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Perspectives from China: Social Media and Living Well in a Chinese Context

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Social Media and Living Well

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Perspectives from China

Social Media and Living Well in a Chinese Context

Sarah Mattice

The United States has a current population of approximately 313.9 million people. In 2013, more than 600 million users had active accounts on Qzone, China's largest social media site (Millward 2013). Although discussions of social media tend to assume American or European users, social media is a worldwide phenomenon, and different locales bring different concerns to bear on social media ethics.¹ China not only leads the world in terms of sheer numbers of users, but also has the most active environment for social media, ranging from instant chat platforms like QQ to blogs, microblogs, social networking sites, and gaming platforms. Chinese users also spend approximately 40 percent of their time online on social media sites (Chiu, Ip, and Silverman 2012). Given this, inquiries into social media ethics should involve China (and other non-Anglo-European locales and concerns). This chapter is split into two parts: part I draws on distinctly Chinese philosophical conceptions of living well in order to provide a cultural recontextualization of some of the questions associated with social media and ethical development, and to hopefully enrich larger discussions of social media ethics; part II considers the contemporary situation of social media in China, what social media actually looks like in China, and some of the political concerns surrounding social media in China.

CHINESE CONCEPTIONS OF THE GOOD LIFE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The Chinese philosophical landscape is relevantly different from western philosophical landscapes in a variety of ways, and so to consider the distinctly Chinese ethical concerns that arise from social media requires brief discussions of accounts of living well in the three most prominent religio-philosophical traditions in China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Although ancient, each of these traditions is a key thread in the complex interweaving of contemporary China's ethical fabric. As will be seen from what follows, none of these traditions seem to provide a hard-and-fast rule about whether or not social media usage coincides with the visions of living well they present. Although on the one hand this may simply be because social media is a relatively new phenomenon, there is a deeper reason for the lack of a firm answer. These three traditions are not principle-based ethical systems that provide a decision procedure for determining best actions. Unlike some versions of consequentialism or deontology, neither Confucianism, Daoism, nor Chinese Buddhism are particularly interested in establishing a set of rules from which all good conduct can be deduced. In addition, these traditions tend to focus on practices, habits, and events, and so rather than "the good life" the phrase "living well" is more apt. Even the Buddhist paramitas, which include the five lay precepts, serve more as guidelines for compassionate and wise action and intentions than strict rules to be followed. Instead, these traditions focus on providing concrete visions of living well in particular circumstances, and call for moral imagination in responding to the unknown. In each tradition, the vision of living well is made concrete through an ethical exemplar: the Confucian exemplary person (*junzi*), the Daoist sage (*shengren*), and the Buddhist bodhisattva (*pusa*). The following sections use these figures to orient the discussion of Chinese philosophical perspectives on the ethics of social media.

Confucianism (Exemplary Persons)

Confucianism is a religio-philosophical tradition indigenous to China that traces its lineage to Kongzi (Confucius 551–479 BCE), who lived and taught during the end of the Spring and Autumn Period.² It developed during the Warring States Period with teachers such as Mengzi (Mencius) and Xunzi, and after its adoption as state ideology during the Han Dynasty, spread across much of East Asia. Indeed, as Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. (1998) state, "whatever we might mean by 'Chineseness' today, some two and a half millennia after his death, is inseparable from the example of personal character that Confucius provided for posterity" (1).

Early Confucian philosophy understands the world in terms of a person-centered hierarchy, where all relations are, in a sense, power rela-

tions, and both the root and the flowering of human experience is in personal, and especially familial, relationships. As French sinologist Marcel Granet notes, "Chinese wisdom had no need of the idea of God," and indeed much early Confucian thought was structured around this world and our roles and relations in it (1934). Persons are understood neither as radically autonomous nor as soul-bearers, but as constitutively relational; persons are no more and no less than the sum of their roles and relationships. Confucian ethics is deeply intertwined with political concerns, as the period in which Confucian thought developed was one of incessant internecine warfare, and Confucius himself sought a political appointment in order to influence a regent and help to bring order to an age of brutality. Although he was ultimately unsuccessful as a minister, as a teacher he was incredibly influential.

Confucian ethics is, broadly speaking, a project of self-cultivation, refinement, and attention to roles and relationships, and an ideal at the heart of this ethical vision is the *junzi*, the exemplary person. Exemplary persons are characterized by their humaneness (*ren*), their attention to good form and ritual propriety (*li*), their appropriateness and emphasis on moral cultivation over profit (*yi*), and their wisdom and practical understanding (*zhi*). Much of the text of the *Analects* consists in short conversations between Confucius and his students, his students and their students, and passages detailing Confucius as a moral exemplar in his daily life. The *Analects* has many passages concerned with exemplary persons as moral ideals: they are not mere vessels (2.12); they first accomplish what they are going to say, and only then say it (2.13); they cherish excellence and fairness (4.11); they are neither bent on nor against anything, but go with what is appropriate (4.10); they do not leave off of humaneness for even the space of a meal (4.5); they learn broadly of culture, discipline this learning through ritual propriety, and can remain on course without straying from it (6.27) (*Analects*, trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr. 1998).

