Confucian Social Media: An Oxymoron?

Wong Pak-hang

Abstract International observers and critics often attack China's Internet policy on the basis of liberal values. If China's Internet is designed and built on Confucian values that are *distinct from*, and sometimes *incompatible to*, liberal values, then the liberalist critique ought to be reconsidered. In this respect, Mary Bockover's "Confucian Values and the Internet: A Potential Conflict" appears to be the most direct attempt to address this issue. Yet, in light of developments since its publication in 2003, it is time to re-examine this issue. In this paper, I revisit Bockover's argument and show why it fails. Using social media as an example, I offer an alternative argument to show why the Internet remains largely incompatible with Confucian values. I end this paper by suggesting how to recontextualise the Confucian way of life and to redesign social media in accordance to Confucian values in the information society.

Keywords Confucian Ethics · Social Media · Ethics and Technology · Design Ethics · Philosophy of Technology

1 Introduction

In recent years, China's Internet policy has been a hot topic in popular and scholarly debate. Particularly, international observers and critics often attack China's Internet policy on the basis of liberal values, e.g., Hillary Clinton's speech on "Internet Freedom" (Clinton 2010). However, if China's Internet is designed and built on a set of values (i.e., Confucian values) that is *distinct from*, and sometimes *incompatible to*, liberal values, and this set of values is a legitimate option in itself, then the liberalist critique of the Chinese government ought to be reconsidered. In other words, if the

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Internet embodies (liberal) values that cannot be readily accommodated by a Confucian outlook, it seems that China's policy is, at least, justified from a Confucian perspective.[1] In a similar vein, China's Internet is often framed with the idea of a harmonious Internet, which is derived from a Confucian outlook; the attainability of this idea requires the Internet and the values it embodies to be compatible with Confucian values. Both issues invite us to rethink whether the Internet is indeed compatible with Confucian values.

While there is abundant research on embedded values in the Internet, there is surprisingly little discussion on the compatibility of the Internet and Confucianism. Mary Bockover's article, entitled "Confucian Values and the Internet: A Potential Conflict" (Bockover 2003), appears to be the most direct attempt to address this issue. However, it has been some years since the publication of her article. Novel developments (e.g., Web 2.0) have taken place and there are new philosophical and ethical discussions on Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). It is an appropriate time to re-examine the issue.

Bockover argues that the Internet promulgates values that threaten Confucian values. She claims that the Internet is incompatible with Confucianism. Although, in a qualified sense, I agree with her conclusion, I think her argument is mistaken. In the following, I revisit this argument and show why it has failed. I then offer an alternative argument to show why the Internet *in its present state* is indeed largely incompatible with Confucian values.

2 Bockover on Confucian Values and the Internet

Before proceeding to my analysis, however, it should be stated explicitly that both Bockover's and my argument against the compatibility of a Confucian outlook and the Internet reject the impact view of technology.[2] Since that view assumes technology itself to be *neutral*, accordingly, the Internet is, by definition, compatible with all value systems. In this respect, *any* argument for or against the (in)compatibility of the Internet and Confucian values must presuppose a non-neutral view of technology. I shall not provide additional arguments for a value-laden view of technology here; suffice it to say that it is well supported by recent philosophical, social, and empirical studies of technology—particularly in the field of science and technology studies (e.g., Winner 1986; Brey 2010).

Bockover begins her argument by asserting that the Internet is driven by "the Western values of free expression, equality, and free trade" which are in conflict, "perhaps even dramatically," with Confucian values (Bockover 2003: 160). Elsewhere, she states that the Internet "is currently the most effective form of communication available to promote

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[1] If such a consideration is legitimate, it will lead to a series of controversial questions pertaining to China's Internet policy (in the international context), especially issues related to censorship and human rights in China, because it appears to lend support to the Chinese government's Internet policy. It is not my intention to argue in favour of censorship here, and my discussion in itself does not support such a conclusion. Such a conclusion can only be drawn if one has ostensibly demonstrated Confucianism *does* support censorship, which is not my objective here.

