceptualize the virality of media content in terms of both its affective appeal, and its social distribution. I would define virality as:

A form of sociality whereby the affective appeal of an assemblage of meaning and practices leads to its rapid diffusion and re-production between multiple weak-ties, resulting in an increase in the number of people participating in that assemblage of meaning and practices

There is still however one shortcoming in applying this definition of virality to the case of the sex video among my interlocutors in Tokyo. How can we differentiate digital practice, the mobility of digital content, and the role of mobile life, from other social practices inscribed with 'virality'? If Chinese social life has always been viral, what is different about digital practices today, particularly in migration contexts, or contexts of rapid urban mobility?

As the video spread to each group among my informants in Tokyo, complex dynamics of intertextuality, cut up the signifiers of the event into smaller forms of content, and recombined them with other pre-existing terms, images, and animations popular within each group. The originally 6.5-megabyte video was converted into short GIFs and stills, and catalysed the swapping of other lewd and transgressive images and animations within friendship groups. One of the groups affiliated with a business quickly admonished the person who posted the video, but otherwise, most groups engaged in a torrent of jokes, banter and animation. The sex video itself and the images taken from it soon stopped circulating, but the terms *Uniqlo* (*youyiku*) and 'changing room' (*shiyijian*) remained as playful substitutions for the term sex. It became the euphemistic 'Netflix and chill' (Langmia and Tyree 2016) for many young Chinese in Tokyo for the second half of 2015, and was deployed in a variety of ways. At times it was misogynistic, such as a GIF with the term 'Women are like clothing, I like to wear them in Uniqlo', and responses from women stating that 'You couldn't even book a Uniqlo changing room, and you want to shag me (*yuepao*)? You're dreaming (*zuomeng*)'. Another GIF was a complex assemblage that was specific to Chinese social media in Japan. Its image was taken from the popular GIF which substitutes a submitters face into a cartoon character with a goofy bob haircut called 'mushroom head' (*mogutou*). And the caption combined Japanese and Chinese language, using the Chinese slang *zhuangbi* that can be literally translated as 'adorning female genitalia' but typically means 'to show off or be a faker', and the Chinese characters for Uniqlo (*youyiku*), while constructing the sentence out of Japanese terms and syntax:

'somebody is *zhuangbi*-ing about their *Uniqlo* skills! Unbelievable!
dareka 'youyiku' (ch) ni tsuite, 'zhuangbi' (ch) shite imasu! Mō yabai yo!

As Uniqlo is a common Japanese brand found at almost every train station in the city, and most of the group members were in Tokyo, the sex video also translated and intensified several ways of interacting with the city, and with each other. Many of my friends and interlocutors started taking photos of local Uniqlo outlets with captions in Chinese such as 'dare I go in?', 'want to be my Uniqlo-friend?', and engaged in a series of selfies where they joked about stealing each other's

boyfriends and girlfriends and ‘taking them to Uniqlo’. Six weeks after the sex video blew up (*bao re*) and became ‘hot’ (*huo*), a group of my informants had gone out to a bar to celebrate one of their birthdays. As they each peeled-off to go home, a final pair, who everyone knew liked each other but had not started dating, lingered as we all left. The next morning everyone in the group speculated on WeChat as to whether the pair had ‘been to Uniqlo to change clothes’, but there was no response from the couple. Later that evening however, one of them confirmed that they were now dating by saying that they had, indeed, been to Uniqlo.

The spread of this one video among a series of overlapping networks outside of China, is suggestive of its virality. Moreover, its proliferation through creative user responses to the original video, indicates the appealing sociothermic affects it generated. It was not simply that the video was exciting or transgressive, but also that it provided the means to proliferate a range of playful engagements, from in-app banter and image swapping to selfies within the city. Practices similar to those of my informants in Tokyo, such as taking selfies out the front of Uniqlo, became popular in mainland China too, but they also differed in terms of the localized language play and image taking. What these various dynamics imply is the multiple scales at which the virality operates.

A large cohort of social media ethnographers recently coined the term ‘scalable sociality’ to better define social media (Miller et al. 2016). Taken from a perspective where all media have social qualities, and interact with each other as ‘polymedia’ (Madianou 2012), Miller et al. argue that the current social media ecology of apps, platforms and devices, are distinguishable in their capacity to scale between public and private, as well as intimacy and estrangement.