In today's world, which is in many ways far removed from Warring States China, how might we understand the relationship between a Confucian project of self-cultivation and participating in social media? While Confucianism is an ancient tradition, it continues to animate contemporary Chinese concerns in a variety of ways. Mary Bockover, in her article "Confucian Values and the Internet" argues that Confucian values—still flourishing in today's world—are in many ways inconsistent with core values of the internet such as liberal freedoms and democracy of information. She writes that "The Internet is currently the most effective form of communication available to promote the first-world value of autonomy: It is driven by the ideas of consumerism, free expression, equal opportunity, and free trade. This stands in sharp moral contrast to the traditional Confucian system of values" (2003, 164). Bockover draws on early Confucian philosophy and emphasizes that Confucian values such as *ren* (hu-

maneness) and *xiao* (familiality, family reverence) entail a set of cultural priorities that does not include any particular interest in western liberal values: "the moral priority of Confucian ethics is to cultivate and fulfill one's social responsibilities. To reconcile one's obligations to others is the most pressing concern, not to be a 'self,' or a person *qua* autonomous or 'free' agent in any sense" (2003, 163). Her argument rests on a pair of claims: first, it is not at all clear that contemporary American definitions of freedom as unobstructed self-expression are either the only or the best definitions of freedom, and so to suggest that Confucian philosophy might have legitimate interests and values that conflict with that notion of freedom is certainly possible; and second, given that China has never strongly embraced or practiced unrestricted liberty, it is culturally imperialistic to suggest that they should with regard to the internet simply because westerners do, even with all of the problems that have come with the internet. It is reasonable to suggest that China might look to Confucian philosophy to articulate its own set of priorities that may not include unrestricted autonomy on the internet.

Wong Pak-hang agrees with Bockover, although for different reasons. He narrows his focus to social media, and argues that there are three characteristics of social media that do not resonate well with Confucian ethics: invisible audiences, collapsed contexts, and the blurring of public and private (Wong 2013). Like Bockover, he situates his discussion of Confucian ethics in terms of the special significance of familial relationships, social roles, and ritual activity (*li*) for living well in a Confucian context. He argues that "whether social media is desirable or not depends first and foremost on its impact on roles," and most importantly its impact on familial roles and relationships (Wong 2013, 289). Considering the problems of invisible audiences and collapsed contexts—it is often the case that one's audience on social media is not actively present, may be anonymous, and may collapse relevantly different contexts down into one online realm—Wong argues that not knowing whom one is addressing is, from a Confucian perspective, a serious problem. Confucian ethics places great emphasis on social roles and relationships as constitutive of one's personhood, and also on ritual activity and propriety as a way of organizing and structuring one's interactions. Not knowing whom one is addressing makes it extremely difficult to know how to act well, from a Confucian perspective: we speak and act differently when with family, friends, employers, strangers, and so on. The blurring of public and private that often happens online de-prioritizes the family, and Confucian ethics requires a strong family as the foundation for moral growth. Wong thus concludes that Confucians will ultimately find social media undesirable, although he opens the door for possible social and/or technological innovation that might challenge this.

Both of these thinkers suggest, in general, that engaging in social media is difficult to do as part of Confucian project. There may, however, be

some ways in which we could understand the drive to become an exemplary person (*junzi*) as benefited by social media. Confucian ethics is often described as a project of growth in relationships, and participation in social media does offer certain avenues for growth in relationships that may be unavailable offline. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter offer the possibility of establishing and maintaining connections with people who may be distant. They may not be the only way of doing this, but they certainly are well set up to facilitate connections. The extent to which these connections are genuine relationships in a fully Confucian sense is unclear, but as exemplary persons do tend to gather others around them, social media sites are possible loci for keeping up these connections when in-person meetings are not possible (assuming that Confucians would prefer face-to-face contact, which seems unproblematic).

In addition to maintaining long-distance relationships, social media is often used for some level of political engagement. From a Confucian perspective, part of what makes the *junzi* an exemplar is that the moral and political realms are understood to be inseparable. Self-cultivation is a political project, and as such political engagement is an important dimension of living well for Confucians.³ In a political environment such as China where direct engagement and remonstrance may be difficult or dangerous, engagement through anonymous microblogging sites allows for political participation that otherwise might not be possible. There are obvious comparisons here with the activity of the Arab Spring, where social media served an important role in part because open discussion was prohibited.⁴

Finally, engagement with social media may blur the lines between public and private in potentially helpful ways. Although Wong's concern about the loss of emphasis on the familial realm is a live issue, with skillful engagement social media could draw attention to the increasing accuracy of the Confucian claim that the boundary between public and private is thin at best, and serve to draw attention and focus to the performative aspects of living well, and the need for managing all of one's interactions in an exemplary way. In a world where opting out of the online is increasingly difficult, engagement with social media can draw attention to persons as relationally constituted, and also highlight the flow of power between people (*guanxi*).

Although there may be some possibilities for convergence between a Confucian project of living well and social media, we can build on some of the critical resources offered by Bockover and Wong to suggest additional concerns. First, one of the persistent concerns of early Confucian thought is the idea that *how* one acts is as important as *what* one does—style and substance are ethically intertwined: "Zixia asked about filial conduct. The Master replied: 'It all lies in showing the proper countenance. As for the young contributing their energies when there is work to be done, and deferring to their elders when there is wine and food to be

rad—how can merely doing this be considered being filial?" (*Analects* 2.8, 1988, 78). It is not simply that the young should defer to the old, but *how* they defer that really matters. The Confucian exemplary person is refined and cultured, and demonstrates this in the success with which she navigates the variety of relationships and roles that constitute her. Unfortunately, refined and cultured speech are not the norm on most social media sites, and few actively promote a care for the links between speech and action that a Confucian perspective values.