[2] The impact view of technology takes technology simply to be an artefact or tool for a certain objective and outcome. Its emphasis on objective and outcome most often links the impacts of technology, as an artefact or tool, on people (Introna 2008).

the first-world value of [personal and political] autonomy" that "stands in sharp contrast to the traditional Confucian system of values" (Bockover 2003: 163). Her argument can be formulated in the following: (B1) The Internet embodies the Western values of free expression, equality, and free trade or the idea of personal and political autonomy; (B2) Western values of free expression, equality, and free trade as well as the idea of personal and political autonomy are incompatible with Confucian values; (B3) Therefore, Confucian values are incompatible with the Internet.[3]

In order to evaluate Bockover's argument, therefore, it is necessary to examine (1) whether Confucianism necessarily fails to accommodate those "Western" values and, thus, are incompatible with those values, i.e., (B2), and (2) whether the Internet *at its present state* actually embodies those values, i.e., (B1). Accordingly, her argument can be viewed as another instance of the long and continuing debate on whether Confucianism is compatible with Western ideals of human rights, e.g., freedom of expression, equality of opportunity, and (capitalist) socioeconomic growth such as free trade.[4] So construed, the argument is relatively weak. It has already been pointed out by a number of philosophers that Confucianism is indeed compatible with human rights and (capitalist) socioeconomic growth.[5] As May Sim succinctly states "[t]here is a way that Confucians can make sense of rights out of the resources of their own tradition" (Sim 2004: 338). Yet, the point here is not that there is a definitive answer to the compatibility between Confucianism and values such as freedom of expression, equality of opportunity, and/or the idea of free trade, but rather to point out that the relation between Confucianism and the values mentioned by Bockover is less contentious than she has construed. Hence, there is sufficient reason to question the truth of (B2).

Perhaps, then, there is something more to Bockover's argument against the compatibility of Confucian values and the Internet. Here, it is possible to take a hint from her emphasis on personal and political autonomy as the embedded value of the Internet. Bockover argues that the idea of personal and political autonomy embedded in the Internet is derived from a notion of autonomous and rational self (Bockover 2003: 165–170). I contend that if the Internet has embodied the idea of personal and political autonomy derived from a notion of an autonomous and rational self, then Confucianism will have enormous difficulty accommodating the Internet, as Confucianism lacks a notion of personal and political autonomy (see, e.g., Chan 2002). Moreover,

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[3] Unfortunately, it is relatively unclear in Bockover how, and in what sense, the values of free expression, equality, and free trade or the value of personal and political autonomy are the embedded values of the Internet except through a number of anecdotes. The most explicit elaboration of the embedded values of the Internet is: "Internet activity now embodies and perpetuates a view of freedom that has nothing to do with [what is right, true and fair, what is proper and in due measure].… The Internet does not lend itself to… self-regulation, and so the concept of freedom that it now expresses is almost exclusively defined by the desire for economic freedom (to get rich) and personal freedom (to have an equal opportunity to do and say what one wants)" (Bockover 2003: 170).

[4] It should be noted that Bockover has assigned a very narrow notion of freedom to the Internet, e.g., unrestricted freedom of expression, based on the assumption that the Internet is not and cannot be (self-)regulated. However, such an understanding of freedom (of expression) appears to turn her argument into a straw man, as the Internet will be incompatible to most—if not all—coherent value systems, including a liberal value system.

[5] For discussions of the compatibility of Confucianism and human rights, see, e.g., Chan 2002, Sim 2004, and D. Wong 2004. For discussions of the compatibility between Confucianism and (Western) capitalism, see Nuyen 1999.

Confucianism presupposes a relational self that runs against the notion of the self merely as an autonomous and rational being.

Of course, this line of argument depends on whether the Internet truly embodies the idea of personal and political autonomy derived from an autonomous and rational self. Unfortunately, Bockover has not explained how—if it is in fact so—the Internet does so. However, her description of the Internet as a space without (self-)regulation, which fosters a "concept of freedom … exclusively defined by the desire for economic freedom (to get rich) and personal freedom (to have an equal opportunity to do and say what one wants)" (Bockover 2003: 170), fits nicely with a view of the Internet envisioned by cyber-libertarians. As Langdon Winner characterised (Winner 1997), cyber-libertarianism consists of (1) an unquestioned belief in a technological determinism of adapt or perish, (2) a radical individualism, especially for pursuit of rational self-interest such as wealth, power, and sensual pleasure, and (3) a supply-side, free-market capitalism (and, together, they usher in (4) a Jeffersonian vision of citizen and political society) (see also, Bell *et al.* 2004: 43–46). Most relevant to the present discussion is the idea that the Internet has enabled (and, simultaneously, rested on) a radical individualism, which, in turn, has embodied and fostered the idea of personal and political autonomy.