From the maintenance of intimate relationships to the possibilities of forming relationships with strangers, social media can be seen as a form of ‘scalable sociality’ enabling people to better control their social lives. This may be through adapting existing social norms to different contexts or allowing for the creation of entirely new forms of social relations and sociality by exploiting this register of degrees of intimacy and distance (Miller et al. 2016: 109)

Miller et al. focus largely on the social scale and form of media interactions, and although it is not the focus of their research, they wager that in the near future all media are likely to become scalable to the degree that the term ‘social media’ becomes irrelevant. However, there is another scale that receives less attention within their work, but may help us understand the virality of phenomena such as the sex video. The Chinese media ecology suggests that content has also become increasingly scalable, as is evidenced within debates of the ‘micro-era’ of Chinese media.

The ubiquity of apps like WeChat and its services, including former social media platforms that now work in conjunction with WeChat, has heralded what De Seta, borrowing from broader commentary in China (Tao 2014), has called the *weishidai* (Micro-Era):

While software development in Euro-American contexts is couched in buzzwords emphasizing the acts of sharing, networking, and personalization (social, smart, personal), the *wei* prefix of the Chinese micro-era summarizes a series of cultural patterns emerging from the local developments of digital media: decentralization, fragmentation, dispersion, and immediacy. (De Seta 2016a: 132)

De Seta analyses the complex semiotics of vernacular creativity to show how miniaturization has led to the increased blurring of distinctions between sociality, devices, digital practices, and everyday life. The prefix of *wei* (micro) adorns a range of popular apps and services today, including micro-messaging such as WeChat (*weixin*), micro-blogging (*weibo*), micro-business (*weishan*), and micro-novels (*weixiaoshuo*). Beyond this prefix, we also see other miniaturizing terms such as in the short video app *miaopai* (1 second video). These references to miniaturization demonstrate the appeal of scalable content, which are both part of scalable sociality and the virality of certain media content and crazes. From a more technologically-oriented perspective, we could argue that the translation of everyday phenomena into a series of *os* and *is*, or in other words digitization, is itself a means of making life scalable. Here we see that everyday Chinese discourses resonate with recent anthropological discussions of the ontology of the digital, whose 'distinctiveness resides in an inherent capacity to be distorted and transformed, to be continuously other than they are' (Knox and Walford 2016). Scalable content affords a degree of 'detachability' and 'reproducibility' (Spitulnik 2002) which helps explain the virality of certain media events and content (Postill 2014).

Often when we think of the scale of digital media and 'virals' we think of the trajectory from micro to macro, from small to big, or private to public. In many ways, the treatment of viral media and memes has followed this emphasis, particularly among diehard advocates for the application of biomedical understandings of viruses to the realm of media. However, in the micro-era, the seductive quality of media content and its scalability, is dependent on its ability to fit into, and occasionally create, niches (Postill 2014). It produces new interpersonal convivialities, and shifts scales from micro to macro and micro again. In this sense, scalable sociality and scalable content are co-constitutive. The success of platforms such as WeChat is predicated on its attention to aligning its application's affordances with the social practices of Chinese-speaking peoples (Hariharan 2017). From gifting money through 'red packet' (*hongbao*) games (Holmes et al. 2015; Wang 2016) to payment services that work from smartphone to smartphone in night markets, to a convivial messaging system that allows the easy combination of sound, image, text and animation into streams of constant banter. WeChat is increasingly scaling pre-existing content and practices, riding tandem to already prevailing vernaculars. In their scaling however, they can also increase and translate the intensities of many of these phenomena, such as in the spread of transgressive and comical material.

How might the case of this ‘hot’ and explosive sex video in China’s ‘Micro-Era’ help us better understand digital practice? The rapid spread, affective language, and recombinant practices that surrounded the sex video case during my fieldwork in 2015, suggest that there is much to be learned from thinking beyond Facebook and Twitter. On the one hand, the alterity of Sinophone media ecologies, allows us to trace platforms and modes of digital practice divergent from the majority of scholarship on digital and mobile media. At the same time, the subtle differences between the commensurate terms used to describe these practices, helps us look beyond our own concept-metaphors. Instead of embracing the metaphoric language of viruses or treating units of meaning as virus-like objects, we can speak of the virality of media in terms of sociothermal affect. From such a perspective, it is clear that the virality of meaning has long been an important part of human sociality. And yet, with the advent of scalable media, we can also note an intensification of virality, which in turn have social effects. To recognize the scalable virality of digital practice in China today, then, is to see new media practices in terms of intensities rather than epochs or forms.

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