Second, part of a Confucian project of living well is emulating and coming to embody moral exemplars. Because social media is, relatively speaking, a new phenomenon, identifying social media exemplars who fully embody the *junzi* ideal is challenging, to say the least. As a new arena of life, we lack the generations of cultural resources available for judging moral exemplars in face-to-face realms. And because many people spend large chunks of time online and on social media platforms, the people they choose to emulate and raise up as exemplars are especially important—many spend more time on social media than in face-to-face engagement, and so figuring out how to find good role models online is crucial. In *Analects* 4.1, Confucius says, "In taking up one's residence, it is the presence of humane persons (*ren*) that is the greatest attraction. How can anyone be called wise who, in having the choice, does not seek to dwell among humane people?" (89, "humane" substituted for "authoritative"). As relationally constituted persons, the moral character and quality of those with whom we enter into relationships and spend time is crucial to our own moral development. The people we spend time with become part of ourselves, and as such, the skill to judge who to spend time with is particularly important to our ethical cultivation.

Related to the issue of identifying moral exemplars online, one of the most serious concerns raised by a Confucian account of living well regarding social media has to do with children. In contrast to much of western philosophy, Confucian philosophy is explicitly concerned with education and with the development of children into adults. In fact, some describe Confucianism as first and foremost a philosophy of education. Living well is not only about oneself, but about one's family, friends, and broader community as they extend from the distant cultural past through us into the next generations. The impact of social media usage on children and their moral development, then, is a central concern raised by Confucianism.

Consider, for instance, a connection we might make between *Mengzi* 1A7 and a recent performance by American comedian Louis C. K. *Mengzi* 1A7 is a conversation between Mengzi and King Xuan of Qi, concerning the moral qualities relevant to good leadership. Mengzi tells the king that he heard a story of the king seeing an ox being led to ritual slaughter and pardoning it. Mengzi draws this out to suggest that the king, in responding to the suffering of the ox in front of him, has the seeds from which to

develop a moral heart. One of the keys of developing morally in Confucian thought is the idea of face, and of shame. Being confronted in person with the ox, and sparing it, demonstrates to Mengzi that the king is capable of being a humane leader (although he has failed to do so). His failure is a matter of effort, not of impossibility.

In an interview on the late night talk show *Conan*, Louis C. K. discusses why he does not want his children to have cell phones (and specifically constant access to mobile social media), showing a very Mengzian kind of concern for the ways in which online interaction leaves an important hole in children's moral development. He says,

I'm not raising children, I'm raising the grownups they are going to be. . . Kids are mean, and it's because they're trying it out. They look at a kid and go "You're fat!" and then they see the kid's face scrunch up and they say, it doesn't feel good to make a person do that. But they have to start with doing the mean thing [and seeing the result]. But when they write [online] "You're fat!" they go "mmm that was fun, I like that." (teamcoco.com 2013)⁵

Although he is making a comedic performance, his words resonate with the *Mengzi*, and the concern that personal interaction is an important component of moral development, most especially for children. Social media, then, can be a hindrance to moral development in that it is often a substitute for the face-to-face interaction necessary for cultivating both empathy and shame, key features of the development into a *junzi*.

Given a Confucian account of moral development and the ethical exemplar of the *junzi*, the exemplary person, it would seem that social media is at best an add-on for social interaction, and at worst a genuine obstacle to self-cultivation and the life of a *junzi*. There is a sense in which the possibilities for productive engagement with social media are not so much for one who is trying to live well and become a *junzi*, but perhaps for one who is already exemplary, social media may be able to serve these potentially beneficial functions. From a Confucian perspective, for those whose moral development is still inchoate, however, and especially for children, the dangers of social media for living well are substantial.

Daoism (Sages)

Daoism, like Confucianism, is a religio-philosophical tradition that traces its lineage back to the Spring and Autumn Period and the Warring States Period of early China. Two of the most important early figures associated with philosophical Daoism are Laozi and the text the *Daodejing*, and Zhuang Zhou and the *Zhuangzi*.⁶ Although Daoism and Confucianism share a cosmological foundation that arises out of the *Yijing* (*Book of Changes*), which is fundamentally this-world oriented, and focuses on patterns of change and persistence, unlike Confucianism Daoism extends

its focus from personal relationships to the natural world. Daoist philosophy also places great emphasis on cultivating certain kinds of productive dispositions to most effectively and playfully navigate the world.⁷ The name “Daoism” (*Daojia/Daojiao*) comes from the term *dao*, which is one of the most rich and difficult terms in all of Chinese intellectual history.⁸ Its meanings can range from road(s) or path(s) to the activity of making road(s)/path(s); from the way(s) to do something to prescriptive discourse about how best to do something; all the way to the energizing process that is the dynamic dance of the cosmos. Much of Daoist philosophy is concerned with questions of how to find and best travel along/with *dao*.

One Daoist ethical exemplar is the *shengren*, or sage, who is often depicted as living a simple but aesthetically rich life. In the *Dao De Jing* there are many passages that describe sages: sages practice emptiness (11), preserve the female and are *yin*, pliable, and supple (28, 76), and they live naturally and free from desires, recognitions, and standards given in human distinctions (37). They settle down and know how to be content (46), act with no expectation of reward (2, 51), never make a display of themselves (22, 24, 72), and do not linger to receive praise (77); they manifest plainness and simplicity, never thinking only of themselves, they create peace (32) and cause no injury (60) (*Dao De Jing*, trans. Ames and Hall 2003). Sages are ideals of living well in moral, political, and aesthetic dimensions of life.