Whether the Internet (and, in general, digital media)—even in its early stage—truly accords to the view of cyber-libertarianism is debatable, but it is hard to deny that if it is indeed so, the Internet and Confucian values cannot be compatible, as the Internet is then rested on a radical individualism that promulgates a radical version of personal and political autonomy, which essentially comes into conflict with the relational self presupposed by Confucianism. So construed, Bockover's argument will be successful.

Yet, as I have already pointed out, there has been a profound development of the Internet since the early 2000s, generally known as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005a, 2005b). Although *the* definition of Web 2.0 remains elusive, its association with the openness, collaborative, and participatory nature of the Internet contrasts greatly with the closed and solitary nature of Web 1.0. The cyber-libertarian view of the Internet, which Bockover's argument relies on, is primarily affiliated with Web 1.0, i.e., it embodies radical individualism by enabling people to publish webpages that are under their *full control* as well as to retrieve and consume information via search engines *self-sufficiently* and *without the need of interaction*. I am not, of course, suggesting Web 2.0 is irreconcilable with radical individualism and/or cyber-libertarianism (see, e.g., Song 2010, Dahlberg 2010). Still, the shift toward Web 2.0, I think, has transformed the nature of the Internet and the values it embodies. Particularly, Web 2.0, with its built-in open, collaborative, and participatory nature, has instilled the Internet with a (new) dimension of sociality that, *ideally*, encourages community building and cooperation (Fuchs *et al.* 2010, Fuchs 2010). A look at Web 2.0 applications such as wikis, folksonomies, mashups, social networking sites, etc. illustrates that sociality is now being designed and coded in, thus clearly distinguishing them from earlier Web 1.0 applications (Beer & Burrows 2007, Papacharissi & Gibson 2011). For instance, social networking sites, often viewed as Web 2.0 applications *par excellence*, are explicitly aimed at (re)creating, online, people's social connections and relationships (boyd & Ellison 2008; boyd 2010a). In this respect, the design and use of Web 2.0 applications does not—at least, not primarily—have in mind the idea of persons isolated from each other; instead, they fully recognise the primacy and significance of social and relational dimensions of people (see, e.g., Albrechtslund 2008, Mallan & Giardina 2009, boyd 2010a).

The shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is also associated with a change in our sense of the self (Song 2010, Ess 2010, Papacharissi & Gibson 2011, Bakardjieva & Gaden 2011). On a more optimistic note, Charles Ess argues that the development of digital media, especially Web 2.0 and social media, has de-emphasised *individual* privacy required to sustain (radical) individualism and, thereby, has ushered a (re)turn to a (more) *relational* understanding of the self (Ess 2010:110–112).[6] Besides, if decisions and actions in a personal realm are representative examples of autonomous choices and actions, then we can also observe a turn to a (more) *relational* understanding of autonomy in and through Web 2.0 and social media. For example, the design and use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and, lately, Google+ explicitly aims to harness collective decisions and facilitate collective actions. And, by foregrounding the decisions made and actions taken by people in the individual's social connections and relations, e.g., aggregation of "Like," "Retweet," and "+1," social media has made people more open to influence from social connections and relations in their decisions and actions. Hence, I think, it is fair to claim that the design and use of social media is based not on an autonomous view of decision and action, but on a relational view. In short, I think it is safe to conclude that this new version of the Internet, i.e., Web 2.0, is based on a different sense of the self and idea of autonomy.

Yet, if it is indeed true that Web 2.0 has introduced a (new) dimension of sociality and relationality to the Internet and (re)turned us to a (more) relational understanding of the self, then Bockover's argument becomes obsolete because the argument invokes a different view of the Internet, which sees it as an embodiment of radical individualism and promotes the idea of (radical) personal and political autonomy. In short, Bockover's argument fails because her view of the Internet in the argument no longer accords to the Internet *at its present state*; therefore, (B1) is false. In effect, if Ess's argument is right that Web 2.0 and social media (re)turn us to a (more) relational understanding of the self, the Internet will be more hospitable to Confucianism. The question, then, is whether Confucianism is compatible with the latest development of the Internet, i.e., Web 2.0.