Although there is not much scholarly attention to possible relations between Daoist philosophy and contemporary social media, we can identify some ways in which there might be beneficial interaction, and some in which engagement with social media might be detrimental to Daoist projects. One of the common Daoist critiques of their Confucian counterparts is that the Confucians have an undesirable tendency to reify social roles and to become dogmatically attached to ritual activity. As mentioned in the previous section, for Confucians the fact that social media can make it difficult to maintain social boundaries is undesirable. From a Daoist perspective, however, the potential openness and interaction across social boundaries offered by social media could be a good thing, and help to maintain awareness that social status is a matter of convention. When even Confucius wants the man with the chopped foot as his teacher, this reversal, and the reversal of other assumptions about conventional understanding, indicates the importance of crossing conventional boundaries.⁹

In addition, Daoists are often critical of the rigidity of common morality. They instead advocate a playful, open, and flexible response to the changes of the world. We can imagine, then, that one Daoist response to social media might be wonder and amusement at this new development the world has to offer. After all, Master Yu responded with joy at the prospect of having his left arm turned into a rooster and his right into a

crossbow!¹⁰ Daoism might in fact offer a valuable perspective on an element of social media that is often criticized today: Many people get much of their news from social media, and fall into the pattern of seeing only the kinds of things that they agree with. In suggesting that sages cultivate the productive emptiness of a bellows or the open center of a wheel, a Daoist might value the online availability of differing perspectives. Daoist philosophy tends to be critical of perspectives that think they have the entire picture and are unable or unwilling to adopt a sense that their perspective is one of many possible perspectives. The *Zhuangzi* advocates understanding perspective as a kind of lodging place, and in the opening image of the Peng bird (a bird so large that flapping its wings causes seasonal change), suggests that adopting a kind of epistemological capaciousness is a valuable strategy. Being able to access many different kinds of perspectives online, then, could be extremely valuable—although one would have to go to the effort of doing so.

Furthermore, the Daoist sage is often depicted as a master of immediacy: “Sages really think and feel immediately” (*Dao De Jing* 49, 153). They are often compared with infants, in that infants respond in the moment, without calculation or deception. Chapter 10 of the *Dao De Jing* asks, “In concentrating your *qi* and making it pliant, / Are you able to become the newborn babe?” and Chapter 55 opens by saying that “One who is vital in character (*de*) / Can be compared with a newborn babe” (*Dao De Jing*, Ames and Hall 2003). One of the commonalities among social media platforms is their brevity and immediacy. Twitter and platforms like it allow only a limited number of characters, and saying something in that way can truly be an exercise in spontaneity.

Not only do Daoists value spontaneity in the sense of the immediacy of the infant or the potency of the child, but they also value spontaneity in the sense of the ability to act without detailed consideration made possible by extensive practice—a jazz musician who can improvise brilliantly because of years of dedication. Furthermore, in a Daoist philosophy of language, language is seen as provisional but effective, and at its best when it poetically opens up a world rather than discursively closes it down: “naming (*ming*) that can assign fixed reference to things is not really naming” (*Dao De Jing* 1, Ames and Hall 2003). Daoists are wary of definitions but love metaphors, and so the brevity inherent in certain social media platforms could provide a useful outlet for cultivating these aspects of sagacity. Ames and Hall write that for Daoists, the “locus of sagacious thinking lies in inspiring and transforming the ordinary and routine business of the common people . . . sagacious living in drawing together and focusing the aspirations of the community” (154). Platforms like Twitter certainly involve the “ordinary,” the “routine,” and bringing a community together, and a Daoist on the path to becoming a sage might take the opportunity to use it as a means of development.

However, in other ways it is difficult to see living well in a Daoist fashion coinciding with much social media usage. Daoist philosophy generally advocates living simply, naturally, and without artifice; social media is in some respects an unnatural complication that introduces a variety of artifice into living. Chapter 19 of the *Dao De Jing* exhorts readers to “Display a genuineness like raw silk and embrace a simplicity like unworked wood,” (104) and Chapter 47 states, “Venture not beyond your doors to know the world. . . . The farther one goes the less one knows” (150). Daoist values often lean toward simplicity, reserve, and locality; social media does not seem to resonate much with those values.

A great deal of Daoist poetry and prose is connected with the ideal of the Daoist sage as a hermit, one who is critical of popular social practices, has renounced life at court, and who retreats to the forests or mountains to live simply with nature. Tao Yuanming’s *Peach Blossom Spring* (*Tao Hua Yuan Ji*) is a widely influential Daoist story from 421CE that tells of the journey of a fisherman to a chance discovery of an idyllic village untouched by the “modern” world. The way in which this story, and others like it, valorizes the simple, natural life seems at odds with the contemporary conveniences and contrivances of social media.