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The question, however, resists an immediate answer, for the term "Web 2.0" is itself vague and ambiguous and there is a plethora of diverse web applications associated with Web 2.0. Hence, the term must be qualified if it is to be meaningful at all. I shall limit my analysis to social media, as they are most characteristic of the social and relational dimension of Web 2.0; and, therefore, the most suitable candidates to test the (in)compatibility of Web 2.0 and Confucian values. As Ess has anticipated, with the increasing prominence of Web 2.0 and social media, there will be a hybridisation of individualistic self and relational self (Ess 2010). Here, it is possible to question whether a (more) individualistic but still primarily relational self that Web 2.0 brings about can be

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[6] At the same time, Ess also argues that there is a change in the sense of the self in East Asian cultures from a relational self to a (more) individualistic understanding of the self. In short, Ess is arguing for a hybridisation of different senses of the self but not a change in singular direction, i.e., from the individualistic self to the relational self and *vice versa*.

coherently conceived from a Confucian outlook. However, I shall not attempt to answer this question because it goes beyond the scope of the (in)compatibility of social media and Confucianism and runs into the foundation of Confucian philosophy. Instead, I will only examine whether social media *as it is now being designed (and used)* is compatible with Confucian values.

3.1 Affordances and Dynamics of Social Media

My analysis is built on danah boyd's theoretical and ethnographic studies of social media (boyd 2010a; see also, boyd & Ellison 2008).[7] In her works, boyd has examined the architecture of social media as well as the *affordances* and *(communicative) dynamics* supported by it. As she rightly points out, although social media does not *determine* users' behaviours and practices, its architecture, through its affordances (i.e., by opening up and/or making more accessible some possibilities of decision and action and *vice versa*) and dynamics, has *shaped* users' behaviours and practices. So understood, my analysis is about whether social media, because of its design and use, *tends* to be considered as (un)desirable from a Confucian point of view.

boyd seeks to understand social media through the notion of *networked publics*, which are publics "transformed by networked media [e.g., information and communication technologies], its properties and its potentials" (boyd 2010a: 42). Networked publics, accordingly, distinguish themselves by their structural foundation, i.e. bits, and the affordances available to the architecture of bits, namely "persistence," "replicability," "scalability," "searchability," and "shareability"[8] (boyd 2010a: 40–42, 45–48; Papacharissi & Gibson 2011: 76). boyd argues these properties of networked publics have supported three dynamics, which have come to dominate the network publics, namely:

Invisible audiences	Not all audiences are visible when a person is contributing online, nor are they necessarily co-present.
Collapsed contexts	The lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries makes it difficult to maintain distinct social contexts.
The blurring of public and private	Without control over context, public and private become meaningless binaries, are scaled in new ways, and are difficult to maintain as distinct. (boyd 2010: 49)

It is these dynamics, as I shall argue, that sit uncomfortably with Confucian values. However, in order to show why social media will be seen as undesirable from a Confucian point of view, I shall now briefly return to Confucian ethics.

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[7] boyd's article only focuses on social networking sites, i.e., a type of social media; but her analysis of social networking sites is based on the notion of *networked publics*, which can also be generalised and applied to social media (boyd 2010a).

[8] boyd does not include "shareability" as one of networked publics' affordances (boyd 2010a). But, as Papacharissi and Gibson rightly note, enacting on the properties of networked publics essentially prompts sharing (Papacharissi & Gibson 2011: 76).

3.2 The Confucian Way of Life: A Brief Detour

It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive study of the Confucian way of life. However, I believe it is relatively uncontroversial to claim that *familial relationships* and *social roles* have special significance in the Confucian way of life. Confucians believe that people's roles are constitutive of their personhood, i.e., whether someone is *truly* and/or *fully* a person depends on his performance of the roles.[9] And, to properly perform a role is to fulfil the responsibility prescribed by that role. People's roles and their performance of them, therefore, are central in the Confucian way of life. This implies that Confucians will scrutinise carefully the relations between technology and (social) roles or, more precisely, they will examine *if and how technology influences and transforms the nature of specific (social) roles and the responsibility prescribed by them.*[10] This exercise should not be viewed merely as historical or sociological, i.e., to identify what (social) roles have changed in relation to technology, because the moral significance of roles and a person's performance of them is too normative. Moreover, technology can enhance or deter people in fulfilling their roles. For Confucians, therefore, whether social media is desirable or not depends first and foremost on its impact on roles.

Of course, not *all* roles are equal to Confucians. Confucianism prioritises *familial* relationships over other relationships. As many commentators of Confucianism have noted, central to the Confucian way of life is the virtue of filiality and fraternity (*Xiaodi*) and the fulfilment of filial and fraternal responsibility (see, e.g., D. Wong 2008, Fan 2010: Chapter 1–3, Kim 2010). For instance, it is stated in *The Analects 1.2,* "filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness ['ren']" (Slingerland 2003: 1). Familial relationships are of utmost importance to Confucians because they believe that these relationships are the prototypical natural affectionate relationships (i.e., parent-children, siblings) through which they allow one to learn to be, and eventually to become, a true and full person. Indeed, Confucians regard *all* non-familial relationships to be the extension of familial relationships; assuming familial roles and fulfilling their role responsibility are viewed as a moral preparation for people to perform non-familial roles. In the Confucian way of life, therefore, familial roles and the responsibility prescribed by them are more important than non-familial roles.