In addition to living the life of a recluse, the Daoist sage is sometimes understood as a kind of artist who turns her life into a work of art. Early Daoist texts often praise and value the time and effort required to become really good at something, especially something that contributes beauty to the culture. Many famous Daoists were artists—poets, writers, calligraphers, painters, and musicians—and the dedication to their art is especially prized as a major component of living well. While social media engagement may not prevent this dedication, people who are active on social media often spend huge chunks of time online. This is time that then cannot generally be devoted to aesthetic cultivation or training.¹¹

Buddhism (Bodhisattvas)

*Why doesn't the Buddha have a Facebook profile pic?
Because there are no selfies!*¹²

Buddhism is a set of religio-philosophical traditions that originated with the historical figure of Siddharta Gautama and his articulation of the Four Noble Truths in approximately the sixth-fifth centuries BCE, in the region of the world that is now Nepal/India.¹³ Buddhist traditions moved to China sometime around the first century CE, took root during the Three Dynasties period after the fall of the Han, and flourished during the Tang Dynasty. Buddhist accounts of living well begin with the Four Noble Truths:

1. All this is suffering/unsatisfactoriness.
2. There is a pattern in how suffering arises.

3. There is a pattern in how suffering is resolved.
4. There is an Eightfold Path for turning suffering toward meaningful resolution: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.¹⁴

Living well, then, requires recognizing the sources of one’s suffering and changing how one lives so as to decrease/eliminate suffering in one’s own life and in the lives of others through interconnected practices of wisdom (right view and intention), morality (right speech, action, and livelihood), and meditation (right effort, mindfulness, and concentration).

Suffering is said to be caused in part by three poisons: attachment, aversion, and ignorance. One of the major causes of suffering is the three poisons in relation to the idea of a permanent, unchanging, essential self (*atman*). It is through our attachment to this fiction, our ignorance of how things really are (impermanent, changing, and non-substantial), and our aversion to pain, suffering, and death that many of our problems arise.

Many of the Buddhist traditions in China are Mahayana Buddhist traditions, which take as their ideal the figure of the Bodhisattva, one who vows out of compassion to remain in the cycles of birth and death to attend to the suffering of all sentient beings. Guanyin is one of the most famous and important Bodhisattvas in China, and she is often depicted with one thousand (many) arms, symbolic of her pledge to compassionately respond to the suffering of all sentient beings. There are many different schools of Chinese Buddhism, all of which draw their lineage back through different Indian Buddhist schools to the historical Buddha. Some of the most prominent schools are: Three Treatise (*San Lun*), Consciousness-only (*Wei Shi*), Tian Tai, Pure Land (*Jing Tu*), Flower Garland (*Hua Yan*), and Chan.¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, most of these schools fall into the general family of Mahayana Buddhism (the greater vehicle), as distinct from Theravada Buddhism (the way of the elders) and Vajrayana Buddhism (the diamond vehicle).¹⁶ For the sake of brevity, much of what follows draws on a specifically Chan philosophical perspective, as Chan is a distinctly Chinese school of Buddhism: “The Chinese sense of wisdom colors Chan” (Jun 2013, 29).¹⁷

In Mahayana Buddhism the image of the Bodhisattva serves to establish a family of teachings that illustrate a life of service to others, based on an understanding and lived realization of co-dependent origination, emptiness of self, compassion, and wisdom. Characteristic of Bodhisattva teachings are the six paramitas: generosity, discipline, patience, energy, contemplation, and wisdom. These paramitas, or perfections, are qualities of cultivation required for the Bodhisattva path; they are interconnected and interdependent. The second paramita, living in a disciplined manner, includes at least the five lay precepts: no intentional killing, no

ying, no sexual misconduct, no stealing, and no intoxication. These precepts point to important behaviors to avoid if one wants to live well: "Practice is . . . about crafting the art of living beautifully, honestly, and with strength and dignity. Precepts are a refinement of this craft; they are a mindfulness tool and a tool of compassion that can open body, speech, and mind to original wholesomeness" (Halifax 1998, viii).¹⁸

The Bodhisattva path is demanding, in terms of intellectual understanding, constant practice, lived realization, and the exercise of compassion. In Chan traditions, however, it is often discussed as the most reasonable response to a deep understanding of the identification between co-dependent origination and emptiness—if I am empty of a permanent, enduring self, but full of all other things, then the suffering of others is my suffering, and my suffering is theirs. Compassion toward any and all suffering is then the most logical and best response, albeit a difficult one that can take many lifetimes. Contemporary Chan Master Sheng Yen writes,

Bodhisattvas are beings who have vowed to help others find the Buddhist path without concern for their own personal benefit. Chan practitioners and other followers of the bodhisattva path should strive to cultivate such a selfless attitude. . . . Chan practice helps us to lessen self-centeredness in all its guises: greed, attachment, anger, arrogance, escapism, expectation, and so forth. (Yen 2001, 15–16)

One of the things many westerners know about Buddhism (and especially about Zen, the Japanese form of Chan Buddhism) is that it involves meditation. "In the Chan practice of sitting meditation we cultivate a combination of patience, endurance, and tolerance" (Jun 2013, 33). Many Chan texts discuss the practice of "just sitting" as one of the most difficult—and important—things necessary for cultivation. Often our minds are running a constant inner dialogue, hopping from one thing to the next without leaving time or space for self-awareness and stillness. "In Chan, wisdom is coming back to the present moment. It is in the present moment that we see, smell, taste, feel, and think clearly. . . . Wisdom is experiential. In Chan, we say it comes from returning again and again to the present moment" (Jun 2013, 30–31).