Finally, the importance of rites (*Li*) cannot be neglected in the Confucian way of life, as one's roles should not be performed arbitrarily—a person ought to perform his role and to fulfil the role responsibility *appropriately.* Rites provide *thick* instructions, not just *thin* principles, as to what counts as appropriate in various contexts. Here, it is useful to note that rites do not only limit to formal rituals, but also include minute rituals for everyday practices (Fan 2010: 171–172). Since the appropriateness of decisions and actions is determined by rites, following rites is essential to the Confucian way of life. To live a Confucian way of life means that one is to ceaselessly perform his role and fulfil the role responsibility appropriately through following rites. Of course, it is not to assert that Confucians follow rites unreflectively and without exceptions, as this entails Confucianism to have no room for (moral) agency and changes in rites, and thereby

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[9] See, e.g., Yu & Fan 2007 and Bockover 2010. I am not, however, arguing that in Confucianism, a person is exhausted by his roles. To hold this view, as Kim convincingly argues, is to deprive Confucian persons of (moral) agency (Kim 2011).

[10] To be sure, the significance of professional roles has already been studied in engineering ethics and other professional ethics, but the notion of (social) role in Confucian ethics should be conceived as much broader.

renders Confucianism to absurdity. As many have pointed out, Confucianism does have room for (reflective) disregard and exceptions for rites (Y. Liu 2004; Kim 2009; Fan 2010: 181–188). Yet, rites cannot be abandoned *ad hoc*; it is allowed only when and insofar as doing so coheres with other Confucian values. In short, rites cannot be separated or withdrawn from the Confucian way of life; as Kim has rightly noted, the Confucian way of life differs from others in that it has incorporated rites in its self-cultivation and self-transformation (Kim 2009, 2010).

3.3 The Confucian Way of Life and Social Media: A Mismatch?

I have highlighted three aspects of the Confucian way of life, namely (1) roles and role responsibility, (2) filiality and fraternity (*Xiaodi*), and (3) rites (*Li*). These aspects are particularly relevant to the present discussion of the (in)compatibility between social media and Confucian values. In the following, I illustrate why and how social media, with the dynamics identified by boyd, is a poor match with the Confucian way of life (boyd 2010a).

   The existence of invisible audiences on social media is problematic to the Confucian way of life. Since users' audiences can be neither visible nor co-present at the time when the users 'say' (or 'do') something on social media, e.g., social networking sites, microblogs, etc., they are in effect interacting with someone who they do not know with certainty. This is not to claim that invisible audiences do not exist prior to social media. Invisible audiences—who are unknown and/or absent—exist in the offline world too. In the offline world, people can interact with someone who is not co-present through writing. There, however, the person absent is not unknown. Similarly, people can interact with someone who they do not know through writing and/or (public) speech, but, they can still draw a sensible boundary of intended and unintended audiences through the writing's and speech's style, genre, and context, and thereby assume and perform their roles accordingly. In this respect, (invisible) audiences in the offline world are to a large degree identifiable to people. Social media, on the other hand, admits a much lesser degree of identifiability. This lack of identifiability is best illustrated by social networking sites: when users disclose themselves through social networking sites such as Facebook, in which other people—as long as they have been granted permission (i.e., in Facebook's default setting, when they are a "friend")—can view them, these people are *all* audiences, and they are indifferent to the users too.[11] The users, in this case, do not specify their audiences and differentiate them by default. This uncertainty about their audiences makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the users to assume and perform the correct roles with respect to their (online) audiences because in order to do so, the users need to know who they are.

   It becomes especially troubling to Confucians if we consider the online world to be a continuum of the offline world, as *all* users' offline relationships, e.g., family, friends, colleagues, etc., are at the same time potential invisible audiences so long as they are online too; being (potential) invisible audiences, however, they have barred the users from assuming and performing the right roles with regard to them even if the users have no problem doing so in the offline world. So understood, social media at its worst

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[11] It is important to bear in mind that "saying" (or "doing") something on social media is not limited to self-disclosure, e.g., managing your pages and content, etc.; it also includes writing and commenting on others' pages as well as forwarding their content. In the latter cases, although the users are interacting with and/or related to some identified audiences and so can assume their roles accordingly, uncertainty remains insofar as their audiences' pages can be viewed by others. In those cases, the unidentified others become the users' invisible audiences.

engenders a world in which people constantly fail to assume their roles. Since (social) roles are, according to Confucianism, constitutive of one's personhood, and one can only become a person if his roles are properly assumed and performed (with the role responsibility properly fulfilled), Confucians should evaluate social media negatively because of the (online) world it engenders.

Invisible audiences, of course, are not only a problem for the Confucian way of life but also a problem for *any* users of social media, as they too need to know if what they say or do is appropriate or not. To counter the problem that arises from invisible audiences, one strategy for the users is to imagine who they are interacting with when they use social media. This strategy helps to reduce uncertainty on the users' side because the users can then delimit their behaviours and practices in accordance to the type of audiences imagined (boyd 2010a: 50; Paracharissi & Gibson 2011: 80–81). Yet, I think imagined audiences are too *thin* for the users to determine their roles correctly. Since imagining audiences is essentially a strategy for *limiting* behaviours and practices, unless the users have imagined a concrete relationship, it cannot tell what roles they ought to assume and perform. At the same time, because of the existence of invisible audiences, even if the users have assumed and performed *some* roles correctly through some types of imagined audiences, they remain—by the default setting of social media—constantly open to other relationships they are unaware of, and thereby, cannot account for. In short, the existence of invisible audiences on social media has created an environment that renders the Confucian way of life hard to live by.

The same is also true of following rites, i.e., another important component for living the Confucian way of life.[12] To reiterate, rites are a set of proper conducts and attitudes for a specific situation. The multiplicity and simultaneity of relationships that social media affords make it difficult—again, if not impossible—to follow rites, as which rites to follow are determined by who the person is interacting with. This issue is further aggravated by another dynamic of social media, namely the collapsed contexts. With social media, contexts are mixed and merged by their default setting; however, people need to know what contexts they are in if they are to know what the proper conducts and attitudes are. In this sense, contexts are *ethically constitutive* of the Confucian way of life, as they require people to have a proper set of conducts and attitudes which are context-dependent, e.g., a familial context and a professional context clearly demand a different set of proper conducts and attitudes.[13] In other words, the Confucian way of life needs to maintain, at least, an epistemic separation of various types of contexts. Collapsed contexts on social media, therefore, entail an enormous difficulty for people to know what the proper conducts and attitudes are in the (online) world.[14]

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[12] It should be noted that I am not arguing for the difficulty or impossibility of following rites, i.e., to have the set of proper conducts and attitudes, on the ground of the texture and experience of the online world being too impoverished to be qualified as *really* following rites. I think this is a legitimate consideration for those who examine the compatibility between social media and the Confucian way of life; this line of argument, however, will depend on *empirical* investigations of the texture and experience of the online world. And, it is also not unreasonable to speculate—with technological advancement—the texture and experience of the online world will only become richer.

[13] I am, of course, not suggesting that there is only a *single* set of proper conducts and attitudes for each and every context, or that a context exhaustively determines what qualifies as *proper* conducts and attitudes.

[14] Also, the collapsed contexts do not only appear on social media, as Turkle described, "demarcations of [contexts] blur as technology accompanies us everywhere, all the time. We are too quick to celebrate the continual presence of a technology that knows no respect for traditional and helpful lines in the sand" (Turkle 2011: 161–162).

Finally, the blurring of public and private should worry Confucians too. However, unlike the current debate on this issue, which is often framed as a privacy issue (see, e.g., Barnes 2006, boyd 2010a: 51–52, Light & McGrath 2010, Hull *et al.* 2011, Papacharissi & Gibson 2011), Confucians' worry on the blurring of public and private is of a different nature. Firstly, Confucians do not distinguish sharply between the public and private with respect to self-cultivation and self-transformation because they believe people's self-cultivation and self-transformation in the private sphere will essentially carry into their public sphere (and *vice versa*). Hence, both the public and private are of *equal* moral significance as they are, and should be, subjected to the same level of (moral) scrutiny. Secondly, in accordance to Confucian non-individualistic views of person, the term "private" is not to be understood at an individual level; instead, it is to be understood at a familial level. Hence, the private sphere refers to the *familial* sphere from a Confucian point of view. So construed, the Confucians' worry over the blurring of public and private is not about *individual privacy* but about changes at the familial level.