In terms of social media engagement, there are some ways in which participation with social media platforms might be seen to aid the path to becoming a bodhisattva. First, there are many large Buddhist communities (*sangha*) around the world and online, and someone who lives in a predominantly non-Buddhist place can use social media to connect with a larger Buddhist community. This means that those interested in the teachings of the Buddha can support and teach one another across physical boundaries. Examples of this include Tibetan Buddhist communities now scattered across the globe that can connect with one another, multinational Buddhist communities online, and online courses in meditation

from different Buddhist traditions. These online communities can serve as ways of working on the Four Proper Exertions: helping others to avoid non-virtuous acts not yet performed, persuading others to cease performing non-virtuous acts, encouraging others to engage in wholesome acts not yet performed, and urging others to nurture and expand wholesome acts already performed (Yen 2001, 18–19).

Second, one key Mahayana teaching is co-dependent origination, or the interconnectedness of all events and phenomena. Social media can and does draw attention to the ways in which global interdependence creates and maintains systems of oppression for which we are all responsible. Bodhisattvas are not just concerned with local suffering, but with the suffering of all sentient beings, and they recognize that our interconnectedness entails a strong sense of ethical responsibility even to situations that are distant. In thinking about what Avalokiteshvara (Guanyin) might say to a prostitute in Manila, Thich Nhat Hanh writes, "he would tell her to look deeply at herself and at the whole situation, and see that she is like this because other people are like that. . . . No one among us has clean hands. No one of us can claim that it is not our responsibility" (Hanh 1988, 33). Social media potentially highlight the connections between us in ways that encourage compassionate responses to suffering.

Social media also offers a way of teaching and sharing the *dharma* in short bursts that may be beneficial to students; the Dalai Lama has a Twitter account. Many Mahayana traditions embrace the practice of *upaya*, or expedient means: "the creative devices employed by bodhisattvas in carrying out their vow to liberate all sentient beings. Great bodhisattvas possessed such profound skill in means that there were no situations in which they could not do the buddha-world of awakening" (Hershock 2004, 63). Like many other expedient means, social media might have certain problems, but may also be a valuable site of awakening.

However, there are many ways in which social media engagement might be seen as at best a distraction from the kinds of practices needed for living well, and at worst an active hindrance. One of the primary causes of suffering is identified as ignorance of no-self (*anatman*); from a Buddhist perspective most people are ruled to some degree by the fiction that their self is permanent, unchanging, and essential. However, Buddhists argue that there is no self. So many Buddhist practices are designed to rehabilitate students out of self-oriented motivations, thoughts, and actions. One of the real dangers of social media usage is that it can serve as a bastion to the fiction of the self—how many likes did *my* post receive? How many followers do *I* have? What's *my* opinion on this issue? Social media tends to reinforce problematic notions of the self. It also has a tendency to become a sea of inanity, where one's time and attention are submerged in the bombardment of new information, ideas, pictures, blogs, memes, posts—not exactly the stillness and awareness Chan/Buddhist practice strives to develop. With all of that demanding constant

attention, there is little time or energy left for focusing on quieting the mind, attending to the fiction of the self, and cultivating compassion toward others. When Huineng, the sixth Chan Patriarch, said that “wisdom is meditation and meditation is wisdom,” it’s doubtful he could have imagined the increasingly busy and fast-paced world in which we live today, where platforms like Twitter offer a space for disposable thoughts. The advice, however, remains the same: slow down and pay attention. “Quieting the mind is only one facet of the practice because at the core of the [Heart] sutra’s teachings are both wisdom and compassion. In fact, one leads to the other. Any insight derived from meditation is incomplete unless imbued and tempered with compassion. We only fully realize the Dharma when we act with both wisdom and compassion” (Yen 2001, 13). That is, the issue is not simply that social media is fast-paced and/or distracting, but that the point of quieting one’s mind is to be able to cultivate wisdom and compassion, which are difficult without a quiet mind.

It is not just our ignorance of no-self, but also our attachment to the idea of a self, that brings us suffering. Living well from a Buddhist perspective requires consistent practices of awareness and non-attachment. “From the perspective of Chan, everything is spiritual practice, not only sitting on a meditation cushion. Practice is the moment you wake up until the moment you sleep, every single moment. . . . There is a Buddhist word for this in English: mindfulness” (Jun 2013, 60). By bringing mindfulness into every moment and every action, one can rehabilitate oneself out of destructive patterns of thought and behavior: “Every step is a mindful step. Every moment is a mindful moment. Every breath is a mindful breath. If you practice the mindfulness of breath, and yet your kitchen is a mess and your bed is unmade, that is a little bit weird” (Jun 2013, 62). Likewise, if you want to be mindful then spending a large chunk of time losing yourself online in social media may not be conducive to the goal.

Furthermore, the path toward becoming a Bodhisattva is also inextricably tied up with *ahimsa*, non-violence, and compassion. In as much as social media has a tendency to proliferate violent responses to posts, like rape/death threats, bullying, and abusive language, it is not a place for developing compassion for others and oneself, and as such perhaps may be dangerous for the path toward Bodhisattva-hood. Non-violence is not only something to be practiced physically, but also in one’s mind and in one’s language.

Buddhists are especially concerned with the connections between intention, thought, and action, and as such some contemporary Buddhists have put together guidelines for *mindful* social media usage. Blogger Lori Deschene (2011) compiled ten pieces of advice for Buddhist use of social media: 1. Know your intentions; 2. Be your authentic self; 3. If you propose to tweet, always ask yourself: Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?; 4.