Confucians' insistence on the priority of *familial* relationships and the importance of *filiality* and *fraternity*, however, has already hinted that a separation between the public and private ought to be maintained. In Confucianism, familial relationships are a model for other non-familial relationships. Family (or, the familial sphere) is believed to be distinct from other spheres in that the roles and role responsibility in familial relationships are driven by natural affections and trust, i.e., parent-children and sibling; therefore, it provides qualitatively different feedback to people in their learning to become persons.[15] It is also where people learn to socialise, by assuming and performing the roles and fulfilling the role responsibility, eventually achieving proper conducts and attitudes toward non-familial members in society.[16] Hence, family is essential in one's (moral) development from the Confucian point of view.

The blurring of public and private leads to the disappearance not only of the private sphere but also the familial sphere; in doing so, it also takes away the space where one learns to become a person and achieve proper conducts and attitudes towards non-familial members. Indeed, by breaking down the barriers between the public, private, and familial sphere, it seems to neutralise familial and non-familial relationships, as well as depreciate the importance of the former. Most importantly, perhaps, is that without the familial sphere, *every* (wrong)doing is subjected to risks of *public* shaming, which is detrimental to people's development. In short, the blurring of public and private has eliminated a domain crucial to the Confucian way of life.

To summarise, the three dynamics supported by social media, i.e., (1) invisible audiences, (2) collapsed contexts and (3) the blurring of public and private, have engendered an online world that is rather inhospitable to the Confucian way of life. Alternatively, since the Confucian way of life is hard to live by with social media, I believe Confucians will inevitably see it as undesirable.

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[15] This is, of course, not to assert family (and familial relationships) *in reality* will always be affectionate. As Kim rightly points out, Confucians do admit the fact that there are unaffectionate—perhaps, even pernicious—family and familial relationships (Kim 2010). Hence, the notion of affectionate family and familial in Confucianism should be taken as a *normative* ideal and not a descriptive claim.

[16] See Kim 2010 for an illuminating account of how family and familial relationships can serve as a model of "relational strangership."

4 Conclusion: Recontextualising the Confucian Way of Life, Redesigning Social Media

So far, I have illustrated that the dynamics supported by social media are not conducive—and are, perhaps, even detrimental—to the Confucian way of life. Hence, even if social media (and Web 2.0) has (re)turned us to a (more) relational understanding of the self, it remains difficult to be accommodated by a Confucian outlook due to its architecture. However, I do not mean to suggest that social media *cannot* be beneficial or that *every* use of social media is *necessarily* harmful to people, especially to those who seek to live the Confucian way of life. As a matter of fact, it is hard to deny the benefits brought by social media, e.g., parents and children get to know each other better through sharing content, people can (re)connect to friends who would otherwise be forgotten, etc. In this respect, it seems absurd for Confucians to deny the use of social media in entirety.

Confucians, of course, can maintain a pragmatic attitude towards social media, i.e., it is acceptable insofar as social media *does* contribute to the realisation of some Confucian values. It is also useful to highlight the fact there is a variety of social media designed for and used with different purposes (boyd & Ellison 2008). Some of them may well be able to help realise the Confucian way of life, even if it is only partially so. More importantly, it should be reminded that although social media *does* shape people's behaviours and practices through its architecture and design, it *does not* determine people's behaviours and practices. In other words, people *can* still develop behaviours and practices desired and demanded by the Confucian way of life. In light of this, I fully agree with Ess's and Vallor's suggestion of returning to *virtues* (Ess 2010, Vallor 2010), which enables people to live well with social media. In a similar vein, I believe Confucian values and the Confucian way of life can be recontextualised to offer valuable advice and direction for incorporating social media into our life.

I shall not pretend to have a fully working account of how Confucian values and the Confucian way of life can be recontextualised to face the challenges from social media. Instead, I will only outline three preliminary responses to the three dynamics supported by social media from a Confucian perspective:

(1)   *A skilful engagement of social media.* For Confucians, the main challenge from invisible audiences is to know who one is interacting with, and, thereby, to assume and perform the role accordingly. While it is true that social media is geared towards publicity by default, in many social media it is *not* impossible to override the default setting and achieve a more expected range of audiences. There are also other strategies the users can adopt to demarcate different groups of (online) audiences, e.g., social steganography (boyd 2010b). Interestingly, Paracharissi and Gibson call these skills "an advance form of digital literacy" for protection of one's privacy (Papacharissi and Gibson 2011); however, it is equally useful to the Confucian way of life, which requires one to know who they are interacting with. At the same time, one can also imagine that Confucians will require the users to be more thoughtful about their connections on social media in order to limit the (invisible) audiences. From this perspective genuine relationships go beyond simple connections.

(2)   *Reinvigoration of rites in the online world*. The same is true to the challenge from collapsed contexts, too. Although the contexts are often mixed and merged by

default, it is *not* impossible to demarcate different contexts by overriding the default setting. This, again, requires users to have the digital literacy of (online) context management. On the other hand, there is the need for Confucians to reconceptualise the online world and to reconsider if the mixed and merged contexts warrant a new form of rites for the online world. Rites, as I have pointed out, are not *fixed* and *unchangeable*; the ultimate objective of rites is to ensure the realisation of Confucian values, e.g., benevolence (*Ren*) and harmony (*He*). It is not unreasonable to reappropriate rites creatively in and for the online world.

(3) *Prioritisation of the offline world*. Finally, I think the blurring of public and private has posed the most serious challenge to the Confucian way of life. It might be true that with the right setting and adequate skills of online context management, it is possible to recreate the familial sphere on social media. However, familial relationships are still essentially on par with other non-familial relationships on social media, as there is no way at present to prioritise the former over the latter. In light of this, I believe Confucians will have to resort to affirming the priority of the offline world over the online world. Accordingly, social media can only be viewed as a supplement of the offline world.

While I have provided a sketch of the response to the challenges from social media, it may remain difficult to see how the Confucian way of life, as I have illustrated, can positively endorse social media. After all, the challenges arise from the architecture and design of social media, and the response I have provided risks "overstating the role of human agency" because of its lone emphasis on people, i.e., users (Light & McGrath 2010: 305). I think this concern is well-founded. Yet, if the challenges of social media arise from its architecture and design, it should also be possible to redesign it in such a way that offers us *new* dynamics and reduces the prominence of certain dynamics. Before ending this section, I want to venture into two possible designs that could make social media more hospitable to the Confucian way of life:

(1) *Designing contextual awareness into social media*. In their discussion of privacy on Facebook, Hull *et al.* (2011) noted that Facebook has created "contextual gaps" to users and, thereby, leads to various privacy issues (Hull *et al.* 2011). They argued that by making the flow of information more transparent to users, the contextual gaps can be mitigated. Then, they offered several design suggestions, the most interesting being "from the point of view of the reader: attached to each update could be a 'view all of Mary's updates' option, which would subtly remind users that the same option applies to their own updates. It could even be designed to send a notice to users: 'Mary has just looked at all of your updates….' [In this way,] users would increasingly view their Facebook identities as subject to constant surveillance, and modify them accordingly. If I knew that Mary always looked at all my updates, I might update with her in mind" (Hull *et al.* 2011: 299). For the purpose of the Confucian way of life, the design from a reader perspective appears to highlight who the users are (or will be) interacting with in contrast to a broadcaster perspective in which the audience is left implicit in the design.

(2) *(Re)introduction of role responsibility into social media*. Another design suggestion is to assign responsibilities to other users in the form of identity and content management (e.g., personal profiles and/or shared content). By assigning different levels of responsibility to different groups of users, the priority of relationships can

be (re)introduced into social media, and relatedly, the familial sphere can also be (re)created in the online world. In accordance to the Confucian way of life, the familial members will have a high(er) level of responsibility (and, therefore, permission) to manage the user's profile and content shared, which can either take the form of suspension, modification or even screening of information and content shared by the user. In this way, familial members can *actively* assume and perform their roles in the online world. At the same time, it also offers an enclosed space in which users can learn from familial members. It is likely that this design suggestion will inevitably invite criticism of breaching user privacy; however, such a criticism will only be valid if one has an individualistic understanding of privacy (and the private sphere), which is rejected by Confucians. In effect, this design suggestion appears to be *morally* desirable from the Confucian perspective, as it truly allows the users of social media to fulfil their responsibility prescribed by their roles.

Unfortunately, as social media continues to evolve and user behaviours and practices are (co-)shaped by social media, there is no guarantee that either the response or the design suggestions outlined can resolve the tension between the Confucian way of life and social media (and, in general, Web 2.0). Yet, precisely because the technology continues to evolve and user behaviours and practices are (co-)shaped by it, a sustained inquiry of their relation is indispensable.

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