Offer random tweets of kindness; 5. Experience now, share later; 6. Be active, not reactive; 7. Respond with your full attention; 8. Use mobile social media sparingly; 9. Practice letting go; and 10. Enjoy social media. Her advice here is permeated with concerns for the dangers of social media overuse: selfishness, partial attention, attachment, and a lack of compassion toward others. However, one could use social media, from a Buddhist perspective, in ways that are mindful, attentive, and compassionate.

What about non-Chan Buddhists? Other Buddhist traditions may have different kinds of concerns with social media usage. For example, Vajrayana Buddhists engage in a variety of esoteric practices, and so are not supposed to share or discuss their practices with non-initiates; they have explicit instructions for what they can and cannot share with others. Tibetan Buddhist teacher Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche issues a series of “Social Media Guidelines” for Vajrayana students, including cautioning students not to share their experiences in practice, not to share whatever attainments or wisdom they think they might have, and to be especially mindful of their motivations for posting/sharing online (2013).

Pure Land Buddhism, one of the most popular forms of Buddhism in East Asia, focuses heavily on the figure of Amida Buddha (who was previously a Bodhisattva). One of the most common practices in Pure Land Buddhism is the sincere recitation of the name of Amida Buddha (*Namo Amituo Fo*), in hopes of receiving Amida’s grace to be reborn in the Pure Land. What might be the status of this recitation on social media? Does “liking” a recitation have the same force as reciting it? These are some issues and questions that arise in other Buddhist traditions.

THEY CAN’T GET ON FACEBOOK AND OTHER CONCERNS ABOUT CHINESE INTERNET ACCESS

As the staggering numbers of Chinese social media users might suggest, there are a variety of social media platforms available in China. In fact, of the top twelve social media sites in the world, four are Chinese (Heggenstuen 2013). Top social media sites in China include Sina Weibo, Renren, Tencent Weibo, Qzone, Weixin, Pengyou, Kaixin, Douban, Diandian, Wechat, and Youku (Simcott 2014). Many of these sites are roughly analogous to Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, Tumblr, AIM Instant Messenger, and YouTube. Although many of these sites have users in the hundreds of millions, the Great Firewall is one of the only things many westerners have heard about the internet in China. The Chinese government maintains an active censorship program (The Golden Shield, or “The Great Firewall”) that shuts down or prevents access to a variety of websites deemed to contain or promote “superstitious, pornographic, violence-related, gambling and other harmful information” (Xinhua 2010). Well-

known western sites such as Google, Wikipedia, Voice of America, and BBC are generally inaccessible in China, and sites that cover sensitive topics such as the Tiananmen Square incident, Taiwan, Tibetan independence, freedom of speech, and the new religious movement Falun Gong are often shut down or difficult to access. Blocked sites also often include famous social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.¹⁹ However, within China there are a variety of well-known ways around government censorship. For instance, successful searches related to Tiananmen Square often use homophonic plays on the date of the incident, June 4 (that is, 6/4). Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) are also a common way around internal Chinese firewalls, and are relatively easy to purchase and use within China, although censors do catch on and shut down some. Many Chinese citizens maintain active Facebook profiles by using something as simple as a VPN. Motivated people can access external sites with some difficulty.

In addition to external censorship, however, the Great Firewall is perhaps more interestingly able to engage in highly agile internal censorship. Scientists at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh recently conducted a study of soft censorship of Chinese social media. Study authors David Bamman, Brendan O'Connor, and Noah Smith did a statistical analysis of 56 million messages from Sina Weibo (the Chinese equivalent to Twitter), and 11 million Chinese language messages from Twitter, looking at the active deletion of messages published by individuals. What they found was a set of politically sensitive terms that led, in their words, "to anomalously higher rates of deletion. We also note that the rate of message deletion is not uniform throughout the country, with messages originating in the outlying provinces of Tibet and Qinghai exhibiting much higher deletion rates than those from eastern areas like Beijing" (2012, n.p.) The study found that internal Chinese censorship is not a centralized, black-or-white affair. Some search terms were censored in some areas while not in others, and not all obviously politically sensitive terms (for example, Ai Weiwei, Falun Gong) were blocked or removed from every instance of use. Internal censorship tends to focus more on local events, such as the Wenzhou train crash and the calls for resignation spurred by the crash (Jiang 2011). The authors also found that not all censorship was political in nature: they recorded one incident where censors deleted a strain of microblog entries spreading a false rumor that iodized salt would protect people from radiation.

In addition to government sponsored censorship, however, Chinese social media sites also self-censor in a way that is not common in western countries. Sina Weibo employs more than seven hundred people as censors, in addition to software that checks for politically sensitive key words (Ramzy 2011). Many Chinese people have also found that the opportunities for discussion offered by this Twitter-like platform can be limited, as others do not hesitate to publicly shame users who post on

certain topics, or are overtly critical of local or national figures. Sometimes this has led to real conversations about corruption and occasionally even resignations, but often it simply results in the original blogger retreating from the controversy.

Discussions outside of China about Chinese social media invariably address ethical concerns surrounding censorship. One way to situate these discussions, however, is as an example of a much larger and very complex discussion about human rights, where the free access to information is often assumed to be a fundamental, first-generation right.²⁰ Documents such as the Bangkok Declaration of Human Rights (1993) and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (2012) affirm the importance of human rights while also opening space for culturally diverse expressions of rights, among other things. These documents grew out of the recognition that the very idea of "human rights" is historically and culturally situated in a primarily western tradition of liberal democracies, where concepts like autonomy and self-sufficiency are taken as unquestionably good assumptions. Because some non-western traditions, such as those found in China, do not embrace certain ideals foundational to previous understandings of human rights (and because of histories of western imperialism and colonialism), open dialogue about the very real problems of human rights abuses was difficult. New languaging about cultural and economic plurality, as well as recognition of different state priorities in terms of first-, second-, and third-generation rights, has made for more fruitful contemporary discussions.²¹ China has consistently maintained that the state seeks to address second generation rights such as right to education and right to livelihood as necessary to pursue first generation rights like individual liberties without a loss of social order. In a nation of more than one billion people, social order is an understandable priority. Chinese dynasties stretching back two thousand years have prioritized stability over liberty, and one of the functions of the government has been moral guidance. The ideal of the sage king, whose personal character is so moral that he can transform the country, stretches back to early Confucian philosophy and is still active in many ways today. That China today maintains its Golden Shield ostensibly to prevent the dissemination of social ills like pornography is seen by many as a moral duty of the government. This is not to say that they are actually successful, or should be. But there does need to be real discussion, not just an assumption that first-generation rights are unquestionably most important, and this real discussion requires an engagement with China's intellectual traditions on their own terms.

CONCLUSION

China and Chinese philosophical traditions have much to offer contemporary discussions on the ethics of social media. Although none of the traditions covered in this essay offer concrete yay/nay arguments concerning social media, the unique perspectives offered by these traditions add to the set of resources for thinking through social media and living well in a global context. Perspectives from these traditions do, however, agree at least that social media is generally a second-best way of interacting with others, and that engaging in social media while attempting to live a certain kind of life comes with specific cautions. Although the ethical exemplar may perhaps gain some benefits from social media use, the dangers for the unskilled are substantial. In addition, when examining issues of ethics and social media, we would be remiss not to consider the actual situation of social media in China, and should try to think through Chinese perspectives on social media without uncritically importing western assumptions into the discourse.

NOTES

1. With the exception of discussions of the Arab Spring, which focus on the role of social media in political change.
2. Although in English we use the term "Confucianism," this is based on the Latinized version of the name of Kongfuzi, "Confucius," and is in fact not how the tradition is identified in Chinese. Kongzi was one of many *Ru*, or ritual masters, who taught during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States period, and the tradition in Chinese is known as the *Ru* Lineage (*Rujia*).
3. In addition to the *Analects*, see for example the *Daxue* (*The Great Learning*), which describes the project of personal cultivation as located along a continuum of cultivation projects moving from the personal to the familial, social, political, and cosmic, and back again.
4. Although there are some key examples of Confucian literati engaging in political critique while knowing that it meant their death.
5. "Louis C. K. Hates Cell Phones." Video Interview from *The Conan Show*, September 20, 2013. Retrieved July 8, 2014 from teamcoco.com/video/louis-ck-springsteen-cell-phone.
6. During and after the Han Dynasty, a variety of figures known as the Celestial Masters become increasingly important.
7. In their introduction to the *Daodejing*, Roger Ames and David Hall describe these dispositions in terms of the *wu*-forms: *wu-wei* (non-coersive action), *wu-zhi* (non-principled knowing), *wu-yu* (objectless desire).
8. Many western thinkers find the common distinction between *Daojia* (philosophical Daoism) and *Daojiao* (Religious Daoism) to be helpful; however, this distinction is not as rigid or as helpful as many scholars would suggest.
9. For this passage, see *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 5. In traditional Chinese culture physical deformity of any kind was often associated with moral depravity, low-class standing, or criminality. So for Confucius to want Wang Tai, with his foot probably chopped off due to theft, as a teacher, is a radical reversal of social conventions of the time.
10. For this passage, see *Zhuangzi*, Chapter 6.

11. There may be some possible counterexamples to this such as online art communities. However, generally speaking for Daoists the physicality and embodied action of the art practice is especially important.
12. My thanks to Dr. Ethan Mills for passing along this joke.
13. Rather than a single monolithic tradition, Buddhism is better described as Buddhisms, as there are many diverse traditions that fall under the loose heading of Buddhism. The term "Buddhism" itself is a product of western religious construction: for more on this see *The Invention of World Religion* by Tomoko Masuzawa.
14. For more on this, see Hershock, *Chan Buddhism*, 13.
15. The question of whether or not to include Tibetan Buddhism as a school of Chinese Buddhism is immersed in a long and complicated political situation. Currently the PRC includes Tibetan Buddhism as a school of Chinese Buddhism.
16. In the contemporary world, Mahayana Buddhism is most associated with East Asia, Theravada with South East Asia, and Vajrayana with Tibetan Buddhism and Shingon Buddhism in Japan.
17. For more on the history and nature of Chan Buddhism, see also Hershock 2004.
18. Although not Chinese, the Buddhism that Thich Nhat Hanh teaches is from the Vietnamese Zen school, which has its roots in Chinese Chan Buddhism.
19. Recently China has unblocked Facebook and Twitter in some parts of Shanghai.
20. Article 8 of the Bangkok Declaration came to represent the high watermark of cultural relativism: "while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds."
21. For more on this, see Ames 1997 "Continuing the Conversation on Chinese Human Rights"; Donnelly 1997 "Conversing with Straw Men While Ignoring Dictators"; Steve Angle 2002 *Human Rights and Chinese Thought: A Cross-Cultural Inquiry* and *The Chinese Human Rights Reader: Documents and Commentaries 1900-2000*.